

# Single Parent, First-generation College Students Who Transfer To A Bachelor's Degree Institution A Phenomenological Investigation

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SINGLE PARENT, FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS  
WHO TRANSFER TO A BACHELOR'S DEGREE INSTITUTION:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education  
in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership  
in the College of Education  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative, phenomenological research study was conducted to investigate the influences of self-efficacy on the college experiences and beliefs about capabilities of single parent, first-generation, transfer students. Consistent and strong levels of self-efficacy were revealed within each of the eight participants. Major participant themes identified through the Pattern Recognition Flowchart include that (a) children are a primary source of motivation and influence, (b) education is the pathway for a better future and career, (c) participants possess strong academic and personal efficacy, (d) participants possess a support network and (e) first-generation status serves as a motivating factor. Minor themes include that participants (a) were influenced by strong role models and positive encouragement and (b) possessed an ability to persevere through significant obstacles. While several of the themes corroborated extant research, some themes supported a unique perspective for this growing student population.

This research study is inspired by and dedicated to each and every single parent who is the first in their family to attend college. These students truly are educational pioneers and persist through college despite having tremendous responsibility back at home. I applaud these unique students for believing education can make a difference not just in their life, but also in the life and future of their child.

As one of the research participants stated, when asked about how she balances her life and childcare responsibilities while attending college ...

“Just keep swimming” - Dory from ‘Finding Nemo’

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### Background

The transition to college is an increasingly complex phenomenon. The process is a highly interrelated, significant life event in which new college students experience numerous adjustment issues (Terenzini et al., 1994). Academic, personal and social challenges might include relating to new surroundings, living with a roommate, being distanced from friends, leaving family and home, meeting new people, and being uncertain about financial and academic expectations. Researchers have found the first year to be particularly stressful for new students (Leong, Bonz, & Zachar, 1997; Tinto, 1975; Thayer, 2000). The difficult transition that may be experienced by students whose parents have not attended college has been addressed in the literature (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Fallon, 1997; London, 1989; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). These students, who are the first members of their families to attend college, have been defined as first-generation college students (Asrat, 2007; Billson & Terry, 1982; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Rodriguez, 2001, 2003; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).

Although the college admissions process can be intimidating for some students, it is especially frustrating when no one in the family has gone before (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Therefore, first-generation college students

have been found to be less likely to consider college as an option and less likely to persist if they do enroll (Choy, 2001; Johnson, 2000). As the first in their families to attend college, these students may not see higher education as the next logical step after high school graduation (Terenzini et al., 1994). Many families of many first-generation students perceive college aspirations and enrollment as a movement away from traditional family expectations. Thus, the transition between the home culture and the new college environment is often extremely complicated and difficult (DeCuir, 2007). As a result, first-generation college students are often seen as educational pioneers (London, 1996), experience a shock of balancing two cultures (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996), and are torn between two conflicting worlds (Bradbury & Mather, 2009).

Despite the dramatic expansion of access to higher education over the last several decades, first-generation college students still encounter numerous challenges as they endeavor to earn any education beyond high school (Engle et al., 2006). These students exhibit unique and considerably different background characteristics as compared to their non-first-generation peers and, resultantly, experience a disadvantage before setting foot on a college campus (Asrat, 2007; Billson & Terry, 1982; Fallon, 1997; London, 1989; Tinto, 1982; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). These students are frequently met with overwhelming hurdles to success, are more likely to enter college less academically prepared (Thayer, 2000), are more likely to transfer (Asrat, 2007), and are twice as likely to depart college before their second year (Lumina, 2006). Also, first-generation college

students are significantly less likely to return to college once they do depart (Choy, 2001).

A large proportion of first-generation college students begin their education at two-year institutions, referred to as community/state colleges in this study, and experience tremendous difficulty if they decide to transfer to a four-year college/university to earn a bachelor's degree. Many transferring first-generation students must first overcome a variety of complex obstacles such as poor academic preparation, lower levels of self-efficacy, feelings of displacement and marginality, family obligations, and lower socioeconomic status. Therefore, their belief in their ability to favorably confront and overcome these barriers is essential for their successful transfer and persistence at a bachelor's degree institution.

Enrollment trends indicate that colleges granting associate degrees are growing faster than any other segment in higher education and that transfer students constitute a significant portion of campus populations at most institutions (Giegerich, 2010; Giles-Gee, 1994; Wellman, 2002). However, research focusing on transfer students has not kept pace (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). Qualitative research and information on first-generation college students who transfer to a bachelor's degree institution is scant (Rood, 2009). Extant research on transfer students has focused primarily on academic achievement and persistence rather than on the examination of college experiences and attitudes toward institutional support (Kodama, 2002). Thus,

more qualitative research needs to be undertaken on transfer, first-generation college students to more richly understand the factors serving a critical role in their college aspirations, experiences and decisions to persist.

Akin to transfer students, single parents are another unique sub-population of first-generation college students facing exceptional challenges. Simultaneously balancing multiple roles as parents, financial providers and college students, single parents are forced to prioritize their obligations. Many times, the parenting role is most important. Therefore, understanding the barriers single parents face and how they overcome these challenges is critical not only to support these students' educational persistence, but also their social mobility (Nelson, 2009).

In order to identify how single parent, first-generation transfer students interpret and make meaning of their experiences, and to explore how these factors influence their persistence in college, qualitative studies are recommended to better understand their needs. Although significant literature has been focused on first-generation college status, there has been limited research investigating how the additional experiences of being a transfer student or single parent influence college attendance and persistence. The interrelation of these factors – being a single parent, first-generation, and transfer student – provides a unique set of issues that impacts college aspirations, enrollment, and persistence. Though these three factors have been thoroughly researched independently, there have been no substantive prior studies to examine how

these variables concurrently influence college life. Furthermore, in reviewing the literature, studies were not found that employed a phenomenological approach to investigating how these unique factors impact students' self-efficacy and how these students make meaning of their college experiences. Therefore, this research was conducted to fill a gap in the literature by specifically focusing on the college experiences of first-generation college students who were single parents and had transferred to a university after earning an associate's degree. It was also intended to shed light on the experiences of this unique group and determine what can be done to improve their persistence and subsequent graduation.

### Statement of the Problem

Being a single parent while attending college is a significant risk factor for dropping out of college before degree completion. Huff and Thorp (2007) report that being a single parent also reduces the probability of graduating with a bachelor's degree by over 70%; approximately 10% of single mothers earn a degree beyond high school. Furthermore, the poverty rate of single mothers without a degree is 90% compared to a 16% poverty rate of single mothers with a college degree (Huff & Thorp, 2007). Therefore, the enrollment, persistence and degree attainment of single parents in higher education is an important area of concern.

Researchers have found that first-generation single parents, most commonly women, are enrolling in higher education more quickly than ever before (Agarwil, 2009; Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Sibulkin & Butler, 2005), and the characteristics and compounding risk factors associated with being a first-generation, single parent, transfer student interrelate to impact college experiences and retention. Therefore, further investigation is warranted to identify, analyze, and examine the experiences of single parent, first-generation college students who have transferred to a bachelor's degree institution in an effort to understand their experiences and discover approaches to help them persist and attain a college degree.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to fill a definitive gap in the literature in regard to understanding single parent, first-generation transfer students and to contribute knowledge and research regarding their college experiences and psychosocial development during college. Particular effort was focused on the characteristics of being a single parent, first-generation transfer student and how these three factors interrelated to impact the college experiences of these students. This study was also conducted to explore and investigate how these students make meaning of their experiences. Emphasized were what institutions can do to improve transition, persistence and degree attainment for this group of students. Knowing those key factors that

minimize barriers and support the success and persistence of single parent, first-generation transfer students will help those most at-risk of departing and improve student retention.

### Significance of the Study

First-generation college students have increasingly become the focus of researchers, educators, and policymakers (Saenz et al., 2007). Studies and research on first-generation students are critical because these students have been considered to be at high risk for dropping out before degree completion. Their attrition has been due, in part, to their educational backgrounds, family support, and other factors associated with their academic abilities, preparation, and college experiences (Asrat, 2007). Understanding their needs and experiences would also improve the ability of administrators and policymakers to facilitate their college access, success and degree attainment.

Findings from this research study were intended to provide important information for educators and policymakers who consider and make decisions that impact the services for, and experiences of, single parent, first-generation transfer students. This study was the first of its kind to examine the experiences of first-generation college students who were both transfer students and single parents through a qualitative research lens. Employed in this investigation was a phenomenological approach to exploring the backgrounds and stories of these students and how they make meaning of their college experiences. The

conceptual framework for this study focused on self-efficacy and sought to recognize and interpret how efficacy influences the participants' college experiences and persistence. Understanding students' levels of self-efficacy and how efficacy might impact their subsequent persistence will help explain how these students overcome tremendous adversity and formidable odds (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

### Conceptual Framework

This research study was guided by self-efficacy as its conceptual framework. Bandura (1977) introduced the concept of self-efficacy as an element of social cognitive and behavioral theory resulting in attitudes, motivations, and behaviors about one's self, linked to beliefs about what one can accomplish. More specifically, efficacy is the conviction that one can "successfully execute the behavior required to produce desired outcomes" (Bandura, 1977, p.193). Efficacy also determines how much effort an individual will exert and how long s/he might persist despite obstacles and setbacks. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active and committed the efforts will be to overcome barriers (Bandura, 1977).

Students' self-beliefs about their capabilities play an essential role in their motivation to achieve in college (Vuong, Brown-Welty & Tracz, 2010; Zimmerman, 2000). Students who have confidence in their ability to do college-level work are more likely to perform well academically, thus leading to greater

college success (Vuong et al., 2010). A strong sense of self-efficacy enables a student to not only gain confidence in his/her ability to survive in a college environment, but also develop motivation and persist to graduation. Therefore, students with positive self-efficacy will perceive they are in control of many circumstances and will be motivated to take action leading to further integration and academic success. The self-efficacy model is then cyclical, as these feelings of integration loop back into the students' psychological assessment of themselves, and in turn, affect future attitudes, motivations, and behaviors.

As Bandura (1993) stated, one's level of efficacy has a direct impact on how much effort will be expended to overcome adversity. Given that first-generation college students typically reveal lower levels of efficacy, due in part to their lack of familiarity with the college environment and expectations, their efforts to persist and excel might be less determined than those of their non-first-generation counterparts. Furthermore, recognizing the challenges and obstacles that single parent, transfer, first-generation college students experience, their lower academic performance and difficulty in college transition might be due to their belief systems. It is also probable that higher levels of efficacy in single parent, transfer, first-generation college students translates into greater persistence toward earning a college degree. These findings regarding the relationship between self-efficacy and college adjustment, experiences, and persistence have significant implications for single parent, first-generation transfer students.

Braxton (2000) recommended that qualitative researchers should investigate how self-efficacy operates at institutional levels within specific demographic groups. Therefore, the use of qualitative research in investigating the relationship of self-efficacy among first-generation college students who were transfer students and single parents was appropriate. Understanding how various levels of self-efficacy relate and influence the experiences and success of first-generation college students who are transfer students and single parents has significant implications for institutions, faculty, staff and administrators. The frame of self-efficacy was employed in this study as a means to investigate and understand college experiences from a perspective of being a single parent, first-generation transfer student.

### Research Questions

Using qualitative, phenomenological methodology, a sample of single parent, transfer, first-generation college students were interviewed to determine the answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of single parent, first-generation college students who transfer to a bachelor's degree institution?
2. How do single parent, first-generation, transfer students' beliefs about their capabilities affect their experiences in college?

## Definitions

For the purposes of this research, the following definitions are offered to explain and simplify terms used in the study:

Community/State College: a postsecondary institution known for its ability to award Associate of Science/Arts degrees; formerly better known and/or referred to as a two-year institution.

Bachelor's Degree Institution: a postsecondary institution known for its ability to award various Bachelor of Science/Arts degrees; formerly known and/or referred to as a four-year institution.

Institution: refers to either a community/state college or a university

First-Generation College Student: students whose parents have no more than a high school education, having never attended any college or university.

Non-First-Generation College Student: students whose parents have enrolled in at least one course at the post-secondary level.

Persistence: students who continue to enroll in higher education and work toward a bachelor's degree.

Single Parent: an individual, male or female, who cares for one or more children without the assistance of another parent in the home.

Transfer Student: a student with initial enrollment at a community/state college, earning an associate's degree, followed by subsequent enrollment at a bachelor's degree institution to earn their bachelor's degree.

### Assumptions

The following assumptions were made for the purpose of this study:

1. It is assumed that all participants interviewed accurately self-identified themselves as single parent, first-generation transfer students.
2. It is assumed that all participants interviewed were open and honest in their responses and feedback.
3. It is assumed that all participants, each of whom had completed an associate's degree and was pursuing a bachelor's degree, understood the questions asked during the interview.

### Limitations

Due to the nature of phenomenological research and data collection, this study had several inherent limitations:

1. This study was conducted at one public institution using a sample of eight research participants. The method of data collection and sample size utilized made it difficult to generalize or interpret the findings to a larger population outside of those being interviewed (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2007; Smith and Osborn, 2003). However, this does not affect the power of the research study to expose emergent and noteworthy themes (Terenzini et al., 1994).
2. Significant effort was initiated to avoid and minimize any bias. Semi-structured interviews, precise and detailed methodological procedures,

triangulation of data, personal journaling, and member checks were employed to minimize potential bias and limitation to the research. Nevertheless, data analysis and examination was subject to researcher interpretation.

3. This study included only students who aspired to earn, and were persisting toward, a bachelor's degree. Single parent, first-generation transfer students who did not persist were not included in this research.
4. Other than those themes discussed in this study, it is possible that other topics and themes went unnoticed.

#### Delimitations

1. This study was restricted to those matriculated first-generation college students who are also single parent, transfer students at one institution granting bachelor's degrees.
2. The study population and subsequent sample was limited to those students who self-identified as being single parent, first-generation transfer students.
3. This study did not interview those first-generation college students who did not persist in college.

4. The researcher only selected participants who were of junior or senior status. Therefore, investigating transfer students who were of freshman or sophomore status may have provided additional insight on the experiences of single parent, first-generation transfer students.

### Organization of Study

Chapter 1 provided background information relevant to this study and introduced the problem, significance, definitions, limitations, and purpose of the research investigation. Chapter 1 also stated the research questions and conceptual framework being employed. Chapter 2 presents a rich and extensive literature review focused on characteristics of first-generation college students, transfer students, single parents enrolled in higher education and self-efficacy. The primary methodology and procedures used for participant recruitment, data collection and analysis is described in detail in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive profile and summary of the interview participants and characteristics of the overall group. Each interview will be illustrated in detail utilizing enlightened narratives from the participants themselves. The results of emergent findings are presented in Chapter 5 by outlining major and minor recurrent themes and connecting them to the triangulated data and narrative texts from within the interview transcripts. Chapter 6 is used to reexamine the conceptual framework for this study in relation to a discussion of the findings. The research questions are also be examined with reference to the literature

review. Lastly, Chapter 7 offers recommendations for various constituents, implications for practice, proposals for future research, and a concluding statement.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The review of literature is comprised of four main segments. The first segment provides a broad literature examination on first-generation college students, focusing on their pre-college characteristics and college experiences and behaviors. The second segment outlines common characteristics of transfer students in higher education with emphasis on the role of the transfer function. Third, the subsequent segment reviews literature related to the unique qualities and traits of single parents enrolled in higher education. Finally, in the fourth segment, the conceptual framework for this study and reasoning behind its selection is presented.

### First-Generation College Students

Researchers have defined the concept of first-generation status in various ways. The least restrictive definition states that first-generation college students are those students whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree yet could have some college experience (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Priebe, Ross, & Low, 2008; Willet, 1989). The most restrictive definition, and most common, defines first-generation college students as those college students who are the first members of their family to attend college and receive any college education beyond high-school (Asrat, 2007; Billson & Terry, 1982;

Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Choy et al., 2000; Engle et al., 2006; Hand & Payne, 2008; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Riehl, 1994; Rodriguez, 2001, 2003; Saenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al. 1996; Warburten, Bugarin & Nunez, 2001; Yazedjian, Toews, & Navarro, 2009; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). For the purposes of this research study, the most restrictive, and common, definition was used. First-generation college students were defined as those students whose parents have not received any postsecondary education beyond high school.

Regardless of the definition used, researchers have found significant pragmatic and empirical differences between first-generation college students and their student peers whose parents have at least some college education (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Choy et al., 2000; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Van T. Bui, 2002; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Researchers have suggested that first-generation college students differ from their non-first-generation peers in many ways including their demographic characteristics, college aspirations, college preparation, family involvement, institutional choice, college behaviors, persistence, adjustment, and confidence levels (Gofen, 2007; McConnell, 2000; Nomi, 2005). First-generation college students are less likely to enter college academically prepared (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Thayer, 2000; Saenz et al., 2007) are twice more likely to depart

before their second academic year (Choy, 2001; Lumina Foundation, 2006). First-generation college students also tend to be older and face competing pressures, both familial and financial, that decrease their likelihood of academic success and persistence (Rood, 2009). As Engle and Tinto (2008) found, these challenges significantly lower students' chances of being academically successful and persisting to graduation. Additional researchers have posited that students whose parents have no education beyond high school are considerably less likely to succeed in postsecondary education than those whose parents have completed a bachelor's degree (Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001; Choy et al., 2000; Cruce, Kinzie, Williams, Morelon, & Yu, 2005; Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Nomi, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996; Thayer, 2000).

Terenzini et al. (1996) reported that first-generation college students differ from non-first-generation students in many characteristics, the most significant identifying them as being from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, members of a minority group, female, older, having lower degree aspirations, living off campus, and earning lower grades. Harrell and Forney (2003) found that students whose parents have a bachelor's degree, as compared to first-generation college students, have higher SAT and ACT scores, take more rigorous high school coursework, have a higher GPA, take less remedial coursework in college, and are more likely to be continually enrolled in college. Furthermore, Van T. Bui (2002) also reported that first-generation college students are more likely to be a

member of a minority group, come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and pursue higher education to help their families financially after completing college. Rendon's (1995) research revealed similar findings: first-generation college students are more likely to be minorities, earn lower grades in high school, and have lower socioeconomic status. Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) found that first-generation students are likely to work more hours, drop out by their first and second years of college, have lower SAT/ACT scores, have lower GPAs, and take less rigorous coursework in high school.

Cruce et al. (2005) showed that after controlling for academic preparation, first-generation college students were still less likely to be academically successful in college and persist to degree completion. Ishitani's (2003) longitudinal study indicated that first-generation students were more likely to depart than their non-first-generation counterparts. The college attrition rate of first-generation students in the first-year was 71% higher than that of students with two college-educated parents, thus suggesting that retention rates are significantly different for first-generation and non-first-generation students. Ishitani (2005) later concluded that higher parental educational attainment resulted in a higher likelihood of children having similar educational aspirations. In a subsequent study, Ishitani (2006) again found that first-generation status resulted in higher attrition rates and decreased graduation rates in the fourth and fifth college years by 51% and 32%, respectively. This observation and relationship continued throughout Ishitani's (2003) longitudinal study, suggesting

that first-generation college students clearly face formidable odds to remain and persist in college (Lumina Foundation, 2006).

Compared with peers who had college-educated parents, first-generation college students also encounter distinct disadvantages in being aware of the demands of college (Inman & Mayes, 1999), are likely to have limited access to information about the college experience (Willet, 1989), are likely to lack knowledge in time management and college finances (Richardson & Skinner, 1990), and are likely to receive less support from their families for attending college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). First-generation college students also have more difficulty choosing an undergraduate major (Chen & Carroll, 2005) and fear failing in college more than non-first-generation students whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (Van T. Bui, 2002).

As a result of these distinctive challenges and disadvantages, first-generation college students experience less college success than their non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nomi, 2005), face formidable odds (Lumina Foundation, 2006) and must enter college without any first-hand knowledge or experience from their parents (Cushman, 2006). For first-generation college students, preparing for and going to college is a leap of faith because no other family members have attended college before them (Engle et al., 2006). They typically claim a lack of parental involvement not only in the college application process, but also in their personal and academic preparation for college. Parents with some form of collegiate experience are better able to

assist their children by supporting their college aspirations and communicating college expectations.

First-generation college students typically enter college with considerable anxiety about leaving home (London, 1989) and studies have suggested they are apprehensive, insecure, and have feelings of being academically and socially unprepared. They also perceive themselves to be imposters, rather than 'real' college students, headed for academic failure (Rodriguez, 2003). These students lack the intergenerational benefits of information about college (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) and commonly experience the difficulty of balancing two cultures while fitting into neither (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Oftentimes, first-generation college students find themselves in new, unfound territory (Cushman, 2006) and feel like two different people, one at home and another at school (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). As they straddle two worlds (Rodriguez, 2001), they struggle to balance both the culture that exists with the family and friends who have no college experience as well as the culture found in their new college environment (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). As London (1996) identified, some family members might feel that first-generation college students are alienating their roots by attending college, whether it requires them to move away or not. This additional array of social and cultural pressure has been identified to produce great tension for first-generation college students (Payne, 2007), thus further inhibiting their college preparation, transition, experiences and degree attainment (Lumina Foundation, 2006).

In a comprehensive national study, Terenzini et al. (1996) found that first-generation college students enrolled in fewer credit hours, spent less time studying, and worked more hours per week than their non-first-generation peers. According to a follow-up study, first-generation students continued to work more hours per week, completed fewer course credits, and enrolled in less selective colleges than their peers who had college-educated parents (Pascarella et al., 2004). Choy et al. (2000) identified that certain characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, college preparation, coming from a single parent family, having an older sibling who dropped out of school, and earning grades of 'C' or lower from sixth to eighth grades, have been correlated to put students at greater risk of not only departing high school prior to earning a degree, but also having lower college aspirations and rates of college attendance. The more of these inhibiting characteristics (risk factors) a student possesses, the less likely s/he is to enroll in college and the less likely s/he is to persist (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

First-generation college students enter college with many more risk factors that have the potential and likelihood to hinder their success and degree attainment. For example, having parents who did not attend college is an identified risk factor that significantly reduces the likelihood of going to college. Other risk factors, such as delaying college entry after high school graduation, part-time enrollment status, employment beyond part-time status, and being a single parent are also common characteristics of being a first-generation college student, thus accounting for their greater propensity for underperformance and

attrition (Lederman, 2008). A study performed by Choy (2001) based on the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 found that only 35% of the 1992 high school graduates with at least one risk factor had enrolled in college by 1994, compared to 63% of graduates with no risk factors. Moreover, Choy et al. (2000) also discovered that as the number of risk factors increased, so did the likelihood of having parents who had not attended college.

Engle and Tinto (2008) identified that risk factors are often interrelated; students having one risk factor, i.e., work beyond part-time, often demonstrate other risk factors as well, i.e., enroll part-time. Risk factors are commonly associated with similar background characteristics of first-generation college students who typically have more risk factors than their peers with college educated parents. As Lederman (2008) reported, the average first-generation student can be characterized by having three risk factors, whereas the average non-first-generation student typically has only one, thereby affecting equal opportunity and access into the educational pipeline.

The pipeline to college has five sequential steps. Students must (a) aspire to a college degree early enough to take the necessary preparatory steps, (b) prepare academically to a minimal level of qualification, (c) take admission examinations, (d) apply to college, and (e) enroll. At each step, Choy et al. (2000) found students less likely to stay in the pipeline as the number of risk factors increased. Those students whose parents had not gone to college appeared to be as successful as students who had at least two risk factors through each step.

They were also significantly less likely than their non-first-generation peers to develop the most important first step – college aspirations.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Choy, 2001), 82% of students whose parents held a bachelor's degree or higher enrolled in college immediately after finishing high school. For students whose parents had completed high school but not college, the rate reduced to 54%; for students whose parents had less than a high school diploma, the rate was 36%. Moreover, in a similar study, Choy et al. (2000) confirmed that having parents who did not attend college significantly reduced the likelihood of students considering and applying to college. In two different studies based on the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS), both Choy et al. (2000) and Saenz et al. (2007) found that the college-going rate of high school graduates whose parents had not attended college was only 27%, compared with 42% for those graduates whose parents had attended college at some point but without earning a degree, and 61% for those whose parents were college graduates. As these research reports concluded, parental education has a significant impact on their children's enrollment in college.

The review of extant research focused on first-generation college students clearly documented the challenges these students face and the differences that distinguish them from their non-first-generation peers (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Choy; 2001; Choy et al., 2000; Cruce et al., 2005; Cushman, 2006; Engle, 2007; Fallon, 1997; Gary, 2008; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Gofen,

2007; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Hand & Payne, 2008; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Ishitani, 2003, 2005, 2006; Jenkins, 2007; Lee, Sax, Kim & Hagedorn, 2004; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Long, 2005; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; McConnell, 2000; Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Payne, 2007; Priebe et al., 2008; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Rood, 2009; Saenz et al., 2007; Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004; Strayhorn, 2006; Thayer, 2000; Van T. Bui, 2002). Fewer studies have concentrated solely upon first-generation college students at community/state colleges or bachelor degree institutions in regard to their academic preparation, transition to college, progress toward degree attainment, and college experiences (Asrat, 2007; Vuong et al., 2010). In addition, as McConnell (2000) found in an extensive literature review, a concern with applicability of most research findings is that first-generation studies were exclusively conducted at either bachelor degree institutions (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Buteau, 2007; Choy et al., 2000; Cruce et al., 2005; DeCuir, 2007; Gary, 2008; Hand & Payne, 2008; Ishitani, 2003; Jenkins, 2007; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Long, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Saenz et al., 2007; Somers et al., 2000; Van T. Bui, 2002; Vuong et al., 2010) or community/state colleges (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lee et al., 2004; McConnell, 2000; Rendon, 1995; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Somers, et al., 2004; Striplin, 1999; Wellman, 2002). Because of differences in student body

characteristics and college environments between community/state colleges and bachelor degree institutions, the findings and recommendations cannot be generalized to first-generation college students at both types of campuses (McConnell, 2000). Furthermore, though the majority of literature reviewed examining first-generation college students was quantitative (Asrat, 2007; Cruce et al., 2005; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Ishitani, 2003; Lee et al., 2004; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Mcarron & Inkelas, 2006; Naumann et al., 2003; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Saenz et al., 2007; Somers et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2006; Van T. Bui, 2002; Wellman, 2002), significantly less qualitative research has been completed (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Buteau, 2007; Cushman, 2006; Gary, 2008; DeCuir, 2007; Gofen, 2007; Hand & Payne, 2008; Jenkins, 2007; London, 1989; Long, 2005; Priebe et al., 2008; Rodriguez, 2001, 2003; Rendon, 1995; Rood, 2009).

Research focusing on first-generation college students has rapidly increased over the past decade because first-generation college students constitute a significant portion of the student population (Asrat, 2000). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Choy, 2001), 34% of students entering a four-year institution and 53% of students entering a two-year institution were first-generation. In 2008, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 35% of the student population at four-year institutions was first-

generation. Furthermore, a nationwide survey of first-year students from four-year colleges during the fall 2009 academic term reported that approximately 32% of their fathers and 29% of their mothers did not attend college (*The Chronicle*, 2010).

Hand and Payne (2008) projected that first-generation college students will continue to present new and increasing challenges to colleges and universities nationwide, particularly as their college populations continue to grow. Given the known characteristics, risk factors and considerable obstacles facing first-generation college students who represent approximately 35% of the undergraduate student population at bachelor's degree institutions, it is imperative for faculty, staff, and administrators to understand the unique needs of this population and what contributes to their success (Rood, 2009).

### Pre-College Characteristics, Attitudes, and Experiences

#### Demographics and Background Information

As Choy (2001) and Nomi (2005) identified, first-generation college students differ from their non-first-generation peers in many ways, specifically in terms of age, gender, enrollment status, and employment. First-generation college students were found to be more likely to be older, female, of minority status, enrolled part-time, and working more hours each week. Other documented research supported and corroborated similar demographic

characteristics about first-generation college students being older (Asrat, 2007; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Saenz et al., 2007), female (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Saenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996), being of minority status (Van T. Bui, 2002), of Hispanic ethnicity (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005); having lower degree aspirations (Terenzini et al., 1996), enrolled part-time (Engle & Tinto, 2008), working more hours per week (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Saenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996), earning lower grade point averages (GPAs) (Pascarella et al., 2004; Yazedjian et al., 2009) and coming from a lower socioeconomic background (Nomi, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996; Van T. Bui, 2002) as compared to their non-first-generation peers.

In their longitudinal research spanning 35 years, Saenz et al. (2007) identified significant trends in data that suggested an increasing education gap between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers. Majer (2006) compared first-generation college students to non-first-generation students and found statistical significance that first-generation students completed fewer college credits, reported having more children, and worked more hours each week. In addition, Engle et al. (2006) also found that first-generation college students worked more hours per week than their non-first-generation counterparts, thus making it more difficult for them to focus time and attention on their academic responsibilities and requiring them to spend more time away from campus. As a result, first-generation college students have been

found to be hindered in their ability to formally and informally engage in the college environment, thus inhibiting their degree attainment (Saenz et al., 2007).

The results from Van T. Bui's study (2002) also suggested that first-generation college students exhibited different background characteristics from those students whose parents have had some college experience or whose parents have actually earned at least a bachelor's degree. These differences have been reflected in some of their reasons for pursuing higher education. For example, pursuing higher education for the purpose of later helping their families has been a more important reason for first-generation college students to attend college than it has for students whose parents have had at least some college experience (Van. T Bui. 2002).

As students grow older before entering college, their likelihood of being married and having children is also greater. In a qualitative study, Priebe et al. (2008) found that all first-generation participants had been out of high school for at least two years before entering college and all but one participant had children. Their research supported the supposition that a later starting age correlates with a higher level of life commitments such as family. Yet even when taking familial obligations into consideration, Engle and Tinto (2008) identified first-generation college students as being at a greater risk of college failure and attrition than their non-first-generation counterparts.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that Hispanic or female first-generation college students were significantly less likely to persist to the second year of

college. Saenz et al. (2007) found that Hispanics remain the least educated demographic group of college students. They also represented the highest proportion of first-generation college students at four-year colleges. Saenz et al. (2007) further posited that the proportion of Hispanics in the overall student population would even be higher if two-year colleges were included in their longitudinal data report.

### Socioeconomic Status

Education has long been seen as a means of providing a pathway for social mobility (Walpole, 2003) and colleges and universities are linked to social mobility because they are entrusted with the education of youth (Smart & Pascarella, 1986). One of the strongest correlations to living in poverty has been not having graduated from high school (Garasky, 1995). MacAllum, Glover, Queen, and Riggs (2007) suggested that socioeconomic level, for which parental education attainment has often been a proxy, plays a significant role in college aspirations, enrollment, and degree attainment. According to Fallon (1997), families with a limited income and a lack of knowledge regarding financial aid may not only view college as too expensive, but they may fear the financial burden that a college education entails. Cabrera, Burkum, & LaNasa (2003) found that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds appeared to have significant advantages over students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in regard to college degree attainment. Choy (2001) also found that as students'

socioeconomic level increased, so did their level of knowledge about college costs and financial aid resources.

Financial assistance has been shown to be crucial in the college decision-making process for lower-income students, especially those who are first-generation college students. Bradbury and Mather (2009) also found in their qualitative investigation of first-generation college students that the ability to finance college was one of students' greatest challenges, and participants confronted significant financial barriers to attend college. Saenz et al. (2007) reported that being able to afford college was a significant and important concern for first-generation college students. These students were twice more likely than their non-first-generation peers to have concerns about financing college and their ability to pay. Because of their lower socioeconomic status, first-generation students were more cost sensitive and were more likely to view a lower-income college as more enticing and realistic, thereby further limiting and reducing the pool of colleges they consider for enrollment.

As a result of their lower socioeconomic status and financial need, many first-generation college students have had to work to pay for college and other college-related expenses. Many of these students must also provide for their families. Studies have found that most first-generation college students work at least part-time while some must work full-time, and typically these jobs are off-campus. As Engle et al. (2006) reported, the majority of first-generation college students found it extremely difficult to focus on academics while working full-time.

Students who worked less were likely to spend more time on campus interacting with peers and faculty and become better socially and academically integrated into the campus culture (Cabrera et al., 2003).

Walpole (2003) found that low SES college students reported having lower GPAs than their high SES peers. The report also stated that low SES students worked more, engaged in fewer extracurricular activities, studied less, and reported lower GPAs than their high SES peers. Even after graduating college, the low SES students had lower educational attainment, annual household incomes, and graduate school attendance as compared to their high SES student counterparts.

Socioeconomic status was also found to be an indicator accounting for graduation rates both in high school and college. According to analyses from a national sample of high school graduates, those students belonging to higher socioeconomic levels reported higher graduation rates than did those in lower socioeconomic levels (Sibulkin & Butler, 2005). Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds received more encouragement from parents, friends and school personnel, earned higher GPAs, and were better academically prepared than their peers in lower socioeconomic levels. Lower socioeconomic students were also 44% less likely to aspire to completing a four-year degree.

Van T. Bui (2002) concluded that first-generation college students were more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic background and be concerned about financial aid for college. MacAllum et al. (2007) conducted focus groups

with first-generation students and parents and found that one of the most significant barriers for their attending college was cost. Both first-generation college students and their parents were most concerned and frustrated by the lack of understanding regarding college fees, scholarships, and financial aid. These findings suggested that first-generation college students, typically from lower socioeconomic levels, experienced the most frustration from a lack of knowledge about financial aid opportunities, obtaining aid, and overall college costs. This inadequate understanding and preparation hindered their ability to make informed decisions about college attendance.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that first-generation college students with higher incomes were significantly more likely to persist than those with lower incomes. This suggested that lower-income first-generation college students were not only disadvantaged by their parents' lack of experience with and information about college, but also by other social and economic variables that negatively impacted their educational opportunities and degree attainment. As Horn and Nunez (2000) concluded, over 50% of first-generation college students at four-year colleges were from low-income families as compared to less than 30% of their non-first-generation counterparts.

Majer (2006) investigated first-generation college students and identified financial constraints as limiting their ability to engage academically. Smith, Miller and Bermeo (2009) also found that financial hardship was a key factor that negatively impacted first-generation college students' ability to pursue a

bachelor's degree. Because a greater proportion of first-generation college students work full time and must attend classes part time, their financial aid is reduced, hindering their ability to take more courses. They are often further discouraged by the significantly increased tuition rates at bachelor degree institutions as compared to the community/state college they previously attended (Smith et al., 2009).

The amount of financial assistance that many first-generation college students receive is insufficient because scholarships and grant aid have not kept pace with increases in tuition and other college-related costs. As Engle et al. (2006) found, first-generation college students demonstrated a greater financial need than their non-first-generation peers. Even after receiving specialized loans, the majority of first-generation students fall short of the amount they need to pay for college. Many are also unaware of and unprepared for the high costs of textbooks, other college-related fees and transportation during their first semester at a bachelor's degree institution. As a result, many of these students do not buy their textbooks or wait until they can afford them later in the semester. On the contrary, non-first-generation students typically receive more aid on a proportional basis than is needed. The decisions about college that first-generation college students make based on their socioeconomic level and lack of financial aid knowledge and assistance has hindered their opportunities for earning college degrees (Engle et al., 2006).

## Parental Education

Parental education matters, and its effect and influence on children's educational attainment has been well documented in the literature (MacAllum et al., 2007). Researchers have found that one of the most important predictors of persistence and academic performance among college students is the educational levels of their parents (Amery, 2003; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Saenz et al. (2007) posited that the likelihood of attending college was strongly correlated with parental education. MacAllum et al. (2007) also found that parental education attainment was one of the strongest predictors for both college aspirations and enrollment. In focus group observations, these authors reported that college enrollment rates varied according to parents' educational attainment with first-generation students having the lowest levels of enrollment.

Garasky (1995) found that children were more likely to graduate from high school and enter college if their parents attended college as well. If a parent has not attended college and has no exposure to the college environment, they may be less likely to see the importance of a college education. The entire collegiate environment may seem foreign to these parents and they may want to protect their children from perceived failure (Fallon, 1997). Choy et al. (2000) additionally found that if parents did not have experience in college, they were less able to provide needed support and assistance to their children who did attend.

With no individuals in the household having collegiate experience, first-generation college students typically miss out on the informal exposure to college

life that can be obtained by listening to others talk about their higher education experiences. In contrast, students whose parents have attended college are more likely to see, hear, and be exposed to college stories, assumptions, expectations and preparatory activities. As a result, they better understand the purpose and value of college for providing personal, educational, and career development (Fallon, 1997).

### Parental and Family Involvement

Parents matter and they serve a key role in their children's academic success. Parents shape and influence their children's aspirations for college, place a value on education, assist with enrollment and selection activities, and convey confidence and belief in their child's academic capability (Bandura, 1993). According to MacAllum et al. (2007), parental involvement is one of the strongest predictors for college enrollment. Numerous studies have posited that parental involvement is positively associated with academic achievement. Parental involvement also has been found to have an influence on educational outcomes and degree attainment (Kim, 2008).

Parental encouragement to attend college has consistently been cited as a top factor for students aspiring to attend college. Students can be influenced and encouraged by many different people. Those students who receive encouragement from parents to enroll in college, however, have been found to be more likely to persist (MacAllum et al., 2007). Parental involvement can

include monitoring children's activities outside home and school, having conversations about school and coursework, discussing future planning, participating in school-related initiatives, encouraging rigorous college preparatory courses, and engaging in other enrichment activities together (Kim, 2008).

Each first-generation college student in Rood's (2009) qualitative study cited the support of family as critical in the college choice process, positing that the support of parents was critical in closing the gap between educational aspirations and attainment for first-generation college students. According to Choy et al. (2000), the odds of enrolling in college were almost twice as great for students whose parents frequently discussed school-related matters as compared to those whose parents had little or no discussion with them. Parental involvement has been convincingly linked to an increased likelihood of attending college.

Cabrera et al. (2003) and MacAllum et al. (2007) also found that parental encouragement in high school was a key indicator leading to college enrollment. As they reported, nearly all of the first-generation college students in their research study acknowledged strong parental involvement and encouragement in choosing to attend college. Bean and Vesper (1992) investigated the parental involvement of first-generation college students, and they found that parental support was the most salient predictor of persistence. McCarron and Inkelas (2006) also found that parental support given to first-generation college students

in high school and college played a significant role in their higher education aspirations and degree attainment. According to Fallon (1997), because many students aspire to attend college as early as the ninth grade, early parental involvement is important to increase the number of students who enroll in postsecondary education. However, in their qualitative focus group research on first-generation students, MacAllum et al. (2007) reported that even if parental involvement was evident, it was typically very low. Research on first-generation college students by both York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) and Thayer (2000) also found that most first-generation college students received less support and encouragement from their families.

As has been previously stated, first-generation college students have dealt with numerous challenges and obstacles in regard to their predisposition, enrollment, and persistence in college (Strayhorn, 2006). As the first member of the family to attend college, many first-generation college students do not receive help from parents or other family members due to the lack of knowledge about higher education (Engle et al., 2006; Saenz et al., 2007). Parental lack of knowledge and awareness about college hinders first-generation college students' decisions to pursue higher education (MacAllum et al., 2007). Priebe et al. (2008) discovered that the parents of their first-generation participants were not versed in the processes of the college application process, degree selection, or how to obtain funding. Furthermore, only one student from their study indicated strong parental support for attending college. Parents of first-generation

students have also been shown to be less likely to understand the value of higher education and earning a degree. Bryan and Simmons (2009) identified, through qualitative feedback, that participants in their study recognized that the lack of parental and family understanding and involvement in their education was likely due to the intimidation of the college setting.

As the literature has suggested, parental involvement has a significant relationship with children's college aspirations and attendance. For first-generation college students, aspiring to attend and attending college is an experience involving the entire family (Engle et al., 2006). As London (1989) observed in his extensive qualitative research on first-generation college students, family relationships served a significant role and influence for these students. "To omit the family in higher education is to miss something of importance" (p. 145). In a subsequent study, London (1996) found that many first-generation college students experienced anxiety as they believed they were compelled to leave one culture in order to be successful in another. It has been suggested that family members of first-generation students might think they had been left behind (Cushman, 2006) and that first-generation students were alienating and distancing themselves from their roots (London, 1996). Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that most of their participants expressed anxiety about their loss of family connection because of the family's lack of understanding about college. Majer (2006) also found that family connections and obligations limited the ability of first-generation college students to engage academically in

the college environment. As college becomes a larger part of a first-generation college student's life, this divide between students and parents seems to grow even further, resulting in potentially increased levels of anxiety.

Rather than a constraint though, the families of first-generation college students can also be very important supportive resources. As Gofen (2007) reported in his study, all first-generation college student participants who attended college credited their families for their successful breakthrough enabling them to sever the intergenerational cycle of not attending college and paving the way to higher education. Rather than hindering their college success, their families actually were essential in enabling it. Interestingly, none of the research participants in Gofen's (2007) research cited teachers, the school, or any element of the education system as being solely responsible for their success – it was the influence from their family.

### College Aspirations

Aspiring towards college is an exciting endeavor for some students; for others it can seem like an insurmountable challenge (Vuong et al., 2010).

College aspirations have been viewed as a predictor for completing a college application, as ambitions determine whether a student will even consider attending college and begin the search process (Cabrera et al., 2003).

Aspirations are influenced by personal, familial, and cultural circumstances that influence a student to think favorably or unfavorably towards college, and a

variety of individuals help to shape a student's aspirations (MacAllum et al., 2007). As Choy et al. (2000) found, the first step for students entering the college pipeline has been to aspire to a college degree early enough to take the necessary preparatory steps. This first step also has been responsible for the largest loss of students. Many first-generation college students do not think going to college is possible simply due to the fact that no one in their family has gone before them. As Engle et al. (2006) found in their research, many first-generation college students had low or no college aspirations prior to participating in pre-college programs.

Choy (2001) and Saenz et al. (2007) both found that first-generation college students had significantly less confidence and lower aspirations for college attendance than their non-first-generation counterparts. As Choy found, only 53% of first-generation college students expected to earn a bachelor's degree as compared to 90% of students whose parents had at least some college experience. In their longitudinal research assessment of a 35-year period, Saenz et al. (2007) found a consistent gap in educational aspirations between first-generation and non-first-generation college students, with first-generation students reporting a significantly lower proportion of college aspirations. First-generation college students might assume that college is not possible due to the lack of college experience in their families. According to Engle et al. (2006), these students may not even realize that college is an option.

Parents play a very important role, if not the most prominent role, in molding their children's educational aspirations (Fallon, 1997; MacAllum et. al, 2007). Parental educational attainment has proven to be a major factor in children's decisions about attending college (Hand & Payne, 2007). As Rood (2009) identified, familial support has also been a significant factor in encouraging students to aspire to college. Each of the first-generation students in his qualitative sample cited strong support from their parents as influencing their college aspirations. In addition, each of the participants believed that a college education was necessary for them to succeed in today's economy and to meet career objectives. It is also true, however, that even when parents want their children to attend college, they often have not been knowledgeable in guiding them through the process (MacAllum et al., 2007).

As MacAllum et al. (2007) identified in their focus group research on first-generation students, parental encouragement to attend college was consistently cited as a top factor for college aspirations. London (1989) also reported that family has had a significant influence on the aspirations of first-generation students to attend college. In addition to family involvement, Fallon (1997) stated that school counselors were in a powerful position to have a meaningful impact on first-generation college students as they aspire to higher education, despite the lack of attention that has been directed toward guidance and counseling in the schools.

Many first-generation college students have had low academic self-efficacy which has resulted in low aspirations and expectations for attending college. However, as Engle et al. (2006) found in their research, first-generation college students who possessed increased confidence in their academic abilities had higher levels of college aspirations and feelings that college was a realistic option. Engle et al. (2006) also discovered that ambition for college increased when first-generation college students were involved with programs and services that helped them improve their grades and develop good study habits. Yet despite their desire to attend college, first-generation college students have encountered additional complex barriers and have enrolled in college at substantially lower rates than their non-first-generation peers (Choy et al., 2000).

### College Access

Despite gains over the years in college access, first-generation college students have continued to face a number of unique challenges in their pursuit of a degree (Strayhorn, 2006). Lack of financial support, inadequate academic preparation, and insufficient information, guidance, and encouragement have hindered their equal access to college (Cushman, 2006; Saenz et al., 2007). As the first members of their family to go to college, most first-generation students have not received sufficient help from parents or other family members in navigating the college admissions process (Engle et al., 2006; Thayer, 2000; Vargas, 2004). As a result, they have commonly relied on the college to find the

information and support needed (MacAllum et al., 2007). As Cushman's (2006) qualitative research revealed, first-generation college students frequently encounter an uphill battle just to navigate through the admission process and matriculate into college.

Engle et al. (2006) found, in their comprehensive research study, that a key factor to ensure first-generation students have college access was to provide information to students as early in high school as possible. A significant portion of these research participants stated that they would not have considered college before senior year, would not have known how to prepare for college, or that they even needed to apply for college before high school was over. Providing support and assistance not only early in high school, but often, was essential to a successful college admissions process (Engle et al., 2006).

#### Academic Preparation

Researchers have found a significant difference in college academic preparation between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers (Fallon, 1997; Saenz et al., 2007). First-generation students have been significantly less likely to be academically prepared than their peers (Asrat, 2007; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Riehl, 1994) and they have been less likely to have taken the proper college preparatory courses in high school (Pascarella et al., 2004). As Saenz et al. (2007) found in their trends data, first-generation college students reported spending less time

studying and doing homework during their last year of high school than their non-first-generation peers. They also found that first-generation students reported lower high school GPAs, lower SAT scores, and lower expectations for their college GPAs. These differences in academic preparation can lead to gaps in achievement and eventual college success.

As the existing literature posited, first-generation students have often found themselves attending college with little guidance from their families. As a result, these students are often unprepared for college life (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2006). Many first-generation college students, although intelligent, may not have been challenged and exposed to a college preparatory curriculum giving them the academic skills for college success. Because of their weak academic preparation, many first-generation college students perform poorly on tests required for college admissions, thereby significantly limiting the types of colleges to which they can apply (Fallon, 1997). As Engle et al. (2006) reported in their research, first-generation college students stated that the most difficult aspect of college was related to academic requirements. Many of their research participants felt they lacked the rigor, knowledge, and readiness skills needed to succeed in college.

One measure of academic preparedness and readiness has been based on the number of remedial courses needed while in college. Insufficient academic preparation has required college students to take more remedial classes. In a study by the Minnesota Office of Higher Education (2006), it was

found that 37% of first-generation college students took at least one remedial course as compared to only 25% of their non-first-generation peers. Strayhorn (2006) also found that taking remedial classes was significantly and negatively related to academic achievement in college. Specifically, taking remedial courses was associated with significant decreases in cumulative GPA. Therefore, Strayhorn (2006) recommended that academic advising, peer tutoring, and seminars designed to teach study skills and good writing habits were especially important to help first-generation students in their preparation and adjustment to college.

Adelman (1999) recognized that one of the most important predictors of degree attainment for all college students was the quality of their academic preparation by way of a rigorous high school curriculum. Specifically, a rigorous high school curriculum can greatly improve the likelihood that first-generation college students will attend college (Engle et al., 2006). Harrell and Forney (2003) found that failure to complete college preparation classes in high school, such as math in as early as eighth grade, was a significant barrier to access and success in college.

Both Choy et al. (2000) and Horn and Nunez (2000) identified participation in a rigorous mathematics curriculum as significantly increasing the likelihood of attending college. Parental education was strongly connected to participating in such a curriculum. High school graduates whose parents had no college experience were less likely than their peers with college-educated

parents to participate in a mathematics curriculum leading to college enrollment. Specifically, taking algebra in eighth grade had a significant relationship with taking advanced mathematics later in high school, which in turn, was strongly associated with a higher tendency to attend college (Choy et al., 2000). Among those high school students who took advanced mathematics courses in high school, 76% enrolled in college as compared to 44% who took middle-level mathematics, 16% who took only algebra and geometry, and only 6% whose mathematics completion level was lower than algebra and geometry. These findings strongly suggest that taking advanced mathematics courses in high school is an important intermediate step and gateway for college enrollment (Choy et al., 2000).

Despite this strong association between a rigorous mathematics curriculum and college attendance, first-generation status still matters. Considering only students who were at the highest level of mathematics proficiency in high school, first-generation students were still significantly less likely to enroll in college. Approximately 85% of these students who had college educated parents went to college as compared to 64% of those students whose parents had no college experience. Furthermore, among the first-generation students, their mathematics curriculum significantly affected their likelihood of going to college. The more rigorous the curriculum, the more likely they were to attend college (Choy et al., 2000).

Butlin (1999) reviewed extensive research on those factors that could determine whether a high school graduate attended college. He found that only 11% of those students who failed a grade in elementary school actually attended college. This suggested that the same factors that resulted in students' failing elementary grades might be related to their academic preparation and decision to attend college. However, as Engle and Tinto (2008) found, even when academic preparation was taken into consideration, first-generation students were still at a greater risk of not being prepared for college than were their non-first-generation counterparts.

### College Preparation

The higher education environment is unique, with its own set of values and expectations, and it differs significantly from the high school environment with which students are familiar. Cabrera et al. (2003) observed that those students who were best prepared for college took advantage of high school resources. Those students who began their college planning before the junior year were significantly more likely to matriculate. MacAllum et al. (2007) also found, in their focus group research, that a significant portion of the first-generation students regretted not initiating the college search process sooner.

Saenz et al. (2007) revealed that students with college educated parents had an advantage over first-generation students in preparing for, and navigating through, the higher education landscape. When preparing to attend and

attending college, first-generation college students must 'blaze their own trails' because no one in their families has attended before them. It is about the collegiate environment that first-generation students most lack knowledge (Fallon, 1997), and college preparation activities are highly related to college enrollment and persistence (Choy et al., 2000). Students who did participate in college preparatory and outreach programs were twice as likely to enroll as those who did not participate. Furthermore, students who received college preparatory help from teachers and staff in their college application and entrance examinations, who participated in a rigorous mathematics curriculum, and who participated in two or more extracurricular activities significantly increased the odds of college attendance (Choy et al., 2000).

However, because many first-generation college students have not been seen as or seen themselves as college material, they have not been encouraged to take part in activities and courses that would help them prepare and compete for college admission. Thus, those first-generation college students who most need information about higher education have often been least likely to receive it (Fallon, 1997). They must depend on the advice and guidance of high school counselors and unsolicited college recruitment materials (MacAllum et al., 2007).

Many first-generation college students, therefore, have lacked the knowledge needed to appropriately prepare for, apply to, and pay for college. When they do receive this preparatory information, it is oftentimes during the senior year, which is too late (Engle et al., 2006). MacAllum et al. (2007) stated

that first-generation students need special assistance and guidance early enough in high school to understand what college information is most important. Both parent and student participants in their study expressed dissatisfaction and anxiety in regard to the lack of support they received from high school personnel. The parents knew they needed assistance to help their children, but they were not fully aware where to begin to find the information and were limited in their ability to assist their children.

### College Experiences and Behaviors

#### College Choice

When first-generation college students do make the decision to attend college, a significant portion of them do not make the decision until late in their high school careers. By this time, many have missed out on the preparatory academic and social opportunities that build a firm foundation for life in higher education (Fallon, 1997). If they do eventually decide to enroll, the majority of first-generation college students attend community colleges or other two-year institutions rather than a four-year institution (Engle et al., 2006; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Lederman, 2008; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Van T. Bui, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics (Choy, 2001) found that during the 1995-96 academic year, 50.2% of first-generation college students began their higher education at a two-year college. Moreover, in their nationwide research study

exploring 35 years of trends impacting first-generation college students, Saenz et al. (2007) revealed that first-generation students were disproportionately represented at two-year institutions.

Van T. Bui (2002) further posited that first-generation college students were more likely to attend two-year colleges because their academic preparation was not competitive enough to gain admission to a four-year college. Additional reasons were that they could not afford tuition costs at a four-year institution, and their other responsibilities (such as work and family) required a more rigorous schedule. As Rood (2009) identified in a qualitative research review, first-generation students were more likely to view a lower-cost college, commonly a two-year institution, as more realistic and affordable, thereby further limiting and reducing their college selections.

MacAllum et al. (2007) also found that first-generation students typically focused on a single college or two where cost, convenience and selective admissions criteria were considerable factors in their decision to attend. Typically, these students attend community colleges for academic and financial reasons, to improve their grades and to lower the total cost of college (Rood, 2009). Asrat (2007) also found a higher percentage of first-generation college students began their postsecondary education at a community/state college even if they aspired to a bachelor's degree. As Nomi (2005) found from those students who attended a community/state college, children of college-educated parents were more likely to aspire to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. First-

generation students sought to remain close to home and had an associate degree or improvement of their job skills as a goal.

First-generation students and their families have typically experienced anxiety about the decision to attend college, especially when that decision involved moving away. Therefore, these students have been more likely to consider institutions close to home so they can live with or near their families and reduce the costs of going to college (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Saenz et al. (2007) found that a significantly greater and increasing proportion of first-generation students attended college within 50 miles from home. Typically, these institutions were less selective, two-year community colleges. According to Engle et al. (2006), the decision to attend less selective institutions can have a negative impact on students' persistence and degree attainment.

### College Attendance

Immediate and continuous enrollment in college are two crucial factors in college persistence, yet not all students follow this straightforward path. Many students with college-educated parents presume that going to college is the next logical step after high school - college attendance is anticipated and is simply what one just does. Furthermore, for these students and families there has been an assumption and expectation that college enrollment will occur immediately after high school. However, first-generation college students have typically not

been exposed to similar family values and traditions regarding college attendance. As a result, many of them have not aspired to enroll in college immediately upon high school graduation, if at all (Terenzini et al., 1994).

Cabrera et al. (2003) found that nontraditional, at-risk paths of college attendance - delaying entry after high school and not attending continuously or full-time - were more likely to be pathways of first-generation college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who were also academically underprepared and had lower degree aspirations. These researchers also observed that students who entered college immediately upon high school completion were more likely to persist in college and earn a four-year degree. It was further revealed that students, regardless of background characteristics and socioeconomic status, who did maintain continuous enrollment after high school and throughout college, were significantly more likely to earn a bachelor's degree.

As Engle and Tinto (2008) concluded, the path to a bachelor's degree has not been a direct one for the majority of first-generation college students. These students have been significantly less likely to attend immediately after high school and enroll full time as compared to their peers with college educated parents (Saenz et al., 2007). Other extant literature focusing on first-generation students also revealed that, as compared to their continuing-generation peers, these students were less likely to enter college immediately upon high school completion (Asrat, 2007; Engle et al., 2006; Nomi, 2005; Rood, 2009). These

students have been more likely to delay enrollment in postsecondary education and have negatively impacted their degree completion time. Furthermore, Strayhorn (2006) found a significant relationship between cumulative GPA and the amount of time between high school completion and initial college enrollment.

MacAllum et al. (2007) found, through focus group interviews, that many first-generation participants were more likely to delay the process of college search and selection until several years after completing high school. Those participants that eventually enrolled did so at two-year community colleges. According to another study, approximately 46% of first-generation students delayed enrollment in college after high school, as compared to 27% of students whose parents had some college and 18% of students with parents who earned at least a bachelor's degree (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2006).

The National Center for Education Statistics (Choy, 2001) reported that 82% of students whose parents held a bachelor's degree or higher enrolled in college immediately after finishing high school. For students whose parents had completed high school but not college, the rate dropped to 54%. For students whose parents had less than a high school diploma, the rate was 36%. Other reports also confirmed that having parents who did not attend college reduced the likelihood of students considering and immediately applying to college. In two different longitudinal studies, both Choy et al. (2000) and Saenz et al. (2007) found that the college-going rate of high school graduates whose parents had not attended college was only 27%, compared with 42% for those graduates whose

parents had attended college at some point but without earning a degree, and 61% for those whose parents were college graduates.

In a comprehensive literature review, Amery (2003) found that employment and participation in high school extra-curricular activities had a significant relationship with college attendance. Students who worked less than 20 hours per week, or who had not worked at all, were more likely to attend college, suggesting that students who did not plan to enroll in college were less involved, worked more hours per week, and possibly took their studies less seriously than did those students who aspired and planned to continue their education.

### College Transition

Attending and adjusting to college is a major transition in students' lives (Yazedjian et al., 2009) as they must adapt to a new set of social and academic communities (Terenzini et al., 1994). It has been widely recognized that the first year transition is the most critical, as students initially learn how to negotiate and navigate through a new environment (Tinto, 1975, 1982). Also, if students depart from college, they typically do so by the end of the first year (ACT, 2002). The additional challenges and barriers that first-generation college students face further complicate this transition process and make it exceedingly more difficult for them (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; DeCuir, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1994).

For many first-generation college students, going to college is a major disjunction in their life course. College attendance was not part of their family's tradition or expectations ... these students are breaking, not continuing, family tradition. For these students, college attendance often involves multiple transitions - academic, social, and cultural (Terenzini et al., p.63)

Engle and Tinto (2008) found that first-generation college students were four times more likely to depart during the first year as compared to their peers with college educated parents. In addition, research studies by Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) and Yazedjian et al. (2009) both revealed that first-generation college students had more difficulty in their college transition and reported higher attrition rates than did students whose parents had attended college. Terenzini et al. (1994) also reported that college attendance imposed an intimidating and significant transition on first-generation college students.

According to Cushman (2006), for many first-generation students, college life often seems like a club to which they do not belong. From college visits to entrance exams, applications and acceptance, first-generation college students need help at every step through the transition process (Engle et al., 2006). Whereas students whose parents have had experience in postsecondary education find the college transition a normal, rational part of their life experience, first-generation college students find the transition to be a disjuncture in their life trajectory (Rendon, 1995). These students find themselves in new territory (Cushman, 2006) and struggle through the difficult transition into the culture of academia (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007). In addition, first-generation students are exposed to new ideas and lifestyles as they enter the

postsecondary environment, and this transition to a new culture often creates an uncomfortable separation from the student's culture of origin (Striplin, 1999).

First-generation college students have described the college transition as one of the most difficult adjustments they have ever been challenged to make. They experience anxiety and frustration in navigating campus life, making connections with peers, and balancing social and academic demands (Engle et al., 2006). First-generation college students not only face obstacles in their academic and social integration, but they also frequently confront barriers to their cultural transition while entering postsecondary education (Asrat, 2007; Engle et al., 2006). In their qualitative research study, Bryan and Simmons (2009) found a recurrent theme from participants assuming separate identities, where participants felt like two different people, one at home and another at school. Being confronted by two completely different worlds (Rendon, 1995), first-generation students struggle to balance both.

How first-generation college students adapt and navigate through these new experiences and transitions will have an effect on their success in college. Many first-generation students must adjust to an entirely new world (Cushman, 2006). Rendon (1995) found that Hispanic and other first-generation college students often believe they have to break family tradition and custom. By attending college, first-generation students may experience issues such as separation from their families and a break in family codes of unity and loyalty (Rendon, 1995). In a qualitative study of first-generation college students,

Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007) found their participants struggled in negotiating both family and institutional expectations as well as past and future success. These individuals had been successful enough at schooling to make their way to college but lacked the cultural capital to fully integrate into the new collegiate environment.

### College Experiences

First-generation college students differ from their non-first-generation peers in terms of their academic and social integration into college due in part to their lack of college experiences. They were found to have a greater likelihood of living at home with parents or spouses and working more hours per week (McConnell, 2000), thus limiting the amount of time they can spend on campus (Engle et al., 2006). As Pike and Kuh (2005) found, first-generation college students were less likely to interact in academic and social experiences such as study groups, faculty interactions, extracurricular activities, and support services. Engle and Tinto (2008) also identified that first-generation college students were less likely to be engaged in similar academic and social experiences that foster success in college.

First-generation college students have often dealt with issues related to multiple life roles and developing a sense of belonging on a campus (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007). First-generation college students have been more likely than their non-first-generation peers to live off-campus, thereby hindering

the extent to which they can engage in the institutional environment (Asrat, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; McConnell, 2000). First-generation college students have also been more likely to attend college solely to take classes (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007) and less likely to be involved in co-curricular activities, campus organizations, intercollegiate sports, and other campus events as compared to their non-first-generation peers (Asrat, 2007). As Rood (2009) found in his qualitative research, some first-generation college students did not feel a strong connection to college partially due to not having the time to be engaged on campus outside of classes due to family needs, childcare responsibilities, and off-campus employment.

First-generation students who work more hours per week and have more family commitments typically find it extremely difficult to participate in campus organizations because of the times at which events occur or because of the time commitment necessary to become involved (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Fallon (1997) attributed first-generation college students' tendency to be less involved in clubs and social activities of campus life to matters of obligation and circumstance and not necessarily a matter of choice. Regardless, this lack of involvement was seen as impeding their ability to be fully integrated into the social aspects of campus culture. As Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) suggested, participation in academic activities may be more important than social activities for first-generation college students. In their research study, they found that first-generation students were more likely to persist if they were engaged in academic

activities, especially those involving interactions with faculty. They saw faculty as having a particularly important influence on first-generation college student experiences and their first-to-second year persistence.

Asrat (2007) found that first-generation college students were less engaged in collaborative learning activities and discussing ideas with other students. Rendon (1995) suggested that first-generation college students lack the cultural and social capital needed to make full use of the academic and social learning community. Hand and Payne's (2008) qualitative research identified that relationships, both peer and faculty, and emotional support played a major role in college persistence. Rodriguez (2001; 2003) found that students' peers and their teachers' attitudes influenced their sense of belonging and, consequently, their college experiences and academic performance. Many first-generation participants described coursework that was extremely difficult, but they loved it, partly because their teachers expressed a strong belief in their worth and abilities, and expressed confidence that they could do the work.

### Academic Performance

Researchers have found that one of the most important predictors of academic performance among college students is the educational levels of their parents (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). In turn, positive academic performance in college fosters persistence and degree completion (Cabrera et al., 2003). However, given the profile of typical first-generation college students, it should

not be surprising that they have not been found to perform as well as their non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Various researchers have found that first-generation college students earned lower GPAs than students whose parents had a college degree (Asrat, 2007; Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001; Strayhorn, 2006). In fact, first-generation students experienced less academic success immediately upon college entry (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Strayhorn wrote that first-generation college students face a number of unique challenges in college that may have a disparate impact on educational outcomes such as academic achievement (Strayhorn, 2006). One of the major findings revealed by Asrat's (2007) study was that first-generation college students spent significantly fewer hours preparing for class (studying, reading, and writing) as compared to their non-first-generation peers. Furthermore, first-generation students also worked more hours per week, resulting in less time to focus on coursework (Engle et al., 2006). The time spent on academic preparation plays a significant role not just in academic performance, but also in student learning, engagement and development.

Some researchers have suggested that first-generation college students do not perform any differently academically than their non-first-generation peers (Hahs-Vaugh, 2004; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Strage, 1999). However, each of these studies focused exclusively on four-year selective institutions. Given these mixed results, additional research on academic performance of first-generation college students is warranted.

## College Persistence

In numerous salient and empirical studies, researchers have suggested and confirmed that first-generation college students are at a disadvantage in regard to their retention and degree attainment (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Choy et al., 2000, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ishitani, 2003; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Rendon, 1995, Riehl, 1994; Thayer, 2000, Pascarella et al., 1996; Terenzini et al., 1996; Warburton et al., 2001). As compared to their non-first-generation peers, first-generation college students are more likely to drop out by the end of the first year and are less likely to remain enrolled and attain a bachelor's degree (Asrat, 2007; Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Rendon, 1995; Riehl, 1994; Pascarella et al., 2004; Warburton et al., 2001; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1992).

In a longitudinal study, Ishitani (2003) reported that first-generation students had significantly higher rates of attrition than did their non-first-generation peers. First-generation students were 71% more likely to depart. Choy (2001) also found that first-generation college students were more than twice as likely to depart college before their second year, 23% to 10%, respectively. Furthermore, first-generation students were more than two times as likely to leave college without ever earning a degree, 43% to 20% respectively. First-generation status continued to remain a significant variable for departing

college even when factors and variables associated with attrition were taken into account (Choy, 2001).

In a report sponsored by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, students who were first-generation and low-income were one-fifth as likely to persist as those students who were neither first-generation nor low-income (Lederman, 2008). Despite institution type, just 11% of students who were low-income and first-generation persisted to earn a bachelor's degree, as compared to 26% who were either first-generation or low-income and 55% who were neither first-generation nor low-income.

Engle and Tinto (2008) discovered that first-generation college students experienced the highest dropout rates of any college students at both two-year and four-year institutions, whether public or private. Regardless of where they attended, first-generation students were more likely to depart than their peers with college educated parents. Choy (2001) also found that among those students who attended four-year institutions and aspired to earn a bachelor's degree, first-generation college students were more likely to leave and never return to earn a degree.

The college admissions process has proven particularly challenging for first-generation college students, and the battle continues to keep them in college (Hand & Payne, 2008). As Engle et al. (2006) found, first-generation participants stated it was much more difficult to stay in college than it was to gain initial access. Furthermore, McConnell (2000) found that many first-generation

students did not leave college for academic reasons. As previously discussed, first-generation college students are more likely to experience additional demands from family and work that cause them to be more susceptible to dropping out of college. The primary reason they have often not persisted is that they have difficulty juggling their multiple roles as students, employees, family members, and more (McConnell, 2000). Additional characteristics associated with departing college include having low grades, working more than 35 hours per week, and being less involved on campus – characteristics commonly associated with being a first-generation college student (Choy, 2001).

Tinto's (1975) model of student departure outlined social and academic integration as essential components impacting a students' decision to depart college. Influences for first-generation students such as off-campus employment, part-time employment, and family obligations impact students' abilities to integrate both academically and socially (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). As Engle and Tinto (2008) found, first-generation college students possess many factors that make it extremely difficult for them to integrate and be successful in college and persist to graduation. Thus, understanding the integration of first-generation college students can provide insight into college success and retention.

As Rood (2009) found in his qualitative research on first-generation college students, the role and influence of faculty on college integration and persistence provided a particularly strong theme. Interestingly, while the participants did not mention faculty as factors in their decision to attend college,

they indicated that faculty were instrumental in helping them persist and succeed. Therefore, the extent to which the faculty are involved in the lives of first-generation college students, according to Rood (2009), has a profound impact on persistence and developing a sense of community and support at a college.

Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007) also found that first-generation participants in their study made frequent reference to their faculty mentors as having helped them persist in college. This supported Tinto's (2008) contention that faculty relationships matter to students. Therefore, faculty interaction is invaluable to first-generation student retention. The time faculty give to these students and their intentional use of in-class activities, may be very influential in encouraging students to persist and complete their education.

As Rendon (1995) identified, characteristics of first-generation status mirror several of the student-related barriers to retention including low socio-economic status, poor academic preparation, lack of or delayed college aspirations, low self-efficacy, and other additional risk factors. Educators should consider these characteristics when developing strategies for identifying at-risk students who may be in need of academic advising, tutoring and other support services. Campus support programs for these students can foster success by offering services that specifically address their concerns (Van T. Bui, 2002). If colleges and universities expect to improve their retention and graduation rates in the future, they are going to have to do so while granting admission to an increasing number of at-risk and under-prepared students (Kelly, 2006).

## Summary

There was an abundance of literature and research concerning the characteristics and challenges experienced by first-generation college students at both community/state and bachelor's degree institutions. In these studies and reports, it was concluded that first-generation students face formidable odds as they aspire to and enter higher education. They experience tremendous disadvantages prior to entering and during their college years. The majority of research studies reviewed compared first-generation students to their non-first-generation peers. Significantly fewer studies were conducted to investigate outcomes among first-generation students. Although abundant research regarding first-generation college students was found, limited studies were found in which the influence of additional sub-groups within first-generation status, such as being a transfer student and single parent was explored. Additional studies, such as the present study, are warranted to help understand and support those students who confront these complex challenges while persisting toward degree completion.

### The Role of Transfer in Higher Education

The mission of community/state colleges is complex and serves a wide range of educational purposes including adult and vocational education, developmental/remedial education, workforce and career development, and preparation for transfer to a bachelor's degree institution (Cohen, 2003;

Ehrenberg & Smith, 2004; McCormick & Carroll, 1997; Smith et al., 2009; Wellman, 2002). The transfer role provides a low-cost, flexible opportunity for aspiring bachelor's students to complete general education requirements and then transfer to a four-year institution (McCormick & Carroll, 1997). Although transfer is just one dimension of the academic mission for community/state institutions, this function has become increasingly important as the baccalaureate degree becomes more of an entry point to the workforce (Wellman, 2002). As Giles-Gee (1994) suggested, more community/state college students have the opportunity for making the transition to a bachelor's degree institution than at any other time in history.

Student transfer is characterized by attendance at more than one institution, and many students change institutions before ever earning a degree (McCormick & Carroll, 1997). Most studies define transfer students as those who have taken courses at a community/state college and afterward enroll at a bachelor's degree college or university (Cohen, 1979), yet there are many types of student transfer movement that should be described within higher education. Students can either transfer from a community/state college to a bachelor's degree institution, between community/state colleges, between bachelor's degree institutions, or from a bachelor's degree institution to a community/state college (Wellman, 2002). Horizontal transfer occurs between colleges of the same level, whereas vertical transfer involves change of level, either forward or

reverse. The definition and destination of transfer vary based on the type of institution first attended (McCormick & Carroll, 1997).

Students who attend multiple institutions are a widespread phenomenon (McCormick & Carroll, 1997). Adelman (1999) found that roughly 60% of all students have attended more than one postsecondary institution. Approximately one-third of all degree-seeking, first-time students, including community/state colleges and bachelor degree institutions, transfer at least once during their academic career (Wellman, 2002). At bachelor's degree institutions, roughly 25% of degree-seeking students transfer, whereas at community/state colleges, 43% transfer. Furthermore, of those students at community/state colleges who do transfer, approximately 50% transfer to a bachelor's degree institution. Adelman (1999) and Wellman (2002) reported that approximately 70% of students who do transfer to any bachelor degree institution after taking at least 15 credit hours graduate with a baccalaureate degree.

Transfer is especially common among students who begin their education at community/state colleges, the majority of whom are first-generation college students (McCormick & Carroll, 1997). As Cuseo (2010) found, approximately 75% of full-time first-year students in community/state colleges desired a bachelor's degree yet only 25% eventually transferred. Cuseo also reported that the number of students transferring has decreased relative to total community/state college enrollment. If this transfer role is not effectively understood and supported, these students will be less likely to earn a bachelor's

degree (Wellman, 2002) and the achievement gap in degree attainment widens for minority groups and first-generation college students. Thus, the transfer function is extremely important as community/state colleges provide the entry point to higher education for those who need it most (Ehrenberg & Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009).

Bradburn, Hurst, and Peng (2001) observed that preparing students to transfer to a bachelor degree institution remains a central characteristic and mission of community/state colleges. Ehrenberg and Smith (2004) posited that there will be a growing reliance on community/state colleges to meet the increasing enrollment and transfer demands of higher education, and that policymakers and researchers should increase their focus and attention to these institutions. Wellman (2002) projected that as numbers of high school graduates increase, as tuition costs continue to rise at bachelor's degree institutions, and as higher proportions of low-income and minority students access college, more and more students will attend community/state colleges as their initial entry point into higher education.

Tuition and fees at bachelor's degree institutions have increased more than fivefold since 1977, more than twice the rate of inflation (Wellman, 2002). As Giegerich (2010) reports, tuition at private and public four-year institutions was \$9,501 and \$2,174 in 1979 whereas in 2009 it was \$26,273 and \$7,020, respectively. Furthermore, in 2009-10, the average annual cost of tuition and fees at public institutions rose 6.5 more than they did the previous year. With

increased demand for education and higher costs at bachelor's degree institutions, pressure has shifted towards community/state colleges to meet enrollment demands. Community/state colleges, therefore, are seen as more accessible and affordable educational alternatives.

Giegerich (2010) reported that since the onset of the current United States recession, community/state colleges have served as an oasis for both displaced workers needing new training and high school graduates unable to afford the steep price tag of a university. As an alternative, these students choose community/state colleges for training and access for at least their first two years of postsecondary education. With this growing demand in mind, Pascarella (1997) emphasized the importance of concentrating more attention on community/state colleges. As Wellman (2002) found, community/state colleges were the fastest-growing segment of higher education and were projected to soon be the largest segment, surpassing public, bachelor's degree institutions. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2010), average enrollment had increased 24% at over 1,200 community/state colleges from 2007 to 2009. Additionally, many states have expanded, and more are planning to expand, associate degree programs to four-year baccalaureate programs as the demand for education increases and tuition rates rise (Wellman, 2002).

Administrators and policymakers should know how well community/state colleges are preparing students to transfer to bachelor degree colleges and universities. Moreover, they should know how successful bachelor's degree

institutions are in helping these transfer students persist and graduate (Ehrenberg & Smith, 2004). Improving the effectiveness of transfer to a bachelor's degree institution has been viewed as critical to closing the degree attainment gap for low-income, minority, and especially, first-generation college students. More minority and first-generation students are enrolled at community/state colleges than at all bachelor's degree institutions combined yet their transfer rate is significantly lower as compared to non-minority and non-first-generation students (Cuseo, 2010). Furthermore, of those who do transfer, their degree attainment rate is also much lower. As Wellman (2002) stated, "The two-year to four-year transfer function becomes a fulcrum for ensuring not just access but also success in baccalaureate degree attainment" (p. 6). However, the difficulties of effective transfer have been compounded by poor academic preparation and low socioeconomic status as experienced by many first-generation college students (Striplin, 1999).

Community/state colleges attract and enroll a higher proportion of low-income, minority, and first-generation college students in comparison to bachelor's degree institutions (Bradburn et al., 2001). Wellman (2002) noted that community/state colleges enroll the most significant and largest proportion of African-American students, Hispanic students, and first-generation college students. Striplin (1999), in a review of first-generation college students, also suggested that these students were overrepresented at community/state colleges and were at high risk of not transferring to a bachelor's degree institution. To

reach the university destination, these students must overcome a variety of obstacles that other non-first-generation college students do not face. Keeping college affordable and attainable thus becomes a challenge for those who need it most.

Although community/state colleges have offered an opportunity for higher education to a diverse group of individuals, there are numerous barriers that limit and weaken students' ability to successfully transfer to a bachelor's degree institution. As Bradburn et al. (2001) identified in their comprehensive research on community/state college transfer rates, the older the age group, the lower was the percentage of students who transferred. Also, higher socioeconomic status was associated with a higher transfer rate. With these factors and obstacles in mind, it is important to recognize and understand the characteristics of first-generation community college students and to identify those factors that might impact their successful transfer (Smith et al., 2009).

From a report examining transfer behavior among a nationally representative sample of students who enrolled at any college, 45% transferred to a bachelor's degree institution within five years. Furthermore, bachelor's degree attainment was significantly higher among students who earned an associate degree prior to transfer (43%) in contrast with those who did not (17%) (McCormick & Carroll, 1997). However, despite the significant transfer student populations at community/state colleges and bachelor degree institutions, transfer students have often been overlooked and student services have rarely

been geared to meet their transfer needs. The lack of needed programs and services often generates feelings of marginality among these students (Kodama, 2002).

The transfer function can be related to various student characteristics, one of the most prominent being educational aspirations. Students enrolled at community/state colleges who have aspired to transfer and earn their bachelor's degrees were three times more likely to transfer (McCormick & Carroll, 1997). As previously discussed, socioeconomic status also has a relationship with transfer behavior. Those students from a higher socioeconomic level had a significantly higher transfer rate from community/state colleges to bachelor's degree institutions than did students from a lower socioeconomic level. Moreover, students enrolled full-time were twice as likely to transfer to a bachelor's degree institution. These findings suggested that policymakers and administrators interested in the role of transfer behavior should focus particular consideration on the issues and needs of part-time students, those who lack aspirations for a bachelor's degree, and those who are from a lower socioeconomic background. Interestingly, these students have tended to comprise the majority of the community/state college student population (McCormick & Carroll) and also represent the typical characteristics of first-generation college students.

## Transfer from Community/State Colleges to Bachelor Degree Institutions

From McCormick & Carroll's (1997) report examining transfer behavior among a nationally representative sample of students, it was found that although approximately 25% of community/state college students indicated they wanted to eventually transfer and earn a bachelor's degree, only 45% of these students had actually transferred within five years. Overall, these students demonstrated lower rates of bachelor's degree completion as compared to those students who began at a bachelor degree institution. In addition, their enrollment status played a significant role in their transfer behavior. Those students who were enrolled full-time during their first year at a community/state college were twice as likely to transfer to a bachelor degree institution as compared to students enrolled part-time. Even when controlling for numerous factors and characteristics, enrollment status in the first year was significantly correlated to the successful transfer within five years (McCormick & Carroll, 1997).

As Nomi (2005) found through research focusing on first-generation college students, the majority of these students selected community/state colleges to earn an associate degree and improve job skills, whereas the majority of students from college educated parents were more likely to select a community/state college in order to transfer to a bachelor's degree institution. Whether or not students earned an associate degree prior to transferring played a significant factor in their bachelor's degree attainment. Roughly one-third of these transfers had completed an associate degree prior to transferring, and the

research findings indicated that these students were significantly more likely to earn their bachelor's degrees as compared to those transfers who did not earn an associate degree (McCormick & Carroll, 1997).

#### Transfer from Bachelor Degree Institutions

As McCormick & Carroll (1997) found in their comprehensive research study, a student's decision to transfer from a bachelor's degree institution was primarily related to satisfaction, institutional fit and/or academic performance. Of those students who did depart from a private bachelor's degree institution, a significant majority of them transferred to a public community/state college or bachelor's degree institution for one of these reasons. Interestingly, the overall persistence rate of these transfer students, as compared to those students who remained at a bachelor's degree institution, was consistently similar. McCormick & Carroll (1997) also found that reverse transfer was significantly more common among students who were older, part-time, earned lower grades, and did not receive financial aid.

#### Transfer Function in Florida: 2+2 Partnership

Florida has had a relatively strong commitment to the transfer function of community/state colleges. These institutions have historically been the primary access point to postsecondary education. There has also been a system-wide articulation agreement, referred to as 2+2, that outlines and specifies the

conditions under which students earning an associate degree can be admitted and transfer to a public university in Florida. Roughly one-half of all enrolled students in Florida's community/state colleges were enrolled in associate degree programs at the time of the present study. Among those students who have transferred to a public university, approximately one-third enrolled after earning an associate degree (Wellman, 2002).

### Summary

The college environment presents both personal and academic challenges for any student, yet the literature suggests that these challenges have been compounded for first-generation college students. A significant and overrepresented portion of first-generation college students begin their education at community/state colleges and experience difficulty in transferring to a bachelor degree institution. If they aspire and choose to attend a bachelor degree institution, they must first overcome a variety of complex obstacles such as poor academic preparation and lower socioeconomic levels. Therefore, their ability to overcome these barriers is essential for their successful transfer.

Transfer students are a unique student population and many institutional services and programs have not been designed with their needs in mind. Despite enrollment trends indicating that community/state colleges are growing faster than any other segment in higher education and that transfers constitute a significant portion of campus populations, the research on the transfer students

has not kept pace (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). Extant research on transfer students has focused primarily on academic achievement and persistence rather than examining college experiences and perceptions of institutional support (Kodama, 2002). Therefore, further research was warranted to investigate the college experiences of students in their transition to a bachelor degree institution and how issues of self-efficacy might play a role in their persistence and degree attainment. Kodama (2002) noted the importance of understanding and assisting an increasingly more diverse and complex student population so as to help students prepare, transition, and persist towards degree attainment.

### Single Parents in Higher Education

The road to college access and persistence for single parents has been paved with various obstacles and stumbling blocks (Nelson, 2009). According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau (2008), there were 12.4 million single parent households in the United States, of which 10 million, or 80%, were headed by females. Furthermore, the report revealed that approximately 88% of all children lived in two-parent households in 1960 as compared to 68% in 2000. Bumpass and Sweet (1989) found that 5% of all children in 1960 were born to unwed mothers as compared to 38.5% of all children in 2006. It has been estimated that one of every two children will spend a portion of their childhood growing up in a single-parent family household. As the statistics have indicated, more single parent households exist, more of the households were headed by women, and

more women were enrolled in higher education than ever before. Furthermore, by 2019, females are expected to account for 59 percent of total undergraduate enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) reported that only 10% of single mothers earned a degree beyond high school. Huff and Thorp (1997) stated that the poverty rate of single mothers without a degree was 90%, as compared to a 16% poverty rate of single mothers with a college degree. Furthermore, as female postsecondary enrollment continues to increase, more and more students will be single parents (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Therefore, from a socioeconomic and societal perspective, it is imperative for single mothers to aspire towards college and earn a degree. Early in the 21st century, more single parents were attending college than ever before, and two of every 10 college students were believed to be single parents – and this proportion was rising (Agarwil, 2009).

Raising children while attending college has been identified as a significant risk factor for students persisting toward a college degree (Adelman, 1999; Cabrera et al., 2003; Sibulkin & Butler, 2005). Single parents experience additional challenges, stresses, and parental demands that non-single parent and non-parent students do not face, and they must confront and overcome these obstacles if they are to be successful and persist in college. Single parents have significant pressures and additional obligations that can greatly occupy the amount of time needed for class and academic coursework. They struggle with

balancing childcare responsibilities with their academics, and sometimes these two obligations conflict. Agarwal (2009) discussed the challenges presented to single parents and observed that for many single parents, finding the time for studying and preparing for class is not possible until the children are asleep. At the sacrifice of their own sleep and health, single parents do their best to meet the dual role of parent and student.

Family responsibilities compete for time and commitment that might affect a student's ability to engage in academic or social activities (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). Being the only parent in the household, single parents must often balance their studies with the need to work. Single parents must also provide a support system for their children, and if their children are young, they must focus on childcare. For parents, children are of the utmost priority, taking precedence over anything else. Thus, if anything must suffer, it is typically schoolwork. Devotion to family, necessity of employment, and various obligations and responsibilities at home take priority over school (Bradbury & Mather; Scaramuzzo, 2009). Though the decision to attend college is a positive one for single parents, the ability to remain enrolled is determined by threads of available childcare, employment, and transportation. Any break in these needs and sources of support threatens their college success and persistence (Huff & Thorp, 1997).

Single parents have unique needs that must be recognized and understood for successful degree attainment (Scaramuzzo, 2009). To be a successful student requires tremendous effort by a single parent, and this extra

effort is often not realized by professors and administrators who do not know about their students' personal struggles (Buteau, 2007). These multiple roles and challenges can become uphill obstacles to a student's successful completion of a degree. If a child becomes ill, more time away from school and studies is necessary. These additional and unpredictable challenges confronting single parent students make them unique as compared to college students who are not single parents.

Some single parents have provided the sole source of income for the family, adding yet another layer of complexity to an already hectic and complicated life. Working while raising children consumes the majority of time and resources for many single parents, thereby further minimizing their belief that college might be an option. Working to financially support a child also takes time away from studies and even caring for the child itself (Sibulkin & Butler, 2005). The additional time constraints and expenses of attending college add stressors and financial burdens to the pressures single parent students already face. As has been mentioned, women led approximately 80% of all single parent households, yet they earned 74% of men's wages. It has been reported that 41% of all single mothers earn \$30,000 per year or less. In contrast, 50% of married mothers earn at least \$40,000 per year (Project Working Mom, 2008). Furthermore, as college costs including tuition, fees, textbooks, and transportation consume a significant portion of the family budget, fewer funds are available for childcare, rent, and groceries. As a result, accumulating debt,

sometimes in significant amounts, may be a necessary evil for single parents attending college (Agarwal, 2009).

With all these additional pressures, financial obligations, and multiple roles that single parent students face, it should not be surprising that so many have dropped out of college or have not performed as well as other students. Adelman (1999) found that students who raise children while still enrolled in college are significantly less likely to persist to a college degree. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) suggested that one of the factors putting students at risk of leaving college before earning a degree included being a single parent (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Also, students who grew up in single parent families were less likely to attend college. Sibulkin and Butler (2005) also reported that having a child while in college significantly reduced the probability of graduating with a bachelor's degree. Specifically, having children lowered the probability of graduation by 71%.

### Effects of Family Structure on Educational Outcomes

Various family structures have been linked to students' likelihood of graduation from high school and subsequent college attendance, and numerous studies have examined the effects of family structure on educational attainment (Bjorklund, Ginther, & Sundstrom, 2002; Garasky, 1995; Ginther & Pollak, 2003, 2004). Empirical scholarly research has also shown a strong relationship between parental influences and children's educational outcomes, from

preschool to college (Kim, 2008). Overall, children from two-parent households have been found to achieve higher educational attainment and complete more years of schooling than children living in single parent households (Bjorklund et al., 2002; Garasky, 1995; Ginther & Pollak, 2004). When compared to children who live in a two-biological-parent family, those children who were raised in single parent families from birth have had a high school dropout rate similar to those children who experienced a family structure transition following parental divorce (Biblarz & Raftery, 1999).

Several studies have been conducted to explore and analyze the effects of children who live in a single parent family (Amery, 2003; Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000; Biblarz & Raftery, 1999; Boggess, 1998; Bruce & Avery, 2003; Ginther & Pollak, 2003, 2004; Lang & Zgorsky, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wojtkiewicz, 1998). In these studies, it has been consistently found that a single-parent household, whether due to divorce, death, or non-marriage, has had a negative effect on children's educational attainment with the effects being more prominent if the parents were divorced or never married (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000; Bruce & Avery, 2003). Garasky's (1995), in his research, found that children in a single mother household, where the mother had earned at least a high school degree, were more likely to graduate as compared to a child in a two-parent household where the mother was not a high school graduate. Thus, Garasky (1995) suggested that the education level of the mother in a single parent household had a more significant influence on educational attainment for

the child than did the family structure. Garasky (1995) also found that the positive effect of a parent graduating from high school was stronger than the negative effect of living in poverty.

Researchers have shown that living with a stepparent is significantly correlated with negative educational outcomes for children (Ginther & Pollak, 2004). Specifically, children who grew up in a household with only one stepparent were found to attain lower levels of education and were less likely to graduate from high school than children who lived in a two-biological parent household (Garasky, 1995).

In *Growing Up with a Single Parent*, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) reviewed four national surveys and a number of other research studies. They found that children who were raised in single parent families, as compared to two-parent families, were less likely to attend college and graduate. Their research demonstrated the connection between family structure and children's educational attainment and success. Furthermore, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) found that those children whose parents did not live together were twice as likely to drop out of high school and become single parents themselves. They also discovered that the educational outcomes of stepchildren were similar to those outcomes of children who live in single parent households.

Ginther and Pollak (2004) offered several explanations as to why children living in single parent and divorced families experience less educational attainment than children living in two-biological parent households. The first

explanation suggests that a stable family structure is correlated with more devotion and investment of family resources toward children such as time, affection, support, and money. The second consideration suggests that environments where stepchildren and joint children exist experience higher levels of stress and strain that stable families do not experience. Stress and tension could explain why children in blended families aspire to and complete lower levels of education. Events that result in alternative family structures, such as blended families, typically involve loss or trauma, which cause short term stress and the removal of positive resources (Biblarz & Raferty, 1999). A third explanation stated that the additional number of family-structure transitions experienced by single parent and blended families affects children's poor educational attainment. Those children who grew up in households with both biological parents more likely experienced fewer family-structure transitions and disruptions to a normal lifestyle (Bjorklund et al., 2002; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Kim, 2008).

As the literature review has revealed, researchers have examined the effects of family structure on educational attainment and a strong relationship between household structure and children's educational outcomes has been shown to exist. These studies have consistently found that single parent households have a negative effect on children's educational attainment.

### First-generation College Students who are Single Parents

In this section of the literature review, the researcher sought to further narrow the focus on single parents to include students who were also first-generation college students. A research study by Nomi (2005) revealed that the majority of first-generation college students have children. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), a significant portion of first-generation college students were also single parent households headed by women. A recent study revealed that 37% of first-generation college students had children as compared to 10% of students whose parents earned a bachelor's degree or higher (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2006).

Buteau (2007) conducted a phenomenological investigation of 14 single mothers who were also first-generation college students. These research participants stated they were pursuing an education in order to achieve a better life for themselves and their children. They believed education was the pathway to achieve this goal, despite needing to balance multiple roles as parent, worker, and student. Some participants commented that their persistence through personal struggles would serve as positive examples from which their children could learn and follow. They felt their personal determination, commitment and sacrifice were essential in meeting the challenges and obstacles that existed in their pursuit of higher education.

Similarly to Buteau (2007), Haleman (2004) investigated 10 single mothers in college and found that they viewed their enrollment as a means to

move out of poverty. They also viewed education as an opportunity for personal growth and development that transcended economic benefits, both for them and their children. Several participants stated that their educational attainment would serve as a positive model for their children that might offset other risk factors. Thus, for participants in their study, education provided an avenue for positive change, life transformation, and economic success for themselves and their children (Haleman, 2004).

### Summary

The literature reviewed suggests that single parents in college believe a college education is an investment and the ultimate pathway to economic success and security. Their college aspirations and persistence provide an avenue for positive change and life transformation not just for themselves, but also for their children (Haleman, 2004). As female enrollments continue to grow Therefore, understanding the barriers they face, and how they can meet these challenges, is critical to support these students both in persisting educationally and improving their social mobility out of poverty (Nelson, 2009). However, single parents face an exceptionally difficult challenge of simultaneously balancing multiple roles as parent, financial provider, and student. These roles and priorities often conflict, forcing single parents to prioritize their obligations as parent first.

In order to appreciate how single parent, first-generation transfer students interpret and make meaning of their college experiences, and to explore how these factors influence their persistence in college, qualitative studies have been recommended to better understand the needs of single parent, first-generation students who have transferred to a bachelor's degree institution. Although researchers have studied first-generation college students, there has been little research conducted to investigate how the additional characteristics of being a transfer, single parent influence college persistence. This study was initiated to begin to fill the void in literature and permitted the researcher to explore and understand the perspectives and needs of this specific sub-group of first-generation college student from a phenomenological perspective.

### Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy served as the conceptual framework for this research study. Bandura introduced the concept of self-efficacy as an element of social cognitive and behavioral theory in 1977. Psychological processes, such as self-efficacy, result in attitudes and motivations about one's self and beliefs about what one can accomplish. Self-efficacy influences an individual's thoughts, feelings, motivation, and behavior in given situations. Bandura (1977, 1997) further explained self-efficacy as personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute a course of action to attain designated goals.

As Bandura (1977) stated, efficacy is a cognitive-process influencing and linked to behavior. More specifically, efficacy is the conviction that one can “successfully execute the behavior required to produce desired outcomes” (p.193). People typically behave and deal with situations within their perceived capabilities while avoiding stressful situations they believe exceed their ability. Efficacy determines how much effort individuals will exert and how long they might persist despite obstacles and setbacks. Strength of efficacy is measured by one’s confidence and certainty about successfully performing a given task (Zimmerman, 2000). Furthermore, the stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts will be to overcome aversive experiences (Bandura, 1977, 1993, 1997).

Decades of research have clearly established the validity of self-efficacy as a predictor of motivation, learning and college persistence (Zimmerman, 2000). Understanding efficacy should provide new insights into the characteristics, experiences and processes that foster and lead to student success and to intentional programs that help students succeed (Braxton, 2000). People with high self-efficacy approach difficult tasks as challenges to be overcome rather than threats to be avoided (DeCuir, 2007). They readily participate, work harder, persist longer, and quickly recover even when they encounter setbacks and failures (Bandura, 1977, 1993, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more goals individuals will set and the more committed they will become to achieve those goals. The more

committed, the more likely they will expend extra effort and become resilient to obstacles and failure.

Whereas those who have high self-efficacy tend to visualize success and exert greater effort, those who doubt and possess lower self-efficacy will dwell on those possibilities that could go wrong, become disempowered when they experience challenges, and hinder their own success (Bandura, 1977, 1993, 1997). People with lower levels of self-efficacy avoid difficult tasks, have lower aspirations, and display weaker commitments than those individuals with higher self-efficacy. They are easily distracted, are sensitized to stress, anxiety, and depression, and they dwell on personal deficiencies and negative outcomes (Bandura, 1993; Zimmerman, 2000). Due to a lack of efficacy in their ability, these individuals frequently do not persist because they assume their behavior is helpless and that it will have no effect on desired circumstances and achieving goals (Bandura, 1977).

This concept of learned helplessness suggests that when an individual is confronted by an outcome which is independent of their responses, they often learn that the outcome is independent of their response. Therefore, they believe their immediate response is futile as well as other future responses. This lack of controllability resultantly undermines efficacious learning and creates a helpless effect which cognitively demotivates an individual to persist taking any further initiative to control the outcome (Maier & Seligman, 1976). The more people perceive situations as uncontrollable, the more stress they feel and the less hope

they feel about making changes in their lives (Henry, 2005). A more contemporary explanation of learned helplessness suggests two different states. The first being that an individual, after repeated unsuccessful attempts, believes the outcome is unsolvable or that, two, the outcome is solvable but that they lack the ability to solve it. Bandura (1977) further explains that the distinction is clearly between self-efficacy and outcome expectations. An individual might give up because they lack a sense of efficacy in controlling the outcome, personal helplessness, or they are efficacious but do not try because they do not believe their efforts will have any effect on the outcome, called universal helplessness (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978).

Another component of self-efficacy involves one's views about the extent to which goals can be accomplished and the impact change in one's surroundings and circumstances. Those individuals who possess a low level of personal efficacy will have little hope of modifying their situations and produce little change even in environments where many potential opportunities might exist. On the contrary, those who have a strong and sufficient sense of efficacy are able to empower themselves through challenges even in circumstances where fewer opportunities and more obstacles might be present (Bandura, 1993).

Accomplishing personal goals requires skills and the beliefs of efficacy to utilize those skills well. One's efficacy and self appraisal of capabilities influences personal goal setting and accomplishment. In turn, an individual with the same knowledge and skills may perform either poorly, adequately, or extraordinarily

depending on fluctuations in self-efficacy thinking (Bandura, 1993). Motivation is the power within the student to initiate action that results in their educational success (Braxton, 2000). Students who have motivation and confidence in their ability to perform college-level work are more likely to better academically perform, thus leading to greater college success (Vuong et al., 2010). A strong sense of self-efficacy enables students to not only gain confidence in their abilities to survive in a college environment but also to develop motivation to persist to graduation.

#### Sources of Self-efficacy

Bandura (1977, 1993, 1997) suggested that the sources of self-efficacy are based and constructed upon four main elements: performance accomplishment/mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal/social persuasion, and physiological/affective states. Performance accomplishments are based upon an individual's personal experiences of achievement. After repeated personal success and accomplishments despite setbacks and challenges, the negative impact of potential failure is reduced. An individual's feelings of efficacy are also derived from vicarious experiences which idealize the ability and accomplishment of others who persist. Observing others perform successfully fosters the belief that one can mirror that accomplishment as well. Persuasion is the dialogue, whether through verbal or social interactions, between individuals that lead each into believing they possess the capabilities to

master difficult situations. Finally, a positive physiological state supports the individual's expectation of success and the ability to cope with stress, as opposed to a state of tension and apprehension (Bandura, 1993). Measures of this positive physiological mental state focus on expected performance capabilities rather than on personal qualities and characteristics, and measures of self-efficacy have validity in predicting outcomes (Zimmerman, 2000).

### Performance Accomplishments/Mastery Experiences

Mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy because they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one has the determination to accomplish tasks. After people become convinced that they have what it takes to succeed, they persevere in the face of adversity and quickly rebound from setbacks. By persisting through tough times, they emerge from adversity stronger. The positive experiences from prior performance accomplishments, therefore, defeat learned helplessness and build a robust belief in one's personal efficacy (Abramson et al., 1978; Altmaier & Happ, 1985; Bandura, 1993, 1997; Thornton & Powell, 1974; Young & Allin, 1986).

Mastery experiences produce and further strengthen generalized efficacy beliefs and weaken learned helpless feelings (Abramson et al., 1978). Belief in oneself can be a powerful influence and the development of efficacy beliefs through mastery and performance accomplishments creates the cognitive and self-regulative capacity for effective performance. Performance successes

demonstrate to individuals that they have “what it takes” to accomplish tasks, despite challenges and setbacks (Bandura, 1993, 1997).

Even repeated performance failures will only affect people’s sense of efficacy to the extent that individuals believe they still have the capabilities to succeed. Those who experience periodic failures but continue to improve over time are more apt to raise their sense of efficacy. However, if they interpret a temporary plateau as evidence they are reaching their capacity limits, they may not exert more effort. As a consequence, they do not invest the needed time and effort to accomplish more. Furthermore, if people experience only seemingly effortless success, they come to expect quick results and are easily discouraged by failure. A resilient sense of efficacy requires experience in overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort (Bandura, 1997). Performance accomplishment alone does not provide sufficient information to judge one’s level of capability; other factors must be considered. Therefore, the process of forming efficacy beliefs is a matter of integrating diverse sources of information.

### Vicarious Experiences

People must not rely on mastery experiences and performance accomplishments as the primary foundation for their capabilities and potential. Another principal element that fosters efficacy is the vicarious influence of someone else who is modeling behavior and desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Identifying and visualizing successful people akin to oneself typically raises

efficacy beliefs. Observers feel that they themselves hold the capabilities to master similar behaviors and results. They convince themselves that if others can achieve, they too have the competence to accomplish similar outcomes. The greater the assumed likeness, the more they see success as probable. If they see the models as very different from themselves, their beliefs of efficacy are influenced significantly less (Bandura, 1993,1997).

People actively seek and admire capable models who possess the competencies which they desire. Self-efficacy can be influenced by relevant modeling when people have had little prior experience on which to base their capabilities. Therefore, people appraise their capabilities in relation to the attainments of others (Bandura, 1997). People compare themselves to others in similar situations, such as classmates, and surpassing these individuals in competition raises efficacy beliefs. Therefore, vicarious influences enhance efficacy beliefs and thereby improve performance.

### Verbal and Social Persuasion

Verbal and social persuasion serves as an additional means of strengthening people's belief that they hold the capabilities to achieve desired goals. Efficacy is enhanced when others express confidence and assurance in one's capabilities rather than in conveying doubt. People who are influenced and persuaded that they can achieve desired tasks are likely to exert greater commitment and effort than if they lack self-confidence to obtain their goals

(Bandura, 1993, 1997). However, to elevate or inflate unrealistic beliefs of personal capabilities only invites failures that will eventually damage and discredit the beliefs of individuals in their potential. Moreover, people who have been persuaded that they lack capabilities tend to avoid challenging tasks and give up quickly in the face of hardship. Social persuasion, therefore, when expressed intently yet truthfully, can promote a positive belief system for both goal attainment and personal development.

#### Physiological and Affective States

Elevated anxiety can potentially encumber performance and, as a result, people are more likely to persist when they are not overwhelmed or agitated. People who cope well with anxiety and view their state of arousal as enhancing their performance are more likely to view their capabilities more constructively. However, people who exhibit heightened anxiety, tension and stress are more vulnerable to interpreting these stressful reactions as signs of weakness and predictors of poor performance. As a result, they incite themselves to elevated levels of distress that produce the very dysfunctions they fear (Bandura, 1993, 1997). Thus, the fourth principal source of efficacy is stress level and emotional states.

## Processes of Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy beliefs influence how people think, feel, motivate themselves and act. These beliefs regulate human functioning and generate effects through four main processes including cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes. These processes usually operate in concert, rather than in isolation (Bandura, 1997).

### Cognitive Processes

Efficacy beliefs influence cognitive thought patterns that potentially can either undermine or improve performance. For example, personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities. The stronger the perceived capabilities to manifest desired outcomes, the more committed people become to persist through goal attainment. Those who possess a high sense of efficacy visualize attainable success scenarios that provide positive guides for performance (Bandura, 1997). Those who judge themselves as inefficacious envision failure scenarios and dwell on potential setbacks. When confronted with challenges, they are more likely to develop negative thoughts. They are also less likely to commence actions designed to advance their circumstances than those who have a firm conviction and confidence in their ability to bring about positive change. Therefore, a major function of thought is to process information in the face of pressing situations and setbacks (Bandura, 1997).

### Motivational Processes

The capability for self-motivation and action is embedded in cognitive thought and activity. People motivate themselves and guide their actions through the exercise of forethought. They construct beliefs about what they can accomplish, they anticipate outcomes, and they map courses of action intended to manifest future goals. Efficacy beliefs, therefore, serve an essential function in the cognitive regulation of motivation (Bandura, 1997).

Self-efficacy beliefs contribute to motivation in several ways. These values and attitudes shape the goals people set for themselves, the amount of effort they expend, the duration of their persistence, and foster resilience to failure. People who have a strong belief in their capabilities possess greater motivation, exert more effort and, as a result, their perseverance contributes to performance accomplishment (Bandura, 1997).

### Affective Processes

People's beliefs in their coping abilities affect their motivation as well as how much anxiety and stress they experience. Affective states are self-regulated by efficacy beliefs through the exercise of personal control over thought, action and affect (Bandura, 1997). People who possess self-efficacy to excel through stressors have a propensity to control self-defeating thought patterns whereas those who do not have a strong belief in their capabilities focus on ruminative thought, dwell on their deficiencies and experience impaired functioning.

## Selection Processes

Choices are influenced by beliefs of personal capabilities. Thus, beliefs of personal efficacy can serve an essential role in determining one's selection of choices. People are products of their environment, and by selecting their environment, they can influence what they become. People avoid activities and situations they suppose surpass their capability but select situations they believe themselves competent to handle. Therefore, selection processes are differentiated from cognitive, motivational, and affective processes because people must choose to engage in different possible activities.

Career choice is one illustration representing how self-efficacy beliefs influence choice-related processes: the higher individuals' perceived self-efficacy beliefs, the wider the range of career options, the greater the interest, and the better the preparation process - resulting in greater success.

How individuals make decisions and choose to interact with the environment will result in how resilient they are to challenges, setbacks and severe adversity. Resiliency is the phenomenon and ability of an individual to recover from obstacles and manage those difficulties effectively (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Ungar, 2004). Many of the factors which contribute to developing resilience, such as having supportive and encouraging relationships, possessing a positive belief system, having future goals which are believed to be obtainable, and the capacity to manage emotions are also sources and positive elements that develop self efficacy. Thereby, the more self-efficacious a student,

the more likely they are to be resilient to challenges and setbacks and manage their environment.

### Self-efficacy and College Students

Students' self-beliefs about their academic capabilities play an essential role in their motivation to achieve in college (Vuong et al., 2010; Zimmerman, 2000). Therefore, students with positive self-efficacy will perceive they are in control of many circumstances and will be motivated to take action leading to integration, academic success and persistence. The self-efficacy model is then cyclical, as these feelings of integration and achievement loop back into students' psychological assessment of themselves, and in turn, affect future attitudes, motivations, and behaviors. Braxton (2000) summarized the model of self-efficacy in the following manner:

Students enter college with a complex array of personal characteristics. As they interact within the institutional environment several psychological processes take place that, for the successful students, result in positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficacy, and internal locus of control. Each of these processes increases a student's scholarly motivation. These internal processes are reciprocal and iterative with continuous feedback and adjustment, leading again to increased integration, institutional fit and loyalty, motivation, and persistence itself. (p. 118)

The concept of self-efficacy has emerged as a highly effective predictor of students' motivation, learning, and academic achievement (Zimmerman, 2000).

The more capable students consider themselves to be, the more goals they aspire to and challenges they overcome. Students with higher levels of self-

efficacy perceive obstacles as surmountable and typically exert greater initiative to overcome these challenges. The stronger that people's beliefs are in their efficacy, the better they regulate learning to master subject material and the better they prepare educationally for different occupations (Bandura, 1993). Furthermore, self-efficacy to achieve and persist in college can be positively influenced. Counselors, faculty, and staff can identify students who exhibit lower levels of efficacy and guide them in ways that result in increased self-perception. Student behaviors that provide positive academic and social results lead to increasingly positive expectations and beliefs about college and the ability to perform (Bandura, 1993; Zimmerman, 2000).

As Terenzini et al. (1994) revealed in their qualitative research study, no theme was more salient and persistent for students during their transition to college than their need for self-confidence and being valued and respected by others. For the students in their study who successfully transitioned to college, the sense that they were competent and that others cared was extremely important. The important role of self-efficacy and self-perceptions was evident in their academic, social, and cultural transition.

Self-efficacy has an influence on teachers as well, not just students. Bandura (1993) reported that students who are taught by teachers with a low sense of efficacy experience less self-efficacy and lower academic performance themselves. This effect was even stronger for those students who already had a low sense of self-efficacy in their academic capability. Students' self-doubts

become even more severe if teachers harbor self-doubts about their capability to promote academic attainment. Therefore, the instructor's sense of efficacy to promote academic achievement has a significant relationship with the student's educational outcomes (Bandura, 1993).

As the research has revealed, self-efficacy has influence on students' motivation, behavior and educational attainment. However, there is a paucity of literature investigating self-efficacy among first-generation and single parent status of college students (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). In the studies that have been conducted to investigate efficacy, researchers have suggested that self-efficacy also influences academic performance for first-generation college students. Given the challenges that first-generation college students experience, researchers have attributed lower academic performance and difficulty in college transition, in part, to students' belief systems.

#### Self-efficacy and First-generation College Students

Researchers have suggested that various levels of self-efficacy are related to performance and persistence for first-generation college students. Majer (2006) found that self-efficacy was positively related to academic performance. Specifically, it was revealed that low self-efficacy for education and learning new tasks was a risk factor associated with GPA which, in turn, was associated with attrition. Therefore, Majer's (2006) findings suggested that low levels of self-efficacy were related to attrition for first-generation college students.

In their comprehensive and longitudinal research study, Saenz et al. (2007) explored 35 years of statistical research on first-generation college students and found a significant and persistent gap in self-reported levels of self-confidence and leadership efficacy between first-generation students and their non-first-generation peers. First-generation college students rated themselves significantly lower in terms of self-confidence and leadership ability. First-generation students also reported lower levels of confidence in writing and math ability than their non-first-generation peers. Saenz et al. (2007) recommended further research on self-efficacy of first-generation college students to better understand why such differences exist between the two groups and how these differences impact their college experiences.

In their quantitative investigations of how self-efficacy beliefs influence first-generation academic performance and persistence, Multon, Brown, & Lent (1991) revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between self-efficacy beliefs, academic performance, and persistence suggesting that high levels of self-efficacy have positive implications for college success and persistence. Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) also reported a statistically significant relationship between first-generation students' beliefs in their efficacy for self-regulated learning and academic achievement. McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis, & Becker (1991) found and reported that first-generation college students had lower self-esteem scores than their non-first-generation counterparts, suggesting these beliefs influenced the academic goals

they set for themselves as well as their academic achievement and ability to overcome setbacks and challenges. Bradbury and Mather (2009) also reported that their first-generation participants lacked confidence in their ability to succeed.

Vuong et al. (2010) investigated the construct of self-efficacy on sophomore, first-generation college students. In their quantitative research study, they found that self-efficacy influenced students' academic success, as measured by GPA, and their likelihood to persist. The perceptions first-generation sophomores had about their capabilities influenced their academic performance and their persistence. Thus, this research supported the outcomes of other studies on first-generation students in that self-efficacy was found to be positively related to GPA and persistence rates.

In a quantitative examination comparing first-generation students to their non-first-generation peers, Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) found that first-generation college students reported significantly lower levels of self-efficacy as compared to their non-first-generation peers, suggesting that non-first-generation students perceived themselves as more confident and capable in college. Furthermore, they found that college adjustment of first-generation college students was significantly impacted by levels of self-efficacy, or beliefs in their abilities. First-generation students with higher levels of efficacy also had better adjustment to college. Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) revealed that high levels of self-efficacy at the beginning of the year predicted better college

adjustment during the first year. They concluded that levels of self-efficacy among first-generation college students have implications not only on college adjustment, but also on achievement and persistence.

Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) suggested that being in a family where parents attended college made it easier for those students to adjust to the expectations and demands of their new college environment. Specifically, the advantage of having parents who could guide them through the transition to college resulted in higher student confidence in their ability to succeed. The researchers suggested that because first-generation college students may have experienced more obstacles and challenges than their non-first-generation peers, their feelings and attitudes regarding their ability to perform in college were less optimistic and self-assured.

Bandura (1993) expressed the belief that one's level of efficacy has a direct impact on how much effort one will expend to overcome adversity. Therefore, it is probable that higher levels of efficacy translate into greater persistence to overcome challenges and earn a college degree. However, given that first-generation college students typically experience lower levels of efficacy, due to their lack of familiarity with the college environment, preparation and expectations, their efforts to persist and excel are less determined than that of their non-first-generation counterparts. These findings regarding the relationship between self-efficacy and college adjustment and persistence have significant

implications for the manner in which institutions implement support services for first-generation college students.

Self-efficacy among first-generation college students or between first-generation students and their non-first-generation peers has been examined by a number of researchers (Majer, 2006; McGregor et al., 1991; Multon et al, 1991; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Saenz et al., 2007; Zimmerman et al., 1992). Scant research, however, could be identified that was conducted to explore the effects of efficacy in relation to transfer status or single parent status among first-generation students. Braxton (2000) recommended that qualitative researchers should investigate how self-efficacy operates at institutional levels within specific demographic groups.

Thus, after reviewing the related literature, it was determined that research investigating the relationship of self-efficacy among first-generation college students who were transfer students and single parents merited further investigation. Understanding how various levels of self-efficacy relate and influence the experiences and success of first-generation college students who are transfer students and single parents has significant implications for institutions, faculty, staff, and administrators.

### Summary

The existing research and literature clearly suggest and demonstrate that first-generation college students have experienced significant disadvantages

before, during, and after college. These findings have been pivotal in highlighting the challenges that inhibit these students' academic aspirations, pursuits, and persistence (DeCuir, 2007). As has been shown in this review, extensive comparative research between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers has been conducted. There have been fewer research studies, however, focused on comparisons of first-generation college students to other first-generation students. Researchers have, therefore, suggested that more qualitative research is warranted to better understand the experiences of first-generation students while in college.

Numerous research studies exist which have been conducted to investigate transfer and single-parent status in higher education and to compare how these two factors impact educational aspirations and college persistence. To date, though, no studies were identified which couple and examine the unique interrelations of these factors – being a single parent, transfer, and first-generation student – either in a quantitative or qualitative methodological approach investigating the role of self-efficacy in college experiences. There is a paucity of literature that investigates these variables concurrently and considers the college experiences from the perspective of this distinctive single parent, first-generation, transfer student population.

Despite this interrelation of obstacles confronting single parent, transfer, first-generation students, many students still persist. Therefore, examining the experiences of these students who do persevere deserved attention. This

research study addressed a significant gap in the literature by focusing on single-parent, first-generation college students who have transferred to a bachelor degree institution. This literature review has provided a clear and demonstrated need for the present research study which served to document and examine the lived experiences of these college students through their own perspectives.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This study applied a qualitative design using a phenomenological approach to explore the life experiences of single parent, first-generation college students who have transferred to and persisted at a bachelor's degree institution. This chapter will explain the research design and rationale of the study, the research questions, the site location, how the sample was selected, how the data were collected and analyzed, and how trustworthiness and ethical considerations were ensured.

### Research Design and Rationale

Though the majority of research focusing on first-generation college students has employed quantitative methods, qualitative investigations have been recommended to seek deeper in-depth understanding of the issues and barriers confronting these students. Researchers have suggested that additional qualitative research is needed to unpack the significance of quantitative results and to provide voices rather than statistics (Mull, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). Strayhorn (2006) concluded that qualitative studies were needed to explore first-generation college students in greater depth and detail because quantitative approaches are most useful in painting only a broad outline of the portrait. Merriam (2009) discussed qualitative

researchers as being interested in how participants interpret their experiences and what meaning they attribute to those experiences. One approach to achieve a greater understanding of students' experiences, according to DeCuir (2007), is to collect data from their perspectives. Therefore, a qualitative, phenomenological approach was selected to seek and understand the lived experiences of each participant and how they make meaning of these experiences.

Qualitative research has been a key form of research in education (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003). Its purpose is to understand the richly descriptive experiences from the participant's, not the researcher's, perspective. The central objective has been to understand rather than to explain or predict (Long, 2005). "In qualitative research, the focus is on process, meaning and understanding, and the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 266). In this methodological design, the researcher facilitates open-ended interviews with intent to identify emerging themes (Creswell, 2003). Furthermore, a qualitative design is flexible and responsive to changing conditions as the study progresses. As Merriam described, the following competencies are desirable in qualitative research: "(1) A questioning stance, (2) High tolerance for ambiguity, (3) Being a careful observer, (4) Asking good questions" (p. 17).

Participant selection in qualitative studies is typically nonrandom, purposeful, and small compared to quantitative research (Merriam, 2009).

Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that researchers desire to understand and gain insight, and, therefore, must select a sample from which they can learn the most information. Since generalization was not a necessary goal or aim of this study, as is the case with most qualitative research, a purposive sampling strategy was employed.

Whereas data are presented through numbers in quantitative research, qualitative researchers present data through words, thus providing in-depth, rich descriptions and understanding. In most forms of qualitative research, the observations and data are composed through interviews, whether individual or focus group, where the researcher and participant(s) engage in a conversation related to the research study (Merriam, 2009). Table 1 contrasts the characteristics of qualitative and quantitative research.

If one is to better understand the college experiences of single parent, transfer, first-generation college students, it is imperative to have a more lucid understanding of their personal interpretation and experiences in that milieu (DeCuir, 2007). Therefore, it was appropriate that this research study employ a qualitative descriptive method known as phenomenology which emphasizes participant perspectives, words, and narratives. This phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to understand the essence of participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 1998, 2003).

Table 1  
*Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Research*

Point of Comparison	Qualitative	Quantitative
Research focus	Quality	Quantity
Roots	Phenomenology Constructivism	Positivism Realism
Goal	Understanding Meaning	Prediction Hypothesis Testing
Design	Flexible Evolving	Structured Predetermined
Data Collection	Researcher Observation  Interviews	Instruments Tests Surveys
Findings	Richly descriptive	Numerical Empirical

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*Adapted from Merriam (2009), Creswell (1998) and Smith and Osborn (2003)*

As Bryan and Simmons (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2003) elaborated about phenomenology, participants are viewed as experts regarding their lived experience. The researcher aspires to identify, learn and understand their interactions and how they make meaning of those experiences.

Phenomenologists are interested in participants as meaning makers, and these types of researchers examine experiences of participants as opposed to assembling a laboratory environment. Therefore, this methodological approach was appropriate for this study of single-parent, transfer, first-generation college

students as the researcher sought to construct meaning of these participant's lived experiences. Through hearing and understanding their stories and analyzing triangulated data obtained throughout the interview process, the researcher was able to provide descriptions of their experience and the complex phenomena that have been under-explored in the research literature. Furthermore, this approach allowed for rich and detailed descriptions of the categories, patterns and themes that emerged from data analysis (DeCuir, 2007).

### Phenomenology

A qualitative research design employing phenomenology was the mode of data collection and analysis in this research study. The philosophy of phenomenology underlies qualitative research, and therefore, some presume that all qualitative research is phenomenological, and in some sense it is. However, phenomenology is a type of qualitative research with its own focus and methodological strategies, and it focuses solely on the participant's experiences and how those experiences are transformed into consciousness. The aim of phenomenology is to explore and make meaning of how participants make sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The task of the phenomenologist, therefore, is to illustrate and describe the essence of the participant's experience (Merriam, 2009).

Phenomenology is used when the rich detail of the essence of people's experiences of a phenomena is to be explored, described and interpreted

(Grbich, 2009). It is the study of intense, lived experiences and this approach allows participants' experiences to speak for themselves (Ehrich, 2003). This methodology focuses on the experience of the individual and is used to capture the core of meaning and uncover how it is derived from those interactions.

Phenomenology is a two-step process; as the participants try to make sense of their world, the researcher is also attempting to understand the participants trying to make meaning of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Olive (2008) stated the following:

Through an analysis of the psychological meaning of descriptions of the lived experiences, as provided by participants, understanding may be gained which could facilitate innovative approaches to meet the needs of students in both secondary and higher education settings. (p. 83)

Phenomenology facilitates a more clear and vivid understanding of participants as being unique and how they, as individuals, apply meaning to their interactions with others and the environment. As Merriam (2009) explained, a phenomenological study seeks understanding about the spirit and underlying structure of the phenomenon occurring. There is a recurring practice of data collection, examination and interpretation within this paradigm (DeCuir, 2007). The purpose of phenomenology is to discover what cannot be realized through plain observation.

Phenomenology can be likened to an orb spider's web, consisting of threads, coils, and a hub. The silk spider weaves its web in open area and threads of dry silk extend from the center like spokes on a wheel. Coiling lines of silk connect the spokes and serve as a trap. The hub (center) of any orb web is like the philosophy of phenomenology. (Ehrich, 2003, p. 44)

However, the spiders in the above scenario are the researchers who spin the phenomenological web so that they can understand the structures of participants' lived experiences.

The phenomenological method consists of four main qualities: (a) description, (b) reduction, (c) essence, and (d) intentionality. Description refers to the aim of phenomenology being the description of phenomena, anything that appears or presents itself, not the explanation of phenomena. Reduction is a process that requires presuppositions and assumptions be temporarily suspended or bracketed, thus ensuring that prejudices and bias do not taint the description of experiences. Essence is simply the core meaning and theme of an individual's experience. Lastly, intentionality is the interpretation of the experience or the total meaning of the phenomena (Ehrich, 2003).

### Research Questions

Research questions should focus on specific populations of interest (Johnson, 2000), and the interviews in this research study employed a phenomenological lens through which the lived experiences were examined as they relate to self-efficacy of first-generation college students who are both transfer students and single parents. Based on the extensive literature review, a gap was identified that explored the lived, college experiences of single parent, transfer, first-generation college students. The research questions in this study, therefore, focused on how these students navigate through their environments

and how they make sense of their experiences. Therefore, the research was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of single parent, first-generation college students who transfer to a bachelor's degree institution?
2. How do single parent, transfer, first-generation college students' beliefs about their capabilities affect their experiences in college?

These questions provided the necessary framework to seek and capture the rich college experiences of these students and provide a salient analysis of how they make meaning of these experiences.

#### Site Location

This research study took place at the Daytona Beach regional campus of a large public, research university located in the Southeastern United States. The regional campus system at this site location was designed to offer students who otherwise could not travel to the main central campus a local opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree. Students at this specific regional campus commonly earn an associate degree at the neighboring state college, and then transfer to the site location to complete a bachelor's degree. As the selection criteria required that participants be (a) transfer students, (b) single parents, and (c) first-generation college students, this chosen site was ideal to identify qualified participants.

#### Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participants for this study consisted of junior and senior students who entered the institution after earning associate degrees from the neighboring state college. A participant sample was initially identified with support from faculty, staff and administration at the regional campus. I contacted each of the three primary academic advisors, department office managers and faculty to explain the research study and identify potential participants who met the research criteria. Numerous faculty were agreeable and allowed me to make presentations in 16 classrooms. During these classroom presentations, I briefly explained the purpose of the research and I requested that students contact me directly if interested in participating. From these classroom presentations, and through referrals, I was successful in identifying 10 volunteer research prospects. As these potential students notified me of their interest to voluntarily participate and confirmed themselves as being transfer, single parent, first-generation college students, they were given an Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) both as hard-copy and via email. Prior to the first interview, participants also completed the Background Data Questionnaire (Appendix B). From the 10 prospects, I selected the first eight students who agreed to participate, returned the consent form and scheduled a meeting for the initial interview.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed for this phenomenological research study. This approach was used in an attempt to find a more closely defined group for whom the research questions were addressed (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Furthermore, snowball, or network, sampling is one of the most

common types of purposeful sampling, and this strategy involves identifying a few participants who easily met the research criteria (Merriam, 2009). As students responded and self-identified that they met the research study criteria, they were asked to refer other possible participants who met the research selection criteria as well, thus creating a snowball effect to increase the participant pool. In snowball sampling, participants recruit others from within their social group. This sampling technique allowed me to identify participants who otherwise might be excluded from the study but became available due to their social networks (Mull, 2007). In this study, as research participants were identified, they were asked to provide recommendations and referrals of other first-generation college students they knew as single parents and had transferred to the institution. It should be noted that of the selected eight research participants, only two participants were identified through referral and snowball sampling. The remaining six participants were informed of this study directly from classroom presentations. Prospects approached me independently about being involved in the research interviews.

Phenomenological studies are typically conducted on small sample sizes, and researchers have suggested that small samples are sufficient to achieve saturation, or redundancy, where no new information is assessed, as long as the sampling is representative and purposeful (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Lincoln and Guba (1985) agreed and concluded that the researcher should continue sampling until a point of saturation is reached. The goal in this qualitative study

was to identify eight participants. This allowed me to attain saturation by the identification of various categories, redundant patterns and vivid themes.

Participants were informed, both verbally and in writing, that their confidentiality would be protected and pseudonyms would be used to ensure anonymity.

Finally, to begin purposive sampling, it is essential that the researcher first determine the selection criteria (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, the selection of participants for this research study was limited to the following inclusion criteria: (a) the student must fit the definition of a first-generation college student as defined in this study, (b) the student must be currently enrolled in at least nine credit hours, (c) the student must fit the definition of a single parent as defined in this research study, and (d) the student must fit the definition of a transfer student as defined by this research study.

### Pilot Study

Before official research commenced, I conducted four informal pilot interviews to serve as an introductory investigation of how effectively the interview questions were formatted and how participants might respond. The pilot study also provided an opportunity to enhance and refine my interviewing skills to ensure appropriate data collection. The participants involved in the pilot study met the selection criteria of the research study and were identified in the same methodological manner as previously described.

After conducting the four pilot interviews, I incorporated modifications to improve the initial interview protocol. First, I changed the wording structure of several questions for better clarification and added additional, more descriptive probing questions. Second, I personalized questions so as to ask for concrete examples. This allowed the participants to better understand and reflect on the questions being asked as well as provide personal accounts of their experiences. Finally, I added questions that more clearly connected and incorporated the structural framework of self-efficacy and its sources and processes. These additional questions and modifications were recommended to yield more rich descriptions of how the participants' beliefs and motivations affected their behavior and persistence.

### Interview Protocol

The interview approach is a crucial consideration for phenomenological researchers to extract the type of information and feedback desired to meet the objectives of the research study (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, my role in a semi-structured interview was to guide and facilitate, rather than strictly dictate what could be allowed to occur during the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Appropriate interview questions are those that are open-ended and designed to yield detailed and descriptive feedback. As advised by Merriam (2009), closed-ended questions, multiple questions and leading questions should all be avoided in phenomenological interviews.

Interviews in this study incorporated open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses from participants about their background, their educational aspirations, and their academic and social experiences before and during college. The Interview Protocol (Appendix C) provided a complete list of interview questions with additional probing questions if I felt more description and rich feedback were warranted to understand the participants' experiences. Table 2 outlines the connection between the interview questions and the research study questions.

Table 2  
*Association of Interview Questions to Research Study Questions*

Research Questions	Interview Protocol Questions
What are the experiences of single parent first-generation college students who transfer to a bachelor degree institution?	2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8
How do students' beliefs about their capabilities affect their experiences in college?	1, 2, 4, 5, 7

Interview Protocol Questions 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 were employed during the interview to provide rich input and help answer Research Question 1. These questions explored categories and themes relating to college experiences, aspirations, self-awareness, influencers, challenges and college relationships. Interview Protocol Questions 1, 2, 4, 5 and 7 provided information to answer

Research Question 2. This question solicited participant responses pertaining to perceived capability, self-efficacy, awareness, problem-solving, persistence and personal development. Although tailored to answer Research Questions 1 or 2, each Interview Protocol Question, such as Protocol Questions 2, 5, and 7, had the possibility of providing salient information for both research questions.

### Data Collection

In phenomenology, the interview is the primary method of data collection (Merriam, 2009). As compared to other data collection methodologies, qualitative, phenomenological interviews serve as the primary manner where the participants' voices are heard (Mull, 2007). In this research study, I employed narrative accounts from semi-structured research interviews to capture participants' points of view, experiences and perceptions. The most effective and appropriate manner in which to collect data through phenomenological analysis has been determined to be through semi-structured interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The guidelines for coordinating and executing semi-structured interviews within the phenomenological framework was founded upon the research of Smith and Osborn (2003). Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to further examine the themes and topics that emerged from the study. This form of interviewing allowed both the participant and researcher to engage in a dialogue where questions were tailored according to participant responses and where I chose to probe areas meriting further investigation.

There are a number of approaches used to categorize different types of interviews (Merriam, 2009). In highly structured interviews, questions and their strict order are predetermined ahead of time. The researcher firmly follows the interview protocol and does not seek or allow variation or flexibility between questions or interviews. Thus, a structured interview in many ways is identical to a questionnaire (Smith & Osborn, 2003). However in effective phenomenological studies, the questions are less structured and more open-ended. Contrary to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews are to be guided by the questions rather than dictated by them. This format allows for quick rapport to be established and the revelation of rich information not possible from other types of interview formats. As Fink (2003) stated, open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews provide information that might not be revealed in highly structured interviews and surveys.

Table 3  
*Qualitative Interview Categories*

Highly Structured	Semi-structured	Unstructured
Predetermined questions and strict order	Mix or more/less structured questions	Flexible structure
Oral form of written survey	Questions used flexibly, adjust wording/order	Conversational
Usually used to obtain demographic data	Interview guided by questions or issues to be further explored	Used primarily in ethnography and case study

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) recommended that the phenomenological researcher should retain an essence of flexibility in their interview approach. As Smith and Osborn (2003) stated, the scheduled questions in a semi-structured interview provide a roadmap, yet they are guided by participant responses. This allows for a dialogue that permits flexibility to explore deeper meaning and clarification as responses warrant. The questions are more flexibly worded, are generally not strictly predetermined, and allow for greater exploration during the interview. This semi-structured format, which I employed, allowed me to respond efficiently during the interviews to participants' words and perceptions, and it permitted me to investigate new ideas and concepts as well as richer explanations from the responses (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Table 3 presents three types of interview categories, according to level of interview structure and format.

I conducted at least one formal interview with each of the eight research participants. Each initial interview was conducted in my office which provided a comfortable and private location on campus. I felt my office location was the most ideal and convenient area to facilitate the interview as it minimized distraction and interruption. For the interviews, I adjusted the seating arrangement to provide a more relaxed atmosphere. I also provided candies and bottled water for participants, and I placed two potted plants in the room to help provide a more soothing atmosphere.

When the student participants arrived at their scheduled interview times, I immediately greeted them in the lobby and thanked them for their participation. I

then walked them into my office and nearly shut the door, leaving only a slight crack so as to not generate any feelings of confinement. With regular student advisement meetings, I keep my office door fully open.

Prior to the beginning of each interview, I explained and emphasized the purpose of the study, the measures protecting confidentiality and that the interview could be stopped at any time. Before each interview began, the participant confirmed having read and understood the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) and completed the Background Questionnaire (Appendix B). As will later be discussed in this chapter, I began taking Observational Field Notes (Appendix D) as they were reviewing the consent form and/or background questionnaire. I then proceeded with the interview and began audio recording the discussion. The previously described Interview Protocol (Appendix C) served as my guide to facilitate the discussions.

Upon completion of each interview, I personally transcribed the discussion within two days. For six of the eight participants, I transcribed the interview discussions within one day. After initial reflection and analysis of the interview recording, transcripts, background questionnaire and observational field notes, I contacted each participant via email and sent them a copy of our transcribed conversation with a request for them to review the transcription ensuring accuracy. In this email I included a brief interpretive summary of our interview and emphasized the main thematic elements. I also asked each participant to share additional comments if they felt that clarification or additional statements

would complement the transcription and my initial interpretive findings. Furthermore, I asked to meet again with each participant to further explore insights and preliminary findings from the first interview. This opportunity provided additional information, validation and insight in regard to the experiences of these students and how they make meaning of the true essence of their college experiences. It also cultivated a deeper level of trust and commitment between participants and me as the researcher. Three of the participants were agreeable to a second face-to-face meeting, and I received supplemental information via email from the remaining five participants.

It should be noted that initial interviews ranged from approximately 45 to 115 minutes. For those participants with whom I met twice, our second interview time was much shorter, ranging from 21 minutes to 36 minutes. Also, one of the initial interviews was conducted via telephone due to the participant's childcare and transportation limitations. Face-to-face interviews were held in my office location with the remaining seven participants.

#### Observational Field Notes

For purposes of triangulation, I made efforts to glean richer participant data through Observational Field Notes (Appendix D). This was in addition to the data gathered from audio recordings, transcribed interviews, member check statements and background data questionnaire. Observational Field Notes were used to describe and capture data not able to be tape recorded and were

outlined into four main categories: (a) personal observations, (b) non-verbal, (c) impressions, and (d) other. Personal observations outlined participant characteristics such as appearance, clothing, jewelry and any other qualities that captured my attention. Second, non-verbal observations described various body language interpretations such as eye contact, vocal tone, posture, hand gestures, etc. The third category, impressions, was used to record my overall impressions of the research participant and our discussion. My impressions were recorded before, during, and after each interview. Impressions include various assumptions and analysis of the participant's comments, perceived attitude, and personality as it related to their shared experiences. The final category, other, was used to describe any remaining participant details and characteristics not previously identified. Collectively, these observational field notes (personal observations, non-verbal, impressions, and other) greatly supplemented the data gathering process and contributed to a more comprehensive description of my thoughts and the characteristics of each research participant.

Throughout each interview and upon its conclusion, I immediately completed the Observational Field Notes document. I described my personal observations, non-verbal observations, participant impressions, and other various observations and comments that I felt would be important to later reflect upon. These notes helped me to understand the true essence of each interview participant and to identify information and characteristics that may not have been immediately apparent.

### Data Analysis

“Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 175). In this phenomenological study, data from the interviews were analyzed to understand the participant’s lived experiences and to develop categories and patterns seeking meaning (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). In the process of analyzing data to find meaning in this research study, each participant interview was digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, edited, and coded to assist with identifying major categories from participant feedback. Upon repeated review of these research notes, personal observations, member check statements and additional documentation, I applied constant comparative analysis to further identify emergent categories, recurring patterns and unique themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Boyatzis (1998) described this process as pattern recognition.

According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), constant comparative analysis also requires that the researcher analyze and interpret the data throughout the study to reveal codes. Codes are shorthand designation categories, or identifying notations, assigned to relevant aspects and characteristics of the data for quick recognition and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). Categorical coding is one of the first steps in organizing the data, and this process helps the researcher focus, conceptualize, and describe the phenomenon. Assigning comprehensive codes to the data notations helps confirm, construct, and determine emergent categories and recurring patterns

(Boyatzis, 1998; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As Creswell (1998) and Fink (2003) concluded, identifying recurrent, dominant categories and subsequently counting presence and patterns allows researchers to develop themes and assert the richness and uniqueness of the qualitative data.

According to Merriam (2009), the challenge of a phenomenological approach is to construct categories that reveal recurring patterns in the data. To uncover the essence of the phenomena in this study, categories were identified by repeatedly reviewing interview transcriptions, researcher notations, member check statements and observational notes. Categories were then grouped using thematic clustering and provided a classification system that reflected and identified recurring patterns. Forming clusters of categories and patterns is a useful way to organize and present the findings as meaningful themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Fink, 2003; Grbich, 2009). Once the recurring themes become redundant and no new information is forthcoming, the data will be considered as saturated (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 2009; Palmer et al., 2009).

According to Boyatzis (1998), observation precedes understanding which, in turn, precedes interpretation. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to move through these three phases of inquiry and to see something - a pattern - that has not been evident to others. The identification of this pattern begins the process of being able to classify or label the pattern and allow for interpretation. Boyatzis (1998) suggested that effective thematic analysis has four distinct stages: (a)

sensing themes, (b) using themes reliably, (c) developing a code to process the essence of the observation, and (d) interpreting the themes into knowledge. In the first stage, the researcher must be open to all information and be able to recognize a codable moment. Second, the researcher must code reliably and consistently, meaning the observations must be consistent. In the third stage of thematic analysis, the researcher must develop a code to accurately reveal the essence of the patterns made from the interview data. Finally, the researcher must be able to interpret the themes in a manner that contributes to the development of knowledge (Boyatzis, 1998).

Moustakas (1994) has defined an analogous process for conducting a phenomenological study:

1. Review and examine transcripts for all relevant statements regarding the experiences of students.
2. List nonrecurring statements and group them into categories.
3. Analyze categories to seek more vivid thematic patterns.
4. Construct textual descriptions describing these themes using verbatim narrative examples.
5. Analyze textual descriptions to create broader descriptions of the participant experiences.
6. Reflect and examine the descriptions and perspectives, explore potential meanings, and construct overall descriptions and essences of the participant experiences.

In this study, I was guided by Smith and Osborn's (2003) phenomenological method of data analysis with influence from Moustakas' (1994) process. The Smith and Osborn (2003) procedure is best explained as a series of seven interconnected stages that help the researcher understand the lived experiences of the participants while in college. These stages are described as follows:

#### Stage One: Initial Analysis

Once the recorded interviews are transcribed verbatim, they should be repeatedly reviewed and analyzed so the researcher can become familiar with the content. Each review has the potential to reveal new insights and findings. By acknowledging comments of interest, many of which might emerge as important, the overall objective of this first analysis stage is to become aware of the data and participant responses. Therefore, the researcher should make comments and notes on the transcripts to help summarize and paraphrase interesting data.

#### Stage Two: Data Transformation

Stage two is closely connected to stage one and involves repeatedly examining the researcher's notes, document reviews, member check statements and interview transcripts. In this stage the data, notes, and comments should be transformed into paraphrased, concise statements. Furthermore, intention should be to begin identifying and formulating categories that emerge from the

interviews. The objective of stage two is therefore to recognize transparent categories and understand how they connect to the interview data.

### Stage Three: Thematic Connection

As the categories emerge, more salient and clear connections are made. In stage three, these connections should be described and summarized with an objective of identifying more vivid and recurrent categories. As a result, stage three is characterized by engaging in a continual process of pattern recognition linked to the primary interview data as well as identifying categorical connections among themselves.

### Stage Four: Analytic Thematic Connection

In stage four, recurring patterns are further analyzed and refined from the data. Initial categories from stages one and two should be repeatedly analyzed and reviewed to determine if any superordinate patterns materialize in a new or explanatory manner. Some patterns might begin to emerge as dominant conceptual themes. Thus, this stage begins the process of clustering, where the patterns begin to cluster, and more broad themes become evident.

### Stage Five: Thematic Coherence

Stage five involves further refinement of the patterns and their appropriate thematic clustering. The goal of this stage is to suggest and develop a more lucid and consistent set of themes supported by the primary interview data. These

themes are ordered and grouped in a logical format and are also summarized and identified with descriptive titles.

#### Stage Six: Comparisons of Themes and Categories

This stage is characterized by recursive reflection and analyses of themes into one primary set of themes. Themes are compared so that decisions can be made to establish which themes take precedence and should be focused on with most priority. Both commonality of themes and richness of theme descriptions are essential in this stage.

#### Stage Seven: Translation from Narrative Accounting

In stage seven, the themes derived from stage six are translated into a narrative accounting from the collective interview data. This translation provides verbatim excerpts from the transcripts and participant remarks made during the qualitative interview. The thematic connections and categories are supported by primary narrative texts within the interview transcripts. This stage of analyses, according to Smith and Osborn (2003) is essential to any qualitative research study.

Upon completion of the participant interviews, I examined, studied and reflected on the data I had collected. I revisited the original transcripts, audio recordings, observational notes and participant feedback through member

checks on numerous occasions to thoroughly explore participants' words in-depth and to capture the true essence and meaning of their answers and stories. Moreover, I also invested time in journaling before and after each interview so as to reflect and examine my own feelings as the researcher throughout this process. Not only did this journaling help me focus on the participants themselves, but it also complemented my ability to interpret and give meaning to their experiences. Journaling was also an effective way to maximize trustworthiness and minimize any unintentional researcher bias that may have been developing throughout the process. Journaling during this study helped to keep the focal point on the research participants.

After sufficient data triangulation and analysis following the participant interviews and throughout the research process, I began to identify emergent categories and recurrent themes. Heavily influenced by Moustakas's (1994) and Smith and Osborn's (2003) phenomenological method of data analysis as previously described, I also developed an innovative process to identify these preliminary issues and themes that were presented by the participants which will be described in Chapter 5.

### Trustworthiness

All research should provide valid, credible and reliable knowledge. Furthermore, ensuring validity and reliability in a qualitative research study requires that the researcher conduct research in an ethical manner (Bryan &

Simmons, 2009; Creswell, 1998, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Smith, 1996). Several strategies and approaches were implemented to establish reliability, credibility and trustworthiness of the research results and to ensure that the findings were consistent with the obtained data. Most importantly, confidentiality and anonymity was maintained for all research participants. As each interview began, I made efforts to foster a climate of mutual trust and quickly build appropriate rapport with each participant.

Through the qualitative methodology, I understood and interpreted the salient descriptions of each participant's experiences and feelings. Interview data collected from multiple participants and sources were repeatedly analyzed to ensure that the emergent categories and recurrent themes were accurately justified and identified. Credibility, integrity and trustworthiness was inferred and presumed as recurring themes emerged and became saturated. Moreover, I initiated member checks with participants to verify, clarify and validate that the transcripts, their statements and my initial interpretive summary were accurate and consistent with their thoughts, beliefs and feelings. Member checks also prevent and minimize misinterpretation of the interview data (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Creswell, 2003; Jones et al., 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). As was previously described, each research participant was emailed a complete interview transcript and asked to provide feedback to affirm that my interpretive summary was accurate. The participants were also given an opportunity to make any additional statements that might

clarify or supplement previous comments made during the interview. Based on participant responses, I made modifications, if needed, to the transcript statements.

I also took efforts to ensure reliability, dependability and trustworthiness by analyzing the data until a point of thick saturation was reached, meaning as the data were repeatedly analyzed, recurring categories and themes were identified and no new findings surfaced. I also explained and reflected on any potential bias and assumptions that might affect the research through personal journaling. Before and after each interview, as well as throughout the interview process, I completed a personal reflection journal to aid in my reflection and interpretation process. The reason for making such a clarification and admission to readers is to help them understand how I arrived at the interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2009). Finally, to ensure trustworthiness, the methodological and interview procedures being employed in this study were clearly outlined. This procedural clarity improved the dependability, reliability and likeliness that similar findings would be conferred if the study were to be replicated with the same participants.

#### Investigator Triangulation

In an effort to (a) validate the emergent research themes, (b) avoid subjective interpretation, and (c) minimize any researcher bias in the interpretation of findings, three experienced researchers were contacted to review three random interview transcripts. Investigator triangulation refers to the

use of more than one observer or participant in a research setting. Observers and participants working independently have individual observational styles and this is reflected in the resulting data. The careful use of two or more observers or participants independently, therefore, can lead to more valid and reliable interpretations of the data. The notion of triangulation bridges the gap between reliability and validity (Mays & Pope, 2000).

Kleinman (1991) encouraged researchers to seek input from colleagues throughout qualitative data collection. Given the rigor and complexity of qualitative data, the process of multiple coding can yield discussions which ultimately further refine and complement interpretations and explanations (Barbour, 2001). More simply, this process utilizing additional researcher review encourages thoroughness of the data analysis. Because the research participants were informed of the consent process and participant identity was confidential, I did not foresee any ethical concerns for sharing transcript data.

Upon confidential review of the transcripts, I contacted the three researchers to inquire about their interpretation of the transcripts in relation to the two research questions of this study. My intent was to seek any patterns of convergence to corroborate or contradict my overall interpretation and to ensure comprehensiveness and a more reflexive analysis of the data (Mays & Pope, 2000). The feedback and interpretations from the additional researchers are discussed in the report of findings in Chapter 5.

### Researcher's Perspective

In qualitative research, it is important to discuss how the researcher might influence data analysis and interpretation (Merriam, 2009; Palmer, Davis & Hilton, 2009). Specifically within a phenomenological framework, it is common and critical that prior to embarking on the research study and interviewing participants, researchers typically reflect and address their own experiences and knowledge of the issues to become fully aware of personal assumptions and prejudices. This process is called *epoché*, a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment (Merriam, 2009). These emotional attachments and potential biases are then temporarily bracketed so that the experiences can be examined without prejudice (Grey, 2003).

While I am not a first-generation college student, as both my parents graduated from college with bachelor's degrees, my motivation to pursue this study originated from the frequent professional interactions and experiences I have had with students who are transfer, single parent, first-generation college students. I firmly believe that these students are inadvertent members of a distinctive student niche with unique, complex needs and background characteristics different from those of other college students. Through previous in-depth conversations, it seemed that these characteristics may have significantly impacted the experiences of these students and their ability to effectively integrate into the campus community. It was the observation of their perseverance, despite extreme challenges that motivated me to undertake this

research study. I was also intrigued to better understand those factors that played a role in student achievement, overcoming obstacles, developing self-efficacy, and making meaning of their experiences. Furthermore, I became increasingly interested and concerned after reviewing the extant literature and realizing there was extremely limited scholarly research focusing on this unique student population.

### Ethical Considerations

Before proceeding with the qualitative interviews in this research study, the requirements mandated by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) from the researcher's home institution were met. Prior to pursuing data collection, all research conducted at the host campus must be approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. To obtain this authorization for research on human subjects, I submitted documentation pertaining to the purpose of the study, methodological procedures being employed, and the type of analysis that would be facilitated following data collection. After review, the IRB determined that the research study would be of minimal risk for human subjects and granted permission to initiate the methodological process (Appendix E).

Further ethical considerations were addressed by interviewing only approved participants who voluntarily completed the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A). The Informed Consent Form outlined and explained the research study objective, participant criteria needing to be met, confidentiality measures,

contact information, and the benefits of participation. I ensured participant confidentiality by employing pseudonyms of research participants, thus minimizing any revealing information. Digital audio recordings and the interview transcripts were kept in a private, secure location and were available only to the researcher and dissertation committee members. Participants were allowed and encouraged to review their respective verbatim transcripts to ensure accuracy and provide supplemental information, thus strengthening my researcher interpretation. Finally, once the research study is fully complete and approved, the digital audio recordings, transcripts and observational notes have been scheduled to be destroyed.

#### Originality Score

The College of Graduate Studies at the host institution where this research was conducted required that students completing dissertation work submit their work for originality. Turnitin is the software tool required by the graduate studies office and therefore was the tool this research utilized. An originality score between 0% and 10% was defined as acceptable by my graduate advisor for this research study. Upon proposal submission, I received a score of 28%. This initial score was immediately reduced to 22% upon my exclusion of previous submissions. The final score was further reduced to < 2% after removal of all matches below 1% and quotes already cited in the paper.

Therefore, the research document was confirmed and approved as original work by my graduate advisor.

### Summary

Phenomenological studies allow the researcher to get at the essence of the individual experience and derive meaning (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Merriam, 2009). Using in-depth phenomenological, qualitative methodology, eight students meeting the selection criteria were identified as single parent, first-generation college students who transferred to the university from a neighboring state college. Consistent with phenomenological analysis, this sample of students was purposefully selected to reflect upon their experiences while attending college. After sufficient pilot interviews were conducted, students meeting the selection criteria were recruited and then interviewed to understand their backgrounds and college experiences. Prior to each interview, the participants read the consent form, completed the background questionnaire and agreed to an audio recording of the interview which was transcribed within one day following the interview. Each initial interview ranged from 45 minutes to 115 minutes and second interviews, if applicable, ranged from 21 minutes to 36 minutes. In an effort to elicit rich and elaborate responses, semi-structured interview questions were open-ended and were not designed to influence results. Interview transcripts, observational notes, member check statements, results from the background questionnaire and personal journaling notes were repeatedly analyzed to classify

emergent categories and recurring themes. Upon saturation, thematic patterns were identified. Chapters 4 through 7 will further report and describe those findings.

## CHAPTER 4 OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

### Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore how single parent, first-generation transfer students make meaning of their experiences in college and how feelings of self-efficacy play a role in their persistence. Particular effort focused on how the interrelation of factors (single parent, transfer and first-generation status) impact college experiences. In this chapter I will describe my experience in conducting the interviews. Following a comprehensive summary of the interview participants and characteristics of the overall group, I will describe each interview in detail utilizing enlightened narratives from the participants themselves. A summary of participant interviews will conclude this chapter.

### Conducting the Interviews

The phenomenological research design in this study employed open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview format. This approach yields to the voice of these students and allows for a narrative analysis of their stories and experiences of being a transfer, single parent, first-generation college student. Therefore, a qualitative approach employing a phenomenological lens was helpful to understand the lived experiences of participants and how they made meaning of their experiences.

The Interview Protocol (Appendix C) served as the guide to facilitate the interviews. As Smith and Osborn (2003) stated, the scheduled questions in a semi-structured interview are guided by participant responses, thus allowing a dialogue that permits flexibility to explore deeper meaning and clarification as responses warrant. The questions are more flexibly worded, are generally not strictly predetermined, and allow for greater exploration during the interview. This semi-structured format allowed both researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue where questions were tailored according to participant responses and where areas meriting further investigation were explored. When needed, probing questions were used to seek more rich detail from each participant. These additional probing questions proved extremely useful in soliciting and discovering important information.

A total of eight first-round interviews were conducted with participants, seven being face-to-face and one being conducted via telephone. Three of the participants met for a second face-to-face meeting and the remaining five participants responded via email with answers to follow-up questions I presented. Overall, the open-ended interview format allowed the participants to guide the dialogue in a comfortable manner. Participants seemed, and appeared to be, very calm and relaxed throughout the interviews. When asked direct questions, they were eager to respond and share their stories. Although initially scheduled for between 45-60 minutes, the average duration of each interview was approximately 85 minutes and ranged from 45 to 115 minutes. For those

participants with whom I met twice, the second interview was much shorter, ranging from 21 to 36 minutes. The research participants were enthusiastic and eager to talk about their experiences. Participants frequently commented how they enjoyed the questions and how their answers helped them to reflectively acknowledge their resiliency and persistence in life and as college students.

It was a privilege to hear the stories and personal aspects of their lives from each research participant. I was amazed at the life experiences of these students and the diversity of challenges they had successfully met while making both their children and education a priority. At times I felt sad to hear the details of the formidable odds they had previously encountered, but I was fascinated and proud to hear about their triumphs and ability to persist through character-building setbacks. As can be recognized in the interview transcripts, most of my questions yielded extremely thorough and elaborative participant responses which, in turn, provided richly descriptive and robust data. At times, the interviews proved cathartic as they took on elements of a counseling or therapeutic relationship. Issues of divorce, sexual assault, and death were all revealed. Even with these issues in mind though, all participants were extremely attentive and remained comfortable in answering questions openly and without apprehension.

### Participant Profiles

For purposes of understanding the demographics and characteristics of the overall student population at the host campus where these eight participants attended, demographic data were obtained from the Fall 2009 academic term. A total of 1226 students took at least one course at the host regional campus and 72% were female while 28% were male. Approximately 61% of the student population was over the age of 24 and 80% were Caucasian. Nearly 58% of all students were enrolled full-time. A total of 831 students filed a 2009/2010 Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and 270 of those students self reported themselves as being first-generation students on the FAFSA. Therefore, it can logically be assumed that approximately 32% of the transfer student population at the regional host was first-generation (personal communication, September 10, 2010). The regional host did not collect single-parent data on students.

Eight students were involved as research participants in this study. Participant confidentiality was assured by employing pseudonyms for each participant, thus minimizing any revealing information. Participant pseudonyms, assigned by researcher, were listed in the order of interview and have been alphabetized for reader convenience. Therefore, as Tables 4, 5 and 6 each display, **A**manda was the first research participant to be interviewed and **H**ank

was last. The three tables display background data compiled from the Background Data Questionnaire (Appendix B) in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

Table 4 displays the demographic characteristics of participants and indicates that seven participants were female and one was male. Seven were Caucasian and one was African American. The average age of each participant was 32 with an age range of 23 through 49. Four participants were 30 years old or higher, while three were 23 and one was 27, respectively.

Table 5 presents participants' relationship status in terms of marital status and numbers of and ages of children. Five of the participants had only one child, and the remaining three participants had two or three children. The average age of each child was 7.5 years old. Five of the participants were divorced and three had never been married.

Table 6 displays participants' socioeconomic and employment status. Three of the participants were not employed. The remaining five worked an average of 37 hours or more each week off campus. Though six participants were the sole providers for their households, the average range of annual household income for the group was between \$10,000 and \$20,000. None of the participants lived with their families and each headed up their own households. Finally, half of the participants' mothers had not earned a high school diploma. Only one of the participants' fathers had not earned a high school diploma or GED.

Table 4  
*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Participant	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Classification
<b>Amanda</b>	23	Caucasian	Female	Senior
<b>Barbara</b>	27	Caucasian	Female	Senior
<b>Christy</b>	23	Caucasian	Female	Junior
<b>Debbie</b>	36	Caucasian	Female	Junior
<b>Erika</b>	23	African American	Female	Junior
<b>Felicia</b>	30	Caucasian	Female	Junior
<b>Gina</b>	47	Caucasian	Female	Junior
<b>Hank</b>	49	Caucasian	Male	Senior

Table 5  
*Participants' Relationship and Child Status*

Participant	# Children	Children's Age (Years)	Marital Status
<b>Amanda</b>	1	3	Single
<b>Barbara</b>	1	4	Divorced
<b>Christy</b>	1	1.5	Single
<b>Debbie</b>	2	6, 9	Divorced
<b>Erika</b>	1	3	Single
<b>Felicia</b>	3	13, 9, 7	Divorced
<b>Gina</b>	2	8, 10	Divorced
<b>Hank</b>	1	17	Divorced

Table 6  
*Participants' Socioeconomic and Employment Status*

Participant	Employment	Hours per Week	Household Income
<b>Amanda</b>	No	N/A	\$10,000-20,000
<b>Barbara</b>	Yes	30	\$10,000-20,000
<b>Christy</b>	No	N/A	\$10,000-20,000
<b>Debbie</b>	Yes	40+	\$10,000-20,000
<b>Erika</b>	Yes	40+	\$20,000-30,000
<b>Felicia</b>	Yes	23+	\$0-10,000
<b>Gina</b>	No	N/A	\$0-10,000
<b>Hank</b>	Yes	50+	\$20,000-30,000

Amanda: "... this is what I've always wanted"

Amanda was a 23-year old Caucasian female and a senior Early Childhood Education major. She had never been married and had one son who was three years old. Her mother had completed some high school but did not graduate, and her father earned his high school GED. Amanda attended the local community/state college within six months of completing high school and transferred to the host campus immediately upon completion of an associate degree. She was currently enrolled in nine credit hours of courses. She was not employed and self-reported that her annual household income ranged from \$10,000-20,000. It should also be noted that, as her academic advisor, I had a previous professional relationship with Amanda before we met for our interview.

Amanda arrived at our meeting wearing casual shorts, a t-shirt and flip flops. She was approximately 10 minutes late for our appointment and she was accompanied with her son. She explained that her babysitter canceled at the last minute which forced her to bring him along with her. Amanda immediately apologized for needing to bring him and asked if it was permissible for him to sit with us during the interview. Foreseeing no problem with her son being in the same room, I was agreeable to her request. Before we began the interview, I provided her son with some crayons, colored paper and a few toy puppets to help keep him occupied.

As we began the interview, I immediately noticed how Amanda's vocal tone appeared very upbeat. She was extremely articulate, and as she began

answering my interview questions, she spoke clearly with minimal pauses. She seemed to understand my questions and exhibited no apprehension in sharing her story openly. She exhibited constant eye contact and only looked away when I would ask her a question that required deep, reflective thought or when her son would talk and distract her attention.

Amanda stated that she first remembered wanting to attend college when she was four years old. “When I was four I wanted to teach and that was kind of my whole life, was working towards being a teacher” (Transcript record [TR] 1, line 5). “My mom said my first day I came home and told her that I was going to grow up and be just like teacher Betty” (line 79). She continued, saying:

I always looked up to all the different educators I’ve come in contact with like my preschool teacher, Ms. Betty, teacher Betty. She was very special to me and I know that to become an educator you have to have a degree. (line 61)

Even though Amanda’s parents did not attend college, they were extremely supportive of her aspirations. “They [my parents] wanted me to go and they really didn’t know what the situation was going to be like, but they were very excited for me to be the first in our family to at least attempt it” (line 23). She continued, “I was always a good student and my whole life, my parents always encouraged that they wanted me to get the best grades I could” (line 123).

Amanda described herself as a good student in high school. “I was a good student, I mean, up until the middle of my junior year I was very driven and I did all of my work on time, very thorough. I always had ‘As and ‘Bs” (TR 1, line 99). When her father passed away during her junior year, life became very stressful

and she enrolled in virtual school to have more flexibility with family responsibilities. Nevertheless, she still perceived college as an opportunity she could handle:

Before I got to college I thought it was going to be pretty easy. I mean, I've always been fairly confident in my abilities because a lot of times, especially with the beginning course work, I felt like we were going over things I had already done in high school. (line 133)

She continued, "It [college] was easy for me but I did work hard at it and I wanted it. I wanted to learn more about all kinds of things" (line 128).

When asked if she had any concerns about college, she acknowledged that she had some apprehension about being in a new situation and being personally accountable for herself:

Yeah, when I first started college I was a little worried about having to be personally accountable for my own work rather than someone keeping me on schedule as well as just the whole college life experience ... the whole idea was just a little intimidating because universities are just so big. (TR 1, line 163)

Moreover, on a scale of one to five, five being most confident, she stated:

Probably a four. I was pretty confident that I still could do it ... now I'm a little bit less so, but just because I've had a really, really rough semester trying to get back into the swing of things and finishing up all the work that I still need to finish up ... last fall my mom passed away and I still have classes to finish with that, so I took the spring semester off and kinda just to regroup. (line 190)

Amanda described her ability to manage her parenting, school, and life responsibilities as "... always a struggle. I'm always juggling trying to arrange certain things so that other things can be done" (TR 1, line 221). Because her parents had passed away and her sisters were no longer in the immediate area,

her support network to assist with childcare was extremely limited. She relied on her grandma and her son's father as needed. As a result, one of her challenges was childcare "... because it's really hard to find someone trustworthy and reliable on a regular basis" (line 238). She handled this frustration by trying to keep a strict schedule and utilizing calendars. "It's kinda like a puzzle I just have to piece together. And I look for help wherever I can" (line 253). "There's just not enough time to do everything that I have to do" (line 340).

She awarded credit to faculty for being understanding and allowing her flexibility as needed with schoolwork assignments. "It's really the teachers who help me because if they weren't so understanding, sometimes I wouldn't be able to do it" (TR 1, line 261). "They [faculty] have also been able to direct me towards different resources that can help, which resources for people in my situation are very hard to find" (line 465). Amanda felt what most impacted her success and persistence in college was the support she received from others as well as her internal motivation. "It [school] gave me something to want to wake up for every day rather than 'oh, I just have to get up and go to work', you know. I get to do something exciting today and that helped a lot" (line 328). She believed her confidence has played an important role:

There have been quite a few times where a lot of other people would've just stopped, or taken time off for an extended period, or just not have continued at all. And even if it's really hard I try to push through it and try to make it so that eventually I'll get my degree. I've been at this almost five years. But eventually, I'll get there. (line 333)

Amanda's motivation is shaped by her desire to make a difference:

That's one of the most important things to me is that we provide children with the foundation that they need to have a good life ... and I'd really like to see changes made so that our children and their children will have a much better shot at succeeding in this world. (TR 1, line 364)

She continued, "He [son] motivates me ... I want for him to have a good education system and really the only way for me to do that is to get involved in the education system to help make changes for the better for these kids" (line 430) .

Overall, Amanda was an inspiring student who had academically persisted through the deaths of both her parents. She seemed genuinely interested in sharing her story with me in hopes that it would make an impact on the research study. As a first interview, I was extremely pleased with our ability to engage in such casual yet profound dialogue. Amanda never appeared uncomfortable or nervous and guided me as the research instrument. Her son did innocently disrupt our conversation on numerous occasions but we quickly provided activities to keep him occupied so as to minimize the distraction. The fact that she needed to bring him along demonstrated her childcare needs and the complexity of responsibility she has as a single parent and student.

I did contact Amanda following our first interview and shared the transcript of our discussion with her. Within this same message, I asked her to review the transcript and provide any additional comments for clarification. I also requested to meet with her briefly one more time and even suggested a phone call appointment. After waiting roughly one week, I sent Amanda another request to meet. In this message, I included the interview questions I intended to ask. I

informed her that if she did not have time to meet with me, I understood but that I would appreciate her answering the attached questions. Unfortunately, Amanda never called or contacted me.

Barbara: "I want to be the first to finish"

Barbara was a 27-year-old Caucasian female and a senior Elementary Education major. She was divorced with one child who was four years old. Her mother completed 10th grade and her father completed his GED. She was one of six children and had three brothers and two sisters. Barbara attended the local community/state college within six months of graduating high school and transferred to the host campus immediately upon completion of her associate degree. She was currently enrolled in 12 credit hours. She was employed, worked an average of 30 hours per week, and self-reported an annual household income between \$10,000 and \$20,000. Like Amanda, it should also be noted that, as her academic advisor, I had a previous professional relationship with Barbara before we met for our interview.

Barbara arrived ten minutes early for our scheduled interview and she sat quietly in one of our office chairs in the lobby. She was wearing jeans, a t-shirt and sandals. At first when I greeted her, she seemed slightly nervous and I quickly initiated light, casual conversation in hopes of easing any awkwardness. As we began the interview, she quickly opened up and giggled throughout our discussion.

When asked about her desire to attend college, she explained that she “was like a future teacher in elementary school ... that’s what I always wanted to do” (TR 2, line 4). She remembered her third grade teacher, Ms. Giorgio, and credited her with initially inspiring her to become a teacher. “I knew I wanted to be like her [Ms. Giorgio] because she was important to me when I was a little kid so I wanted to be like that” (line 10). She described her high school experience working in a daycare program called CUDACARE as reinforcing her desire to become a teacher.

Barbara stated that attending college was a requirement to become a classroom teacher. She expressed confidence in her ability to do college-level work but also concern about financing the tuition. “I was always a good student, but that’s something I, you know, always tried to maintain, that way I’d have a chance because my mom and dad couldn’t afford it” (TR 2, line 46). Barbara also indicated anxiety about being in a social, new environment. I observed her slightly fidget as she stated, “I’m not really a people person. I’m very shy, so I was kind of worried about that a little bit ... like I just get nervous when I’m in new situations, but oh well” (line 150). She explained that the reason she attended college in Daytona Beach was to stay close to family. “I didn’t want to go far away. I wanted to stay close. That’s why I went to Daytona Beach Community College (DBCC). I don’t want to go far away from family” (line 155).

Her parents supported her aspirations to attend college despite their lack of any college experience. Barbara rolled her eyes as she recalled her mom

saying “We don’t want you to be stupid ... and you need an education. You have to get a good job ... you don’t want to, you know, end up coordinating Kmart for the rest of your life or whatever” (TR 2, line 267). One of Barbara’s role models was her aunt who ran the daycare that she worked at over the summers. Her aunt attended college, and so did all of her aunt’s children. This provided a positive influence for her college aspirations as well. Four of Barbara’s siblings, two sisters and two brothers, also attended college at some point. However, none of them had persisted to earn degrees, and she was proud that she would be the first to finish and earn a bachelor’s degree.

Barbara sat back in her chair and talked about her father having a heart attack during her first semester at the host campus. As a result, she had dropped all of her classes. She re-enrolled in courses the following semester but then dropped them the subsequent semester once she was pregnant. “I stayed home for I think two years, and then as soon as I got my divorce, that’s when I moved out. Then I came back to school” (TR 2, line 293). She explained her reasoning for coming back to school was to do more with her life. “I don’t want to do this forever. I don’t want to wait. So I just talked to my mom. My mom said she could watch her [daughter] when I was in school and everything, so. Figured I’d better start, that way I don’t put it off anymore” (line 340).

When asked to describe her self confidence on a scale of one to five that she would be successful in college, Barbara ranked herself, without hesitation, as having an eight or nine:

Back then, back then, yeah, eight or nine. I figured I could do it, for ... but after I had her [daughter], I kinda, you know, that's when things got ... I didn't know if I would finish because I wanted to stay home with her and I don't like to push things off when I want to get them done.  
(TR 2, line 502)

"It's [college] something I want to do, so I just have to manage my time and prioritize what needs to be done, and just push through it" (line 619). She stated that overcoming obstacles keeps her motivated. She commented:

I know that when things are hard, do them, you grow stronger, so there are going to be things now that are going to be hard, just finding time, you know ... but I know I have to find the time, have to, you know, I know I'm going to do it. I know I'm going to make it, so no matter what, I'm going to do it, and then I know it will be over eventually. (line 654)

Barbara was fortunate to have an encouraging support network. Both her mom and grandma lived within two miles and were extremely helpful in taking care of her daughter as needed:

... I take her [daughter] to my mom and then she'd watch her and ... she [daughter] loves going to grandma's so it makes it easy because if she wasn't happy about it, I wouldn't be happy about it, but she's happy there, so I don't feel bad about it, but I hate leaving her. I love spending time with her. (TR 2, line 551)

She described a desire to be more involved on campus, "... but I just, I can't so that's kinda a barrier to me because I'd like to put more into it than I have time for ... I don't work as hard as I need to sometimes on things just because I don't have time" (line 586).

Barbara explained that her internal drive is one of the factors that had most impacted her success and persistence in college. She replied:

I want to accomplish something. Like everyone in my family, they started but they haven't finished. I want to be the one who can finish ... [laughs]

... you know, and I can't teach until I have all this done, and I really want to teach, so have to get done what has to get done. (TR 2, line 692)

When asked how her child has impacted her college experiences, she smiled and replied "... she's what pushes me, you know. I want to do good for her. I want to make a better life for her, so, she motivates me" (line 612). "She just motivates me, like in everything, every aspect of life, you know ... to be a better person, do well for her, do the right thing, you know, raise her right, be a good role model. She helps with all that" (line 888).

At the conclusion of our interview, Barbara shared that "if I didn't have my mom to watch [daughter], I wouldn't have come back here [school] ... yeah, I need them ... [laughs] ... to help me through the craziness" (TR 2, line 961). I then thanked her for her time, shook her hand and walked her to the door. She seemed extremely comfortable and commented that she hoped the information she shared was helpful.

I did contact Barbara following our initial interview and shared the transcript of our discussion with her. Within this same message, I asked her to review the transcript and my interpretive summary, and provide any additional comments for clarification. I also requested to meet with her briefly one more time and even suggested a phone call appointment. Barbara affirmed both the transcripts and my comments and politely agreed to meet with me the next day.

When we met for our second interview, Barbara was carrying several books in a large bag, wearing jeans, a white t-shirt overlapped with a light, long-sleeved top, and sandals. I met with her hoping to probe deeper into where her

confidence in her abilities originated. Barbara described feeling extremely capable in her academics and ability to perform school work. Therefore, during the second interview, I asked her to describe any particular goals she had outside of academics. She answered, “Well, from life goals, you know family is what my focus is on ... I want to be able to take care of her [daughter] so it kind of ties into academics because I wanted to do a good job” (TR 12, line 8). She continued, “Life is family. So I don’t have too many goals other than that” (line 19).

When asked about her attitude and approach toward accomplishing goals, she stated, “Anything, any goal I have, I put everything into it. You know, I go above and beyond. I try, you know, to be the best at anything I do” (line 55). We talked for a few minutes more about her desire to compete with others, which she acknowledged was a significant source of her motivation. I then thanked her for her time and expressed my appreciation for her willingness to meet with me one more time.

Christy: “Everything I’m not has made me everything I am”

Christy was a 23-year old Caucasian female and junior Nursing major. She had never been married and had one child who was 18 months old. Her mother had completed 10th grade and her father earned his GED. Christy attended the local community/state college within six months of high school completion. She transferred to the host campus within one year of earning her

associate degree. She was currently enrolled in 12 credit hours. She was not employed and reported an annual household income between \$10,000-20,000.

Christy shared that she moved out of her parents' house when she was fifteen years old and had been on her own ever since. Despite being a straight 'A' student, she dropped out of high school during her sophomore year and when she turned 16, she earned her GED. When asked about college, she replied, "... there really wasn't a question. I just knew that in order for me to succeed in life and have more than what I grew up with, that, that's what I needed to do" (TR 3, line 5). She continued, "I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to get into but I always made good grades and overall enjoyed school" (line 28). As Christy spoke of her college beliefs and high school accomplishments, I noted her confidence and determined belief in her attitude expressed through her articulate words and vocal tone. She appeared to be very succinct and factual throughout our discussion.

She explained that she had not had role models who attended college or positive influences that provided encouragement for her. "It was never really instilled in me that you had to go to college. From growing up, that wasn't, you know ..." (TR 3, line 63). She continued, "Nobody to this day has gone to college that I've known, so" (line 79). She felt like she made the right choice to attend college and she is proud of her persistence. "... I made the right choice. I think later on down the road when I look back, they're [friends and family] probably going to be doing the same things" (line 84).

One of the recurring comments from my discussion with Christy was that she wanted to prove people wrong. She felt much of her confidence was inspired by her desire to do more with her life than others around her when growing up, including family. When asked about the source of her feelings of being capable for college-level work, she replied “Um, I think maybe from people putting me down, me wanting to prove people wrong, that I could do more than that I guess” (TR 3, line 95). She continued, “What motivates me to do it is people telling me ‘I can’t’” (line 443).

Christy became pregnant during the time period between earning her associate’s degree and beginning at the host campus. She was awaiting acceptance into the Nursing program when she had her child. Once she had her baby, she took some time off from school to care for her child. She returned to college the following year and began taking courses at the host campus. She commented “I had no idea what to expect. I just kind of jumped in and went with it” (TR 3, line 139).

On a scale of one to five, five being most strong, Christy quickly reported her initial confidence to succeed in college was five. She focused her eyes on mine and explained:

I don’t know, I just like, that’s just what I’ve wanted to do, like I always had this plan and that’s what I was doing so I ... I think I’m going to do it and I’m going to do it. I guess it’s more of a control issue. It’s what I have control over in my life – it’s school. So I can control that. Anything else is pretty much uncontrollable ... [laughs] ... (TR 3, line 165)

Christy remembered her first day of class at the host campus. One of her teachers made a comment that frustrated her and, yet again, instilled a desire in her to prove that teacher wrong:

I remember my first of class ... one of the teachers ... said something about um, people who have kids aren't going to have the same commitment and dedication. And really, I thought about that, and if anything, she's [daughter] my motivation to do more. If I didn't have her, I might be tempted to go out and go to a movie at night. But instead I'm home with her. (TR 3, line 224)

She continued:

... even though I was motivated to do it for myself, I'm even more motivated now to do it for her [daughter], to show her, instill in her, that you have to go to college. Like no one told me, like that's what you do. And she'll grow up thinking that ... (line 229)

Despite not having anyone in her life who inspired her to attend college, Christy believed her internal motivation came from her desire to break the cycle and beat the odds:

I just want to be the one to prove that you can break the cycle ... you can turn it around, because I mean, if you knew me from high school and I dropped out, I was hanging out with the wrong crowd ... I've seen people nowadays, who I run into from back then, and they're pretty surprised at where I am, so. (TR 3, line 248)

She elaborated:

Everything I'm not has made me everything I am. Pretty much, um, where I came from, how my parents are, who I was surrounded by, that's, you know. Everything I'm not, they just led by example everything I never want to be. It's what I don't want to do. So I guess, I guess that's my motivating factor. (line 431)

She relies on her time management and prioritizing skills to get her through each day with childcare and a demanding school schedule. The father of

her daughter sees her once per week, and friends help her with childcare as needed. Christy described a particular day:

Well, this morning I woke up at 5:00 a.m., and I don't have, I didn't have TV anywhere today because I don't have class so, um, my daughter does have day care on Thursdays I though, so I figured I, she needs to be there by 9:30 a.m., so I woke up at five, I, um, got her a cup of milk and put her in my bed so she watched cartoons for about an hour. I figured maybe I could sleep a little bit longer so that didn't work because I am the jungle gym apparently. And so I got up at six, then I made breakfast, I, um, and I ate breakfast with her, and then after that we went in my bathroom and I took a shower and got ready, got her, her ready, packed a lunch for me, and then we left, dropped her off at daycare, I got to school at about 8:30 a.m. and I planned on studying. I usually study from like 8:00 a.m. about four or five up in the library. I go home and pick her up, make dinner, do housework, I put her to bed at seven, and then I, you know, take maybe half an hour to myself and then I study until midnight and then on the days that I have clinicals, I have to wake up at 3:30 a.m. in the morning. Like tomorrow, give her up, take her to my, uh, friend's house, my friend will take her to daycare, because daycare doesn't open until 6:30 a.m., I have to be in Palm Coast at 6:30 a.m., I have clinical from 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., 6:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m., and then I have someone pick her up and because daycare closes at 6:00 p.m., I get home, she's, should be asleep, usually she isn't. (TR 3, line 269)

Christy expressed having anxiety when she first started at the host campus in the Nursing program. Her child's father left during that semester, childcare was difficult, and the bills were piling up. However as she experienced that initial transition and focused on school and a structured schedule, she got through the first semester with excellent grades. She glanced outside my office window and stated:

I think if I had more time to actually stop and think and hear myself think about other things than school, I would have more stress but, maybe the stress drives me, maybe, maybe that's why I'm going to be a nurse – I work well under stress ... [laughs] ... (TR 3, line 301)

When asked how her child has influenced her while in college, Christy shared:

I feel like she [daughter] is my hobby. Some people who are in the program, they go and do this, they go and do that ... I don't have time for any of that. I have time for her and school, and that's it, so ... I think it helps if anything. (TR 3, line 313)

She continued, "I can see how what I do is influencing her and making it better for her" (line 482).

Christy described that her closest support network were her classmates. "They're, you know, they're like my Nursing family. You know, if I need anything, they're right there. That's really the only people that I have around or even converse with" (TR 3, line 455). She looked up to the faculty and considered many of them to be role models. However, she recognized, unlike Amanda and Barbara, that she never talked to the faculty when she had childcare issues. She shared, "Never have I ever brought that factor in ... I want to be treated like everyone else regardless if I have a kid or not" (line 511).

At the end of our discussion, I asked Christy how it felt to be a first-generation college student and how that status had affected her experiences as a college student. She replied:

I've never thought about it. Someone asked me the other day, because I told them I was coming here, and someone was like 'oh doesn't that put a lot of pressure on you?' Not really, I mean, maybe, maybe it puts less pressure on me because no one's ever instilled that in me. No one's expecting me to do good, so no one's, you know, breathing down my neck about it. I mean, there, I consider ultimately, now that I'm here and I'm doing this, they are proud of me, but did they expect me to do it, no, no. (TR 3, line 570)

At times during our interview, Christy's answers seemed succinct and less descriptive as compared to comments from Amanda and Barbara. I remember feeling slightly dissatisfied with some of her short answers but more disappointed with myself as the researcher for not being able to extract more rich information through probing questions. However, I was extremely intrigued by her story and background and her experiences clearly indicated a unique background and support network.

Once our interview had concluded, I turned off the tape recorder and thanked Christy for her time and valuable input. I expected her to quickly walk out of the office. However, we continued to casually talk for about 10 minutes. She began asking me questions about the research study and my personal motivation for my topic, methodology, and selection criteria. I was slightly surprised to find her so interested in the research, my own education background and my career interests. Therefore, I was pleased to end our initial meeting in a friendly manner and by building additional rapport. Before she walked out of the office, she commented that she hoped her feedback was helpful for me and to the research.

I contacted Christy following our initial interview and shared the transcript of our discussion with her. Within this same message, I asked her to review the transcript and provide any additional comments for clarification. I included thematic patterns for her review based on our initial discussion. I also requested to meet with her briefly one more time and even suggested a phone call appointment. Christy quickly responded to my request and unfortunately, her

availability was so limited that it prevented us to arrange a meeting time. Instead, I sent her an email message with a thematic summary and additional questions and she again responded within 24 hours. She answered my questions in the email and affirmed my thematic findings.

My questions posed to her in the email were focused on her personal goals outside of academics and questioned how she planned to attain those goals. She shared that her personal goals were to complete renovations to her house. While she had already accomplished significant improvements to the house such as new tile, paint and woodwork, she still had numerous projects yet to complete. Her approach to completing the renovations was based on time and money, both of which she outlined in meticulous detail.

My final question to Christy was based on her attitude towards goal setting and how that had changed over the years, if at all. She responded that her attitude towards goal setting has evolved and now she no longer compares herself to other people nearly as much. She stated:

I've realized that everything is what you make it. If you're patient and put forth the effort, anything is possible. If you want something bad enough you will find a way to make it happen no matter how long it takes or what obstacles challenge you. There is no reason to compare yourself to anyone else. (TR 13, line 41).

Debbie: "... in order to get there, this is what I have to do"

Debbie was a 36-year old Caucasian female and a junior Early Childhood Education major. She was divorced and had two children who were nine and six years of age. The father of her children was not involved in their life and offered

no financial or personal support. Both her mother and father had earned their high school diplomas. Debbie began taking courses at the local community/state college after two years of high school completion. However, she enrolled in only one or two classes each semester for several years. She transferred to the host campus after completion of her associate's degree and realization of her interest in becoming a teacher. She currently was enrolled in 12 semester hours of coursework. She was employed, worked more than 40 hours per week and self-reported an annual household income between \$10,000 and \$20,000. As with Amanda and Barbara, it should also be noted that as her academic advisor, I had a previous professional relationship with Debbie before we met for our interview.

Debbie commented that she was extremely interested in being a research participant and sharing her story as a single parent, first-generation college student. When asked about scheduling an appointment with me, she adamantly stated that she could not come to the office for the interview. Rather, she clarified she could only speak on the phone due to the limitations in her schedule. Debbie explained that she worked more than 40 hours per week, had two children to support on her own, was taking four courses and simply didn't have the time to drive 45 minutes from Palm Coast to meet with me during a weekday. Initially, I assumed I would not be able to include her as a research participant. However, I identified a way to securely record our phone conversation in order to later replay and transcribe our discussion. Debbie and I eventually spoke on a Saturday morning at roughly 9:30 a.m.

I did have prior professional interactions with Debbie and, therefore, was more comfortable in interviewing her via telephone than I would have been if I had not known the participant. As we began talking, I was immediately relieved at how open and communicative she was. Speaking on the phone did not seem to inhibit any feelings or beliefs she shared in response to my questions. Her vocal tone was extremely upbeat, articulate, and energetic. Her responses were exceptionally descriptive. In many instances, no probing questions were needed to delve deeper into her life experiences.

I noted at the beginning of our interview that I could hear background noise in the phone. It sounded as if she was either quietly cleaning dishes or organizing papers while speaking to me. I chose not to inquire about the noises for three reasons. One, they were not affecting her ability to have a conversation with me. Her ability to provide informative and detailed answers was extremely coherent. Perhaps if her answers were fragmented or unclear, I might have attempted to ask for more of her attention. However, this was not the case. Second, I wanted to experience her in a normal realm of life. If she routinely multi-tasked her responsibilities, then I wanted to understand and be familiar with how she managed to do so. Third, I did not want to disrupt our conversation and make her feel uncomfortable in any way. I recognized that she was making time to talk with me and most likely had to occupy her children with activities during our discussion. Therefore, for these three reasons, I continued our conversation

and accepted the light background noises. Within the first 10 minutes though, these noises completely stopped.

Debbie admitted not being an interested or good student in high school:

... from a very early age, my parents have not ever placed a great importance on schooling. Um, they always supported me and made sure that I knew I was an incredibly intelligent person and I was capable of anything I put my mind to. But their focus for me was in having more common sense and having a questioning open mind, not necessarily what school could provide, because they didn't, they didn't necessarily see the benefit of the rote kind of 1 + 1 is 2, and, and they didn't have a lot of confidence in the school system, so there was never a high level of emphasis placed on schooling. And consequently, I ended up being a student through high school who did very well in subjects I loved, like English and Math, um, and did horrible in, in, subjects that didn't speak to me like History. (TR 4, line 3)

Debbie's mother did not discourage her from attending college. Rather she called it an "option" (line 13). Her father, however, never saw the point or value in an education. Debbie described her father as someone who was always very successful and didn't want to be too focused on just one thing. She recalled him stating "... a college degree will pigeon-hole you into something, and it will, you know, you'll become so focused on one thing that you'll stop seeing the bigger picture" (line 18).

It was not until she became discontent with her life and career that she reconsidered attending college. She worked in the computer industry and had a very successful computer hardware store with her family. During this time, she would take only one or two courses. However these classes were aimless and general and were not focused on any particular career choice. Her focus at that time was on her computer store and beginning to raise a family with her

husband. Debbie recalls her computer store being "... wildly successful right up until, uh, about 2000, when the Internet bubble burst. And overnight, pretty much lost most of our investors" (TR 4, line 50).

Debbie admitted that once her computer store began to struggle, her desire to earn a degree become more of a priority. She stated:

Alright I, I think that maybe a degree would be nice thing to have so let's start working towards it, but um, even then, there was still no driving passion, it, it, seriously, it was not until I found my love of teaching that it [college] became a driving passion for me. (TR 4, line 120)

She discovered her love for teaching while she was volunteering for an extended daycare program with her children. After that experience, she remembered:

Now my goal, full degree so that I can teach those kids, and so that I am a capable and amazing teacher who can bring my joy and my passion to that classroom. And make them laugh and make them discover and open this world to them. And, and make them see that learning should be fun. And that's when my passion for college, that was when my reason for going became crystal clear. (TR 4, line 792)

Once she identified teaching as her new career, she became committed to earning a bachelor's degree. Debbie recalls a conversation with her father:

... he goes, 'what are you doing getting into teaching, you know, there's, they, they don't get the support in the community that they need, and they don't get the money, and they don't get the recognition, and you know, why are you, why are you pursuing that because you're going to be poor your entire life.' And I looked at him and said, 'I will be poor but I will be happy. I will be doing something that I love.' (TR 4, line 94)

When I asked Debbie about her feelings of being capable to do college-level work, she responded:

Never questioned it, I've, I've, in my college career I have never questioned my ability, um, but like I said, my parents have, that was the one thing, even though they didn't stress the value of education, uh, they

always stressed my intelligence and my ability to handle anything that came my way. So consequently, I can walk into nearly any situation, uh, even something I've never done before, with a high level of confidence in myself, in knowing that even if I don't know what I'm doing, or, or have any experience with something, I pick things up very quickly and I am a dedicated individual and I'll do whatever, uh, research I need to do to become very proficient at something. So consequently, I, I tend to not get stressed out about school or anything in that arena. I've always felt very capable. It was one of the gifts my parents gave me. (TR 4, line 192)

She continued:

When you believe in someone, you show it through every action and interaction that you have for that person. And so it is unspoken as well. So I had the verbal part of it but it was also the underlining feeling that came through from them on every interaction we had – you are capable, you are able to do it, we believe in you, you should believe in yourself. (line 214)

It was not until Debbie's marriage ended that she felt she needed to prioritize earning her degree. She remembered the stress being "unbelievable" (TR 4, line 344). However, she got through that semester with an 'A' and 'B+'. Even though Debbie felt extremely efficacious about performing well in college, she was slightly concerned about her age in the classroom. She assumed that she would be significantly older than the other students. She also had financial concerns about being able to pay for tuition. However, she countered her own concern by stating, "I am very confident in my ability to get a job and pay them [student loans] off" (line 322).

After Debbie earned an associate degree, she had options for earning her bachelor's degree through the host campus or the local community/state college. She chose the host campus specifically because of the online instructional delivery for the majority of courses in the Early Childhood Education program.

This allowed her to attend courses once per week while also remaining fully employed and able to care for her children. She elaborated:

... when I realized there was an option for me to take 90% of my degree online, with very limited face-to-face meetings, all of a sudden this whole world opened up and I had an option for getting a degree quicker and being able to take more classes because you, at [the host campus], were, were willing to put together a method, of delivery, instruction delivery that met my needs. (TR 4, line 416)

When asked to describe how she balances her multiple roles as student, parent, and employee, she replied “Well, uh, sometimes I’m not sure how I do that. Um ... [laughs] ... I mean, really, there are days I’m looking at my homework going, how am I going to find time to do this” (TR 4, line 451). She has chosen to expose her children to her homework and has placed an emphasis on school work:

... one of the most important things that I do, is I let my children see the fact that I’m doing my homework. We make their homework a very important part of our day, and I make my homework a very important part of our day, and sometimes I’m very honest with them, and my nine-year-old will come up and go ‘mommy, I really want to do this’, and I’ll look at her and say ‘I’m sorry honey, but I have homework. This is a responsibility and it’s an important thing and I need to take it, and take it seriously and do it.’ So that has helped a lot, being very honest with my children about the importance of my college education to me, and they see me putting it first in life. Well, second because they are first in my life. But that’s helped a lot. It also helps that they are almost 10 and seven because they are able to view it from an older child perspective. You know, if they were two, I don’t know how’d I do it, because I can’t look at a two-year-old and say ‘mommy really needs to take this test online. I need you to go read a book.’ You can’t do that. Um, so part of it is lucky where they are at developmentally, and, and part of it I think is just we place the importance on it. Because if they see me placing an importance on it, they will place an importance on it. (line 452)

Debbie also described one of her mottos that helps her handle all her responsibility:

... one of the mantras that keeps going through my mind is it's [school] three months, that's all. You can do anything for three months. So, if I don't get quite as much sleep as I need, or whatever. I just need to keep telling myself it is three months ... I just have to get through December, actually just November, cause classes end at the beginning of December, so I just have to get there. And if I can do that, everything else will be fine. So, it keeps me going. (line 521)

She explained how school helped her cope with her marriage ending:

I overnight found myself as a single mom, with little-to-no income coming in, um, trying to figure out what I was going to do, knowing that my marriage was over but not really sure how to make that happen, um, you know, fighting with the layers of guilt when you're contemplating ending a marriage, especially when there's children involved, uh, is it best for the children, things like that. And still trying to uh, do the work in a college course that you need to do. And in all honestly, I think that that semester, having those two courses really saved me, because it gave me something to focus on other than my life ... It was a, kinda an escape for me ... I used those two classes as a way to, um, focus on something that didn't have to do with the turmoil that was going on in my life. (TR 4, line 556)

Debbie identified her belief in herself as the most significant factor impacting her success and persistence in college. "My belief in myself. I think it really goes back to that" (TR 4, line 599). She continued:

I can find the plus side to anything. That's the other thing about me. Not only am I incredibly self-reliant and believe in myself, I'm also incredibly optimistic. So even when, and that's key, I think, that's one of the keys to being able to handle college is that even when I'm having a tough time with something, I kinda go 'that's OK, even in 10 seconds the wind will change direction', you know, it's all going to change. I don't need to expend a lot of energy on this situation because it's not going to be this situation for very long at all. And that helps me deal with things and stay optimistic, and know that I'm not in this horrible, you know, this morass, this pit of despair. No matter how bad things get I always know, yeah 'just give a while, things will work themselves out and it'll all be ok', and because I honestly believe that it helps me stay mentally clear, focused, and prepared for whatever's coming up. (line 672)

Debbie also recalled a prior employment position that instilled an extreme amount of confidence in herself and her ability to accomplish tasks:

I've always dealt well with working with people who were older than me and, and handling responsibility that was given to me, and I've always been rewarded for it, you know, it was kinda that self-fulfilling prophecy, everyone tells you that you can do it, you go into it believing you can do it, then you do it, and everyone comments on the fact that you did it, and that they knew you could do it. And then it becomes a circular ball of goodness ... I don't know ... it's, it's, it's worked out well for me. I just, I'm, by nature I'm not a timid person and by nature I have a strong belief in my ability to handle everything. (TR 4, line 623)

Debbie credited her parents, specifically her mother, as being a tremendous support network. "My parents have been a huge support, a huge support. Without their help, just getting to Daytona two or three nights, um, a month would be difficult if not impossible" (TR 4, line 726). Her children were also a significant support network. "My children have inspired me to look back on how my parents treated education and not make the same mistake" (line 855). She commented that her classmates had no significant effect on her support network. Rather, she stated, "I am a perfectionist and one of the down-sides to being a perfectionist is that somewhere in your cloudy little brain, you figure that nobody else can do it as well as you can" (line 880). However, she did share that several faculty had positively influenced her as a future teacher. She had vicariously enjoyed observing and living through their teaching styles, and this has made a tremendous impression upon her.

Debbie could not identify one support service that she had utilized while being a student. She stated, "I can't think of a single service that I've used. What

are, what are some of the services that you guys offer that I might have used?” (TR 4, line 945). She did experience significant frustration with financial aid as a new student, but now had gained more understanding of the process and knew what resource person to access at the university.

At the conclusion of our conversation, I thanked Debbie for her time. She replied that she was hopeful her comments would be helpful in my research study. She also stated that many of my questions helped her to think about her life, her belief system, and her experiences as a college student. Our interview concluded after 118 minutes.

I contacted Debbie following our first interview and shared the transcript of our discussion. Using the standard message, I asked her to review the transcript and provide any additional comments for clarification. I included my thematic summary for her review based on our initial discussion. I also requested to talk with her briefly one more time and suggested another phone call appointment. She did respond that she was available on one particular day, but unfortunately, we could not arrange a time that we both were available. Therefore, I responded to her email with several questions I requested that she answer. Debbie quickly responded to my email and affirmed my thematic findings.

My questions posed to her in the email were focused on her personal goals outside of academics and how she planned to attain those goals. She shared that she had two main goals, “One that is optional and the other which is life changing” (TR 14, line 6). Her optional goal was to become a derby skater

who could scrimmage against established derby teams. Her second goal was to restore balance and emotional stability in her life. She felt confident about both goals. However, she indicated that the derby goal was not as high a priority as her emotional stability, raising her children, and being awarded that ideal teaching job.

My final question to Debbie was about her attitude towards goal setting and how that had changed, if at all, over the years. She responded that her attitude towards goals was now focused on “perception shifts” (TR 14, line 63). Her goals no longer surround tangible items like money. Her final comments to me via email were to thank me for including her in the research study. She wrote:

I'm happy to share my experiences, and truthfully, each time you ask me questions, it pushes me to sit and really think about what is important in my life. I love self-reflection :) Thanks again for allowing me to be a part of this! (TR 14, line 70)

Erika: “... if I've made it this far, clearly I can finish”

Erika was a 23-year old African American female and a junior Interpersonal Communication Studies major. She had never been married and had one son who was three. Erika's mother earned a high school diploma and then enrolled at the local community/state college only after Erika completed her associate's degree. Her father earned his high school diploma. After earning her diploma, Erika worked for two years and then attended the local community/state college. She transferred to the host campus immediately upon earning her

associate's degree. She was currently employed, worked 40 hours per week, and self-reported earning an annual household income of \$20,000-30,000.

Erika wore professional work attire to our interview, comprised of black pants and a dark navy blue top. She stated that she was meeting with me during her lunch break and that she had to return to work once our discussion was over. She carried a large purse and sat in a very proper posture. She exhibited pleasant facial expressions, a gentle smile, and excellent eye contact throughout the interview.

Erika reported doing very well in high school. She recalled being popular, very involved on campus, being a cheerleader, and graduating cum laude. At that time, her motivation to do well in school was to continue cheerleading. She stated,

... you can't cheer for anything if you don't have a good grade and you have to have good conduct, so in order to be involved with activities you had to kinda, do well in school first, and plus, in my mom's house, academics always came first, so if I didn't keep at least a 3.0, I wasn't allowed to do anything, so I had no choice. (TR 5, line 61)

Her parents encouraged her to do well in school and they supported her aspirations to attend college. She explained, "They both still just really wanted me to be, I guess, do better than they did kind of thing" (TR 5, line 71). In fact, her mother provided awards for her if she performed academically well in school:

... well my mom always said if I got a certain GPA, I always got a reward, and my senior year I ended up getting a car because I had, she said my senior year I could get a car if I had at least a 3.0, which I did, so I got a car my senior year, but anytime I did good, my parents always rewarded me with something, whether it be money, or clothes, something. I never really had to work in high school. (line 81)

She continued:

... there was never an option not to go to school, you know how some people say that college isn't for everyone, that was never an option in my mom's house. It was school, it was just always go to school, there was no plan B. it was just always you're going to school kind of thing. They didn't necessarily say what I had to go to school to do or where I had to go but I just had to get an education beyond high school. (line 100)

Erika also had a very close extended family, and her mother was one of nine children:

Um, all of my family went to school and are successful, so like I said ... it [college] was always a priority, so everyone always, my family has always encouraged me to go to college ... not everyone graduated but everyone at least started. (line 204)

Even though she was admitted to other universities outside of Daytona Beach, she chose to attend the local community/state college in order to stay close to home and family. She admitted, "I just decided I wasn't ready to go kinda thing, so I didn't" (TR 5, line 110). She also explained that she was an only child and did not want to go far away from her parents. "I think my parents kind of sheltered me and did a little too much for me. So I wasn't ready to go off" (line 138). She also shared, "I think I was focused more on the party than education at first ... kinda like freedom from the house kind of thing" (line 127).

When asked about her feelings of being capable to do college-level work, she stated she was never worried about being able to perform well. However, she distracted herself with the local party scene and rarely went to class the first year at the local community/state college. She described going out to bars

Wednesday through Saturday nights each week:

I went from going out, Thirsty Thursdays, ladies night on Fridays, and I forgot what they call it on Saturdays but I know I could drink free until like one o'clock even though I wasn't old enough to drink but I knew I partied Thursday, Friday, I'm sorry, I started on Wednesday. Wednesday was Razzles ladies night, and then, that was another club we get to on Friday, so Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday I partied. (TR 5, line 165)

During Erika's self-proclaimed 'party stage' was when she became pregnant with her son. She continued to take courses, but she reduced her academic load to just one or two courses. She continued to work during this time as well. Her mother and grandma served as an incredible support network and positive influence during this time. They helped take care of her child and even provided financial assistance to Erika as needed.

One of Erika's role models was her aunt. She shared, "My aunt who graduated from [the host campus] with her bachelor's and her master's degree, she had a kid when she was 15 and still somehow managed to go to school and she actually retired last year at 50" (TR 5, line 281). Erika elaborated, "She had a kid that young, so, and she still went to school and was able to be successful so it kinda lets you know that it still can be done and I looked up to her a lot" (line 289).

Erika recalled one of her immediate concerns about college was being disciplined enough to get up in the morning and go to class. After she went through her period of partying and a year of receiving bad grades at the local community/state college, she felt that the undisciplined behavior was now out of her system. She said, "So, now I show up for class on time and everything but, I think it's because I'm older now and I kinda got the real heavy partying out of my

system. It's not appealing anymore" (TR 5, line 348). She was also concerned about balancing her school, work and childcare responsibilities. She indicated, "That's what I struggle with and am getting used to right now" (line, 393).

Her main motivation for transferring to earn her bachelor's degree was her son. She believed that in order to be successful and to provide for and give him a better future, she needed a degree. She did not want to live paycheck to paycheck. On a scale of one to five, five being most strong, she proudly described her confidence that she would succeed as a five. Without hesitation, she explained, "Definitely a five, I know I can do it. Especially, I have support ... I feel ... like a little past the halfway point now, so if I've made it this far, clearly I can finish. It's just going to take determination, which I feel I have" (TR 5, line 399).

Similar to Barbara and Debbie but unlike Amanda and Christy, Erika had childcare support from her family as needed. This allowed her to work full time and take classes while still being a parent for her child. She elaborated, "Child care isn't an issue, like I said, my parents, my mom will watch him, or even my dad will watch him so that's not really a concern" (TR 5, line 419). Furthermore, she sleeps:

... in on Saturday; my mom doesn't bring my son back until around 4:00 p.m. or 5:00 p.m. on Saturday, so I have all morning to sleep if I want to. And I don't worry about cleaning. The same person who cleans my mom's house she also cleans my apartment for me, so, so I don't have to worry about that, so, it helps out a lot too. (TR 5, line 545)

Her son's father also lives roughly four miles away and is in a master's program at a nearby university. She stated they see each other quite frequently. Although she and her son's father are not married and do not live together, they plan on being a family once they both complete their education.

When asked to describe a typical day, Erika replied:

Okay, typical day, on a school, on a day when I do not have school right now, I wake up at 6:30 a.m., um, I picked out my clothes, pick out my son's clothes, wake him up at seven, get dressed and take him to school, he has to be there no later than about 7:45 a.m., get me to work by 8:00 a.m., 8:00 a.m., I work throughout the day, normally on my break I either go home and chill out or go eat lunch at my mom's house, 5:00 p.m. I get off work, pick up (name omitted) no later than 5:30 p.m., either go to my mom's house or see my grandma or I go straight home, kinda study, spend time with him whether we watch TV or go to the pool, park, kinda spend time with him from around 6:00 p.m. to about 8:00 p.m., go home, shower, get him fed, and in bed no later than 9:30 p.m.. After he goes to sleep I have to do homework and try to be in bed by 11:00 p.m. and start the process all over. The nights that I have class the only difference is that at 5:00 p.m., my mom picks him directly up from school so I come straight here. I'm here until 8:50 p.m., I go home, it depends on whether my mom has cooked, I'll either go to her house and pick him up and eat there or I come to my house and wait for her to bring him and I'll stop by and eat leftovers or grab fast food, come home, put him to bed, same study process, and get up the next day. (TR 5, line 523)

When asked about experiencing a stressful barrier while in college, Erika stated:

Um, the most stress was kinda doing it all on my own because I kinda got a little angry, like my son's father got to still go off to school, and he got to go through college straight, no work, just football, focus on what he wanted to do, but I had to stop, be the more responsible parent, and even now he still is playing his last year of football but I'm having to work full-time kinda thing, so it was pretty stressful and then I would have to deal with going up there and see that he's living the college life that I didn't get to live, you know we both made the decision to have a kid, but I was kind of the one stuck with the responsibility, so that's what was very stressful

for like the first year, but after that I was kind of over it. He [son] became my focus so it really didn't bother me anymore. (TR 5, line 577)

She described another example of experiencing a stressful challenge:

Um, I would say just balancing school and, just the balance of everything. I think once you get that balance down, it's really not hard and now I have a balanced life I have a routine, I'm setting it, so I feel like I can be successful, but before like I said I didn't have any focus, like I lost focus. I told my mom, I kind of felt like I lost my identity. I went from being a pretty wild child to some mom who had responsibility. I never had responsibility growing up. My parents gave me everything, my first responsibility was working and even then it wasn't real responsibility because I knew any day I wanted to I could just quit, and it would not have mattered because I just would've asked my parents for more money. When I had my son, I had a real responsibility, so. (TR 5, line 634)

Erika expressed feelings of accomplishment because she has a full-time job and benefits, things that “a lot of people with degrees don't have right now ... I can afford to pay all my bills and still have a comfortable life” (TR 5, line 658). She also felt more independent now that she has raised her son.

She did not feel that her classmates played a significant role in her academic or personal life. Although she recalled being very social in high school, she didn't talk to many people at the college. In fact, she stated, “... only if you knew me would you know that I am a mom” (TR 5, line 801). Erika did indicate that one particular faculty member was a positive influence for her. However, this was only due to the fact that this instructor was flexible with her bringing her son to class if needed. The faculty member also allowed her to take a test early one day because Erika's son was sick and she did not want to leave him alone.

I did contact Erika following our first interview and shared the transcript of our discussion with her. Within this same message, I asked her to review the

transcript and provide any additional comments for clarification. I included my thematic summary based on our initial discussion for her review. I also requested to meet with her briefly one more time and offered to send her questions via email if she preferred. Erika quickly responded to my email and affirmed my thematic interpretations from our previous conversation. She also indicated that I could send her the questions via email which I did immediately.

My questions posed to Erika in the email were focused on her personal goals outside of academics and how she planned to attain those goals. She shared that her main goal was to “purchase my own home by the end of next year. I am determined to own my own home by age 25” (TR 15, line 5). She felt confident that she could achieve that goal, but she did state that she might need the help of her mother. My final question to Erika was related to her attitude towards goal setting and if that had changed over the years. She responded that “When I was younger, I never cared about not achieving a goal that I set, but now I have the determination to follow through” (line 18).

Felicia: “... it’s going to pay off in the end”

Felicia was a 30-year-old Caucasian female and a junior Legal Studies major. She was divorced and had three children - ages 13, nine, and seven. Felicia’s mother earned a high school diploma and her father earned a military certificate. She was the middle child of her family and had four brothers. After earning her high school diploma, she worked in the community for several years

before attending the local community/state college. Once she earned an associate degree, she immediately transferred into the host campus. She was currently employed, worked an average of 23 hours per week and self-reported an annual household income between \$0-10,000.

Felicia spoke quickly yet elegantly throughout the interview. Her fast-paced speech was expressive yet she described her experiences in a calm, matter-of-fact manner. Her body language was proper, yet comfortable, and she sat in the chair, leaning back during much of the interview. She appeared very serene, and her eye contact was constant unless she looked away to quickly ponder a response. She replied to most questions very quickly and without hesitation, almost as if she had previously read the interview protocol.

She recalled being a good student in high school and making excellent grades. She elaborated that she had “always been on honor roll and never really tried hard for it ... she was always more into school work” (TR 6, line 7). She was also involved in various clubs while in high school. At age 18, she married and had her first son. Roughly four years later, she had another boy. Anxious to have a daughter, she had one more child two years later, and it indeed was a girl. Once her daughter entered kindergarten, Felicia began working at the hospital and later attended the local community/state college. Approximately 10 years elapsed between her completion of high school and first college course. She explained her reasoning for attending college was so she could get a better job.

She stated, "I definitely wanted a better job than working at the hospital" (line 84).

She continued:

I was divorced, and I was ready to go do something different. I've asked myself questions, do I want to stay here at the hospital and work, you know, kinda, not go anywhere or do I want to go back to school and see where it takes me? And I was divorced and decided to take school route, and that's why I'm here. (line 218)

Felicia did not recall having any significant influencers about college. She shared:

... my mom, she was never, she was always wrapped up in her stuff so she never had much time for me, and I always hung out with my dad. I used to help my dad build racecar motors ... yeah, just always helped him with tools and wrenches. (TR 6, line 190)

She described one experience with a high school classmate that influenced her feelings about college:

I did have a friend who was, uh, in school, and she was the same age as me, we went to middle school together. And we, I saw her working in the meat department at Winn-Dixie and she said 'Hey how are you?' She told me she was going to [the local community/state college] working on her associate's degree. And I was like, 'well that's cool', and she kinda got my mind, got the, got the motors turning, you know, got 'em going on that. And I was like 'oh really?' And she told me that, uh, she was, she was working on it. And she ended up dropping out, and I started after her and here I am. I've been at it, keep going ... so, she kinda ... probably, she probably put that thought there. (line 235)

When Felicia first started attending classes, she recalled feeling slightly nervous due to her age. She glared out through my window before sharing, "I felt old and still do next to all the young kids" (TR 6, line 143). However, she believed herself to be extremely capable of doing the work. "Oh, I didn't have any

problem. I didn't really stress that. I knew I could do it – pretty ambitious" (line 157). She elaborated:

I didn't let it [college] worry me. You know, I, try to look at everything in a positive way and not look negative upon anything. I mean I didn't even really think about my age when I first started in there, it was just after I got there that I noticed everybody was so young, you know in high school, and I was in all these classes with these kids who were like 18, 19, and here I am a woman and ... so I never, I guess when I, my very first class was ENC 1001, it was kinda like all these writing skills that I knew I had because I scored high on my high school placement tests in Writing and English, and then somebody was actually judging them for the first time in my life, judging my writing, you know, the professor .... well, I didn't do that bad but it was, it was a little different but I, I still didn't have any doubts, I didn't have any doubts. (line 305)

When asked where she believed her confidence came from, she replied:

I don't know, I think it was something I was just born with, you know. I don't know ... I just always have been confident ... it's me I guess, you know. I just, I have a good outlook on where I, um, I've always been really optimistic, always looked at the good side of things, I don't try to worry about anything, worrying doesn't get you anywhere, it just causes stress. It just, I guess maybe because my ex-husband was very negative in a lot of ways and he kind of, um, I had to be the positive one and it was, it was something I learned. Maybe life skills, you know, were developed. It took me years to learn about my life, be positive. (TR 6, line 317)

Felicia described a complicated work schedule while also being a full time student and mother of three children. She had Mondays and Fridays off to complete school work. She worked Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday as a work-study student at the host campus. On Saturdays and Sundays, she worked 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. shifts at the hospital. She described her motivation to persist through that demanding schedule:

I'm hoping, well ... [giggles] ... I really think that there's, it's going to pay off in the end. That's my motivation, it has to ... I don't think I'll have to work hospital weekends forever, you know what I mean, it's not going to be,

once I get an education that I need to do what I wanted to, I'll be able to work that, this schedule that I have to work for that and I won't have to work as a work-study and I won't have to do, to work at the hospital where I get sick at. You know, I'll just be able to, you know I guess that's my motivation, and, and, and mostly it's to provide for my children ... I own my own house but my parents still don't. They still rent, they've been renting for 30 years, and they are happy with that. They like it but I want to leave more for my children. I want to give them more. So that's exactly my motivation right there. When you have a kid you want to give them something. (TR 6, line 411)

On a scale of one to five, five being most strong, Felicia ranked her confidence for persisting in college as a five. Without hesitation she explained, "... yeah I could, I could stop, I could drop out or whatever. Yeah, because I'm just not going to give up ... I'm going to finish it. I mean what else am I going to do with the next two years to my life?" (TR 6, line 518). She also felt that being the first in her family to attend college was an achievement. "It's an achievement, I, uh, definitely went further than they did ... I think that I've achieved a lot in my 30 years and it makes me happy" (line 538).

However, she also commented that being a student and single parent had been extremely challenging. She stated, "Well it's definitely challenging. It's challenging because like I said earlier, I feel guilty because I don't get to spend as much time with my kids as I could" (TR 6, line 551). She elaborated:

I try getting all my school work done while they're at school but ... I think that they [children], they realize sometimes, they come home, and if I'm working on something they don't really bother me ... my kids are great, they, my oldest son cooks dinner and he's been pretty much the man of the house forever. (line 564)

When asked what her children did when she was not at home, she shared, “well, they're used to that. They just hang out at the house, watch a lot of DVDs ... we've got Internet” (line 378).

Felicia commented about how she balanced her multiple responsibilities.

She admitted:

I just do. I don't ever even think about it. Nobody ever really questions me about it. I mean, I have a few good friends and they tell me all the time, 'wow, you're so busy', but they don't, they don't ever question me about it. I don't really have an answer for it. I just do it. (TR 6, line 654)

Unfortunately, Felicia and I were not able to complete the full first interview when we initially met. She only had one hour before class to talk with me and our conversation had already taken up that entire time. Therefore, she had to quickly depart and we scheduled another time to finish the meeting. Luckily, I had asked Felicia a large majority of the questions I had intended and she had responded with richly detailed information. I immediately contacted her to thank her for her time and to arrange a brief follow-up meeting. We met five days later.

As we continued the interview, I posed questions focused on her persistence and personal goals outside of academics and how she plans to attain those goals. She explained that she felt her persistence had most been impacted by her motivation. She stated, “... well, just for myself, I want to do it. I'm going to do it” (TR 16, line 138). She emphasized that a major factor for her was that she really wanted “to give my kids a good childhood. I want them to be happy, and I want to take them places and do things and teach them somehow and show them things as much as I can” (line 231). We discussed this motivation for

several minutes more and then I concluded the interview thanking her for her time.

Gina: "... just keep swimming"

Gina was a 47-year-old Caucasian female and a junior Legal Studies major. She had been divorced two times and had two children, eight and 10 years old. Her mother had dropped out of high school in the 11th grade, and her father dropped out in eighth grade. Gina attended three different community/state colleges before earning an associate degree roughly 25 years later. She enrolled at the local community/state college in 2008 and completed her remaining requirements for the associate degree. She transferred to the host campus after a short break in 2010. She was currently enrolled in nine credit hours. She was not employed and reported an annual household income of \$0-10,000.

Gina and I worked diligently to identify a convenient interview time that fit with her schedule. Once we finally arranged a time for her to speak with me, she contacted me that same morning to inform me that she had overlooked the fact her children got out of school early that day. Therefore, she was not able to meet with me and we had to schedule an alternate time the next day. She stated, "So sorry, juggling so much!" (personal communication, September 2, 2010). Luckily, she and I scheduled a time for early the next morning.

When Gina arrived to my office at 8:30 a.m., I immediately sensed her enthusiastic and extroverted persona. She exuded personality and a spirited

character that quickly intrigued me to learn more about her. I provided her with a cup of coffee and we immediately began talking. She was wearing jeans, a worn t-shirt and sandals. She sat comfortably in the chair closest to me and casually leaned back into the chair. Although this was the first time I had met her, Gina and I developed an immediate rapport. I felt as though she and I had known each other before. She seemed extremely comfortable and relaxed.

We talked casually for several minutes, and I thanked her for her interest and taking time to participate in my research. After roughly 10 minutes, she began talking about her college experiences and some of the challenges she had experienced. After she described part of her journey that led her to Florida, I stopped her and asked if she would mind if I simply started recording the conversation. She agreed and we began recording. Unlike the other interviews, Gina was initially leading and guiding me in the interview discussion.

Gina shared that her brother had died in a car accident when she was 14 years old. Although she was an “A’ student” (TR 7, line 4), this experience of losing her brother was devastating to her. “My brother died in a car accident when I was 14. And that was pretty traumatic, like you know, it rocked my world a little bit” (line 13). She remembered taking antidepressants, rebelling against high school and feeling like she received no support from her parents. She explained:

Yeah, so I rebelled and I got married a week before I graduated high school after cutting 50-some days of school and graduating by the skin of my teeth as they say. Yeah. So, um, from an 'A' student, honor society to a, you know, I married this loser a week before I graduated and said 'I'll show them', you know, kind of crazy, but um, yeah, that didn't work out so well. (line 32)

She continued:

so I just went ... [motions like a plane crashing] ... and um, um, then on, on my first attempt into college was at about 20, when it became evident that I didn't need to be married to this guy. And so I didn't know what to do, and I'm 20 years old, I'm in the middle of nowhere in North Carolina, divorced, still don't know what I want to do, confused. So to keep mom and dad off my back, I enrolled in a community college up there, didn't still have a clue. I went through I think one semester ok, and in the middle of the second semester I turned 21, and I went to the liquor store and I never went back to class." (line 55)

At that time in her life, Gina shared that she divorced her husband at the age of 20, failed each of her classes at the community college, and then moved to Miami, Florida to pursue a career opportunity. She also had visions of attending the University of Miami and to enroll in their marine biology program. However, she indicated that she "couldn't get my act together, I partied too much. You know, my motto used to be 'I may not ever get the chance to do this again' because my brother died such" (TR 7, line 74). She remembered dating a few attorneys who piqued her interest in the legal system and becoming a paralegal. As a result she sporadically enrolled in Associate of Science classes at Broward Community College and eventually graduated with highest honors. She commented, "So, it works ... [points to her head] ... it just needs to be focused" (line 91).

After earning her Associate of Science degree, she moved to Ormond by the Sea, Florida where her parents provided a house and promised to pay her tuition to attend Stetson University and complete her bachelor's degree. She stated:

And I moved up here and they reneged on their promise to go to Stetson. And here I was and I got mad again, and you know what I do when I get mad at my mom and dad? ... I get married to some loser. That's what I did when I was 18. I'm seeing a pattern now. (TR 7, line 121)

She elaborated:

I kinda had a child and then got married, you know, um, after he presented the white picket fence fantasy that I fell for, um, turns out, he was a crack addict ... And um, then, two years later ... [motions like a plane crashing] ... you know, without a pot to potty on, and uh, credit's gone, and, divorce, bankruptcy, all that stuff, and two kids. And um, I was like, ok, that wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done, but two awesome kids out of it, so um. (line 129)

Before her marriage ended, she enrolled in the local community/state college's *Fresh Start* program and got a job as a legal assistant working for Daytona International Speedway. During this time, she recalls her husband being extremely unsupportive and pawning off many of her household items. With two children, ages four and six, it was an extremely stressful time in her life. She finally had to file an injunction to be separated from her husband.

Once the divorce was finalized and her husband was out of the house, Gina was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. "Um, so, went through eight rounds of chemo and 32 days of treatments with the kids in tow, and at the end of all that my brain was like mush" (TR 7, line 165). During this same time, Gina took a new job as a waitress so she "could spend time with my kids" (line 178).

She continued:

... working nine to five was way too stressful for me, for me doing it all by myself, I wasn't very nice, as a mom, doing that. So if I was waitressing ... I have shorter hours, I had more time to do what I needed to get done. So I became a waitress. (line 179)

Gina recalled an experience one day while waitressing that led her back to pursuing her education:

I was waitressing, right. And I remember just breaking down at work, oh my God, you know, screwing up orders and stuff, and it's like I can't do this, I can't do this. And this little voice came over to me and goes, 'your brain is a muscle and if you don't use it, it's going to atrophy. Go back to school'. And I went, 'what?'. So I went over to [the local community/state college] one day, just to inquire, and it just so happened, it was the time of year when I was renewing my kids' scholarship, I happened to have my income tax stuff in the car and in an hour and a half I was admitted, I had the FAFSA filled out, and it, it was easy, painless it was like, 'oh my God, nothing's ever been this easy my whole life'. (TR 7, line 183)

Gina described her experience being a single parent and having no child care, no money, and no support network while planning to be a full-time student:

You know so, it's, it's falling, it's hard, you know that, it's hard as a single parent, trying to when you don't have support, when you don't have parents, you don't have relatives, you don't have ... I didn't have anybody here because I had moved here when I met him [ex-husband], and I didn't trust people. That's hard ... [begins to cry] ... sorry ... anyways, so um, anyways, I'm like 'oh, I can't believe this is happening, I'm going back to school, I'm 40 some years old, and bald as I can be, you know, I got no hair ... because of the chemo. (line 202)

She elaborated:

See that's what being a single parent, it sucks when you don't have ... you know I said to, myself ... I'm not going to do this again. Move to a place, not know anybody, you know, not have any support system, and have kids with a crack head. Bad move. (line 420)

Then, roughly two weeks later, Gina recalled an older woman, 'Edna', approaching her at a cancer support group after she had described her frustration and challenges of having no child care. Gina remembered her coming up to her after the meeting and stating, "I will help you with your children anytime. I am a widow and I live by myself, have two cats, two dogs, and a swimming

pool. And I mean that, I will help you ... and I live right across the street from DBCC" (line 196).

After completing chemotherapy and radiation treatment, Gina began attending classes at the local community/state college the following fall term, utilizing the help from 'Edna.' After earning an associate degree with honors, she took a break from school and began working as a legal assistant at the Domestic Abuse Council. After being there for a short period, she recalled feeling dissatisfied and embittered with the operations of the agency. She stated,

I was making \$12.70 an hour, you know, which is not bad for this area, but when you're raising kids, it's still working poor, and um, stressful because it's a full-time job and within a month of being there, the voice, you know the voice, 'you need to go to law school'. (TR 7, line 260)

She continued:

I wasn't going to quit, so I got laid off in April. And I went 'thank you' ... [laughs] ... I was starting to voice my dissatisfaction at why we had grant money to do these things and we weren't doing them. You really shouldn't do that if you want to keep your job in a place like that. And I was starting to ask questions about where donations were going. And um, so, gosh, the funds went away for my job, so BS, they fired me, they called it a layoff, which is fine with me because I want to go back to school and I didn't want to quit because if I quit, it's going to be harder on me as a single parent. You can't get unemployment. (line 281)

After leaving the Domestic Abuse Council, she applied to the host campus to earn her bachelor's degree in Legal Studies. She explained choosing her degree:

... so I figured the easier, softer way would be to get, with the kids in tow and everything, would be to get a legal studies bachelor's and, it would serve two purposes, a) it would be like a refresher course for me because it's been 10 years, well more than 10 because '96 was when I got the legal studies degree and I haven't really used it much, here and there,

um, uh, so, so going legal studies because I think will be good as a refresher and it'll be easier for me, and I think it would be good for where I want to go [law school]. (TR 7, line 334)

Her motivation for Legal Studies was also inspired by her desire to “champion the underdog ... I want to help people, you know I want to help the underdog get a leg up. Because it's hard, you know, some people, you know, don't have the silver spoon” (line 357).

Gina credited her doctors, counselors, ‘Edna’, her faith, and her children as influencers who inspired her to complete her degree:

... she [‘Edna’] watches them on Wednesday and Thursday night when I'm in class, and she's also, she was my encouragement. I get, I let myself get overwhelmed ... blah, blah, blah ... there were times when I would go to her house for lunch, or whatever, 'I can't do this, I just need to quit and go back and get the job' ... and she was my little cheerleader. (TR 7, line 453)

She described her relationship with her cancer counselor team who supported her as well:

... and um, they dropped into my life when I was diagnosed with cancer, and they counseled me for free and uh ... oh, more happy tears ... [starts to cry] ... um, they were cheerleaders, they were cheerleaders. Oh, see I have all these people telling me how smart I am ... [laughs] ... and I gotta believe it, you know ... (line 521)

She shared the influence that God has served in her life:

... what's making me do it now, believe it or not, is, uh, as much as I don't believe in myself, I have this really cool relationship with God, especially since the kids are safe, and I know He's telling me to do it. It's like, and he's been telling me to do it for a long time, and I just wouldn't listen, you know. (line 558)

She also commented about her children's influence on her:

... my kids are proud of me, and they are, they are my motivation too. Um, um, they are a big part of my motivation ... so I tell them all the time, 'you've got to go to college. You've got to go there before you get married, before you have children, you have to go do your education. Mom did that wrong.' You know, you gotta do this ... so, best lesson ever taught me ... it occurred to me that um, if I want to see them do well and succeed in college, I need to do well and succeed in college, and they are very proud of me that I graduated with honors, you know what I mean. (line 603)

Gina stated that her parents still did not support her educational pursuits:

... and you know what, my parents still won't support me ... it just drives me nuts. You know, when I got laid off, my dad said 'so, you're just going to go back to school?' I said, 'Dad, why do I want to go back to working poor? The only way out of this rut, as a single, struggling, single parent is to get more education'. And uh, they're still not supportive, really, it really frustrates me ... it, it just frustrates me because they were never there when I was a kid pushing me, you know. (line 499)

For Gina, her education was a means to provide a better life for her children. She stated "... um, I think it will give them [children] confidence, you know um, I think it will help them make informed decisions in lots of areas, it will teach them critical thinking, you know, reasoning, and uh, focus" (TR 7, line 716).

Gina described her biggest current challenge as being childcare: Um, the biggest challenge for a single parent in my situation is childcare, it's like, it, it, it determines where I go to school, it determines when I go to school, it determines when I study, you know, it, it, that's the biggest obstacle for me. I can, I've even figured out how to make it financially, you know, for now with unemployment, when that ends I'll have to think of something else, or something, or get a part-time, I can't. But the childcare without family and without you know, the lady across the street is a godsend. She's 70 years old and a cancer survivor, you know, I don't know how long I'll have her. Maybe I'll have [her] for 20 years, but I don't have backup in place. (TR 7, line 438)

She continued, "... it's uh, just another challenge, I mean, it's ... you know what I mean. It's, you know, band, basketball, Boy Scouts, gymnastics, and my classes, and their homework" (line 770).

When asked about her ability to successfully complete schoolwork, Gina responded “I can do the work academically and I do it well ... and I know how to take advantage of tutors if I had problems with math. I lived at the Academic Support Center, at DBCC” (TR 7, line 428). She continued, “I know, I know I can do it academically. You know, I'm not scared of, of not being able to do the work, so, I'm a good test taker ... [laughs] ...” (line 572).

Gina described her ability to manage her responsibilities:

It's not just school, it's life, its doctor's appointments, its dentist appointments, it's car maintenance, it's mow the grass, it's walk the stinking dog ... [laughs] ... you know, it's all the other nuances of life that are thrown in there. Oh you know, don't forget to pay the bills, you know ... [makes spinning and juggling hand gestures] ... you know, every now and then something falls off the plate, and, and that's what I describe it to my friends, like, like I have all these balls in the air and one day they are all going to come crashing down on me. And every now and then, one slides off the plate. My motto is ... 'just keep swimming' ... I try to juggle so many things. It's not that I'm unfocused, it's that I'm trying to juggle so many things that I seem like I'm unfocused. (TR 7, line 853)

Gina described her support network as:

... great, it's phenomenal. My, my, my fellow classmates, um, my two adopted moms, uh, my kids, my kids are so supportive, they, they, they realize this is a good thing, and um, the you know, friends that are, even my Facebook friends are, you know very supportive, and um, that's helpful. It's good now, it's a good support network. (TR 7, line 1133)

As we concluded our interview, I asked Gina to provide any information that we had not yet talked about. She recommended:

... have a game room on campus, with a supervisory person in there. It could be a high school student, you know, with the background check, or you know, you know a trusted person supervising a game room for students who hit snags with childcare while they're going to school. If people can't afford, I mean I can't pay somebody to watch my kids, by the time I do that, I have, you know what I mean, it's, it's, it's, um, and that

would be hard to do, but if there was a grant that could be written for something like that, wouldn't that be cool? ... because I know that [the local community/state college] has uh, for little kids, they have a preschool type of thing, but that didn't help me because my kids weren't little. They were older ... (TR 7, line 1178)

She commented on utilizing tutoring services extensively at the local community/state college as well as the Academic Support Center. Additionally, she shared that she took advantage of the Early Learning Coalition as a community resource when her children were much younger. Before she left, I thanked her for her time and valuable input. We both gave each other a brief hug and I walked her to the door.

I did contact Gina following our first interview and shared the transcript of our discussion with her. Within this same message, I asked her to review the transcript and my thematic summary and provide any additional comments for clarification. I also requested to meet with her briefly one more time and even suggested a phone call appointment. After waiting roughly one week, I sent Gina another request to meet and I attached the intended questions to the email message. I informed her that if she did not have time to meet with me, then I understood but that I would appreciate her answering the included questions.

Gina did respond to my email questions several days later. She also indicated that she had not read the transcript yet, but that she would soon. In her email responses, she described her personal goals outside of academics and how she plans to attain those goals. She stated that her goal was to improve her health, weight, and eating habits. She wrote that she was currently walking with a

friend daily for support and was attempting to eat healthier as well. However, she did indicate that eating healthy with such a busy lifestyle was difficult. She stated, “healthy eating on the run is an oxymoron” (TR 17, line 21).

My final question to Gina centered on her attitude towards goal setting and how that has changed over the years, if at all. She responded that her attitude towards achieving her goals had changed over the years. She wrote, “I no longer require my parent’s approval in order to succeed” (line 28).

Hank: “... blessed and highly favored”

Hank was a 49-year-old Caucasian male and a Mathematics Education major. He shared being the proud father of one son who was 17 years old. His son’s mother, whom he was divorced from, earned her high school diploma, and Hank’s father was an eighth grade dropout who earned a bachelor’s degree while serving in the Navy roughly 20 years later. After earning his GED, Hank enrolled at the local community/state college and occasionally took one or two courses. Upon earning his associate’s degree, he later transferred to the host campus to earn his bachelor’s degree in hopes of becoming a certified teacher. He was currently enrolled in 12 credit hours of course work. He was employed, worked 50 hours per week, and self-reported an annual household income of \$20,000-30,000. Like Amanda, Barbara and Debbie, it should also be noted that as his academic advisor, I had a previous professional relationship with Hank before we met for our interview.

Hank arrived 10 minutes early for our interview and engaged in polite conversation with our front desk personnel while waiting. When I greeted him in the lobby, we gave each other firm handshakes, and I asked him how he was doing. He smiled and replied, "Man, I'm blessed and highly favored." Hank was wearing a white, loose t-shirt, white sneakers and long, silver basketball shorts.

Before we began our official interview, Hank and I talked casually for roughly 10 minutes. Like Gina, Hank began talking about his life and some of the challenges he had experienced as a teenager. After he described an inspirational and emotional story of nearly committing suicide on the beach when he was 17, I cautiously asked if he would mind my recording the conversation. He agreed, I began recording, and he continued talking about his life for another 15 minutes.

Hank's father served in the Navy his entire career and, therefore, moved with Hank quite often. Hank recalled attending seven different elementary schools and expressed that he did not have many close friends when he was younger, simply because he was moving around so much. He explained that as soon as he met and got to know a group of people, his father moved again. When I asked Hank what high school was like for him, he recalled it as being "tough" (TR 8, line 4). The biggest highlight for him in high school was playing football and "being part of something bigger than me" (line 7). Hank dropped out of high school in 10th grade because he lost interest and wanted to work for a living. His career plans at that time were to serve in the Navy like his father. He

stated, “Nobody in my generations in the past had gotten a high school diploma so, and they did alright, I thought, in my mind” (line 19).

After Hank earned his GED, he was told by the Navy that his entrance physical indicated he had diabetes. Therefore, the Navy didn’t accept him. Hank shared, “That was really crushing” (TR 8, line 45). In an attempt for reconsideration by the Navy, he took some college courses at the local community/state college. However, the Navy still did not accept him. Hank stated, “And after I got some college courses, I still wasn’t attractive to ‘em, I mean, for whatever reason. You know, they didn’t need anybody” (line 62).

During the same time that Hank was registering for classes at the local community/state college with aspirations of joining the Navy, he recalled a conversation with one of the administrators at the local community/state college whom he still remembered by name. He remembered the administrator stating, “You know what, [name omitted]? If you don’t join the Navy, education needs a few good men too” (line 57). Those words planted a seed in Hank and made an impression that changed the direction of his life.

Hank then began taking courses at the local community/state college to earn his associate’s degree. However, he admitted that:

Between getting my GED, getting turned down from the Navy. Uh, I went through a real, uh, real difficult time because I had just turned 18 and, so uh, got into a little bit of trouble and, uh, went to see the world. Uh, went up to Minnesota and, uh, went out to Arizona and, uh, came back ... (TR 8, line 86)

On his destination to Key West, Hank remembered stopping at [the local city] to enjoy Spring Break. After meeting a friend who offered him an inexpensive room to rent, he decided to stay and sell suntan lotion on pool decks. Several years later, he started sporadically taking courses at the local community/state college again.

When asked about his motivation and aspirations for earning an associate degree, Hank explained:

I just wanted to accomplish something. I hadn't ever accomplished anything. I was a high school drop-out, uh, I really hadn't done anything, uh, to, uh, you know ... so I wanted to accomplish something. I hadn't accomplished anything ... and at that time I was, uh, I had been given an opportunity at a private school to teach Kindergarten. So I, uh, I taught Kindergarten, you know, for a year, almost a year and a half. (TR 8, line 131)

Hank shared that no one really served as an influence on him to attend college when he was younger. It was not until he was working in the business world and interacted with people who had already earned degrees that he started to truly develop a desire to work toward his bachelor's degree as well.

Furthermore, when his son was born, Hank's motivation to pursue education became even stronger. He explained:

You know, it, it, it's not what I want, you know. It's not what I want. And, uh, uh, I think, uh, really, what really changed me a lot is when my son was born. I think that's who influenced me more than anything, cause I'm going, 'What am I leaving for him? What kind of legacy, you know, am I, am I leaving in my life?' You know, and, uh, you know, I, I, I, have this picture of this little boy looking out on this water and said, you know, it's not, at the end of my life, it's not gonna matter how much money I have in my bank, or a car, or, or clothes I've wore. But it may matter in the life of this child. You know, and, and I look back on it, and I think that's why I

pursued the passion ... of, of education, especially the degree that I'm going into, it's uh, I can, I can, I feel like I can truly make a difference. (TR 8, line 264)

He continued:

I coulda given up after my A.A. But something inside me said, man, there's something, there's something more, there's something bigger. And I look at teachers, man, teachers, teachers have something that nobody else ... You know, that's what I like about my son is ... He knows there's something bigger and better. And if we can get more people to think like that, I think we'd have a better world. (line 553)

Hank concluded, "So I think that the motivation more than anything came from within inside myself. I felt like life was passing by, and, you know, it's like, 'What am I going to leave?'" (line 285). He added, "I'm setting the stage for my son, to leap off, to do higher and bigger and brighter than I ever thought about being, his child, and his children" (line 819).

Another turning point in Hank's life was when he beat cancer in 2005. He stated "I think there was a lot of, of, of spiritual moving in my life" (TR 8, line 321).

He elaborated:

There's something greater than that cause it ain't all about me, man. That's what I've found out in my lifetime. There's something bett-, bigger, you know. And I knew, I, I, I mean ... man ... this is, uh ... [tears in eyes] ... I just know I can make a difference. I know as a teacher, you know, and just like, uh, my Calculus I teacher told me, he said, 'You know,' he says, 'You struggling now is gonna make you a better teacher.' He said, 'You're, you're going to have a kid in school that's going to be struggling and you're going to do whatever you can to help him overcome his obstacles.' I, I'm saying, 'This is going to make me a better teacher. I can learn every math education program – that's not going to make me a good teacher.' So, yeah, overcoming these obstacles, you know, it, it ... It's just like I'm going to do a, I'm going to run a 5K in November. I've never run a 5K. Do I wanna win? No. But do I wanna be able to ... [claps three times] ... the thing about it is, Kevin, I've got it in my life. It's not how I start the race; it's how I finish it ... It's how I run the race. And that's why I think that the

burning desire in my life to overcome all these obstacles. Obstacles are set there to make us grow. (line 437)

Hank also commented about his age and how he had influenced his younger classmates. He stated:

You know, if everything is given to you, I don't think you appreciate it. And I appreciate my life. Do I appreciate the things that happened early on in my life? No. But do I appreci-... I appreciate the friends that I've met in, in college ... I've made some really awesome friendships and they look at me, they look up to me because of my age difference. And I think, you know, I can, they can pass on so much knowledge, book knowledge to me, but I can pass them on so much life knowledge to them. (TR 8, line 483)

Hank continued to describe his passion and motivation for making a difference and influencing others:

You gotta really love and enjoy what you do, 'cause it doesn't matter how much money you make; if, if you don't love what you do, man, truly love what you do ... it's like the job that I've got now. I love working with those kids. I've got 25 kids that are behavioral issues – drug and alcohol. I love that job. If I, if I did not get to teach for whatever reason and was to stay there, I'd be content. Cause I'm making a difference. I got, I got a couple hours every morning I can make these kids have a different day just by my tone, just by talking to them, say, "Hey, it will be alright. Something's bigger than you, man, something's, something's ... hey, you're life has got so much to offer." And I got that two-hour window of opportunity. (TR 8, line 618)

Hank shared a schedule for a typical day:

This semester, with my internship, is really interesting, um, because they offer the classes on Monday and Wednesday ... so, uh, I get off work, on a typical Monday morning, I get off work at 7:00 a.m., I go to the gym, work out, go home and catch about a three hour nap, get up, drive to Orlando, uh, go to class, from, uh, 3:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., drive back to Daytona, catch a 45 minute nap, go to work at 11:00 p.m., work til 7:00 a.m., get up, go home, take a shower, and go to Silver Sands and teach for the day. Then at 2:30 p.m. I get off, go home and sleep for a couple hours, and then I get up and spend some time with my son, I get a good night's sleep, you know, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. (TR 8, line 675)

Hank described his experience as a first-generation college student as being “difficult” (TR 8, line 800) and akin to an American settler pioneering the travel route from east to west across the frontier. He added feeling like a cowboy as well, stating “getting knocked off, getting thrown off, and I just keep getting back on that horse and keep riding away, you know, and blazing the, blazing a path” (line 804).

When asked to indicate his current support network, Hank replied that numerous people had been helpful and encouraging to him. He first mentioned his ex-mother-in-law, then his son, God, his classmates and some of the host campus faculty. About one of the faculty, Hank commented:

Yeah, I mean, God puts people my life for a reason ... It's not by chance that I saw Mr. H. yesterday. I needed to hear what he had to say. I look up to him, you know. He's my mentor, no matter if he's my advisor he's still my mentor, he gives me advice. (TR 8, line 867)

Hank also replied that his current internship supervisor was a tremendous support for him. He shared a story about her speaking to his internship class:

She goes, ‘I ask everybody at the beginning of the year, how many love math, and most of them go ‘I hate math’, and that’s their first response.’ She says, ‘by the end of the year I want you to get to at least appreciate math, that’s all. That's my goal. Just appreciate it. Not love it but not hate it either. Learn to appreciate it.’ (line 893)

Hank concluded, “I thought that was really cool, you know” (line 897).

Hank went on to explain his desire in life now comes from his faith. He stated:

I'm faith built, you know. I've got to have faith that I'm going to make a difference, you know as a teacher ... it's powerful, how much teachers

have to either build somebody up or tear something down, you know. I could tell you that you are wonderful person every day, but if you don't believe it then it doesn't matter what I say ... So the burning desire is coming into knowing that, you know what, I want to leave a legacy and make a difference. And if that's just one child, after all this pursuit, is it worth it? Yeah ... it might be my own son. (TR 8, line 901)

Like each participant I had spoken with previously, Hank had an amazing life story full of both accomplishments and setbacks. What was most inspiring about Hank was his exceptionally positive attitude and magnetic enthusiasm for learning through every experience. His final words to me were:

Life's amazing. I focus on the things I can control and let God handle the things I can't control. Like character building, it's how you deal with it, that's what you're made of. At the end of your life doesn't matter when you're born, or how you died, it's what you did in the middle.  
(TR 8, line 924)

I contacted Hank following our first interview and shared the transcript of our discussion with him. Within this same message, I asked him to review the transcript and provide any additional comments for clarification. I also requested to meet with him briefly one more time for a few follow up questions. Hank and I arranged a meeting two days later when he was scheduled to be on campus.

My questions posed to Hank addressed his personal goals outside of academics and how he planned to attain those goals. He shared a story about his battle against cancer again, and the fact that his driving force "is that I know that God has, God has something for me to do that I haven't accomplished yet. Because if he didn't, I'd have died of cancer. Or I'd have committed suicide when I was 17" (TR 18, line 90).

My final question to Hank was about his approach to goal setting. I asked him to describe how he worked toward accomplishing tasks. He stated, “So I have to remember what my objective is. It’s like the old saying, when you’re in a swamp full of alligators, it’s hard to remember that your main goal is to drain the swamp” (TR 18, line 128).

### Summary

This chapter highlighted and provided an overview of the interviews with research participants who shared their stories and lived experiences. Their responses were presented as enlightened narratives from the participants themselves. A comprehensive summary of the demographic characteristics of the overall group was also presented. Chapter 5 contains a report of the findings identified in the interviews and descriptions and discussion of emergent major and minor recurrent themes.

## CHAPTER 5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Introduction

The goal of this research study was to provide a richly descriptive analysis of the lived experiences of single parent, first-generation transfer students. After conducting the interviews in accordance with the detailed phenomenological approach and data analysis procedures described in Chapter 3, emergent categories and recurring thematic patterns were identified. Chapter 5 contains the results of the findings. Major and minor recurrent themes are presented and supported by references to narrative texts from within the interview transcripts. A summary of those findings concludes this chapter.

### Thematic Generation

As was described in Chapter 3, thematic generation for this study was guided by Smith and Osborn's (2003) phenomenological method of data analysis, which is a procedure best explained as a series of seven interconnected stages. These stages are described as follows:

1. Stage One: Initial Analysis
2. Stage Two: Data Transformation
3. Stage Three: Thematic Connection
4. Stage Four: Analytic Thematic Connection
5. Stage Five: Thematic Coherence

6. Stage Six: Comparisons of Themes and Categories

7. Stage Seven: Translation from Narrative Accounting

After all participant interviews were completed, I analyzed, reflected and triangulated the collected data. With influence from Smith and Osborne's (2003) analysis approach, I developed a Content Matrix (Table 7) to help with the data examination process and to begin identifying preliminary categories and issues that originated from the multiple data sources. I revisited, on numerous occasions, the original interview transcripts, audio recordings, member check statements, observational notes, background data obtained on the questionnaire, and personal journaling notes to thoroughly explore participant words in-depth and to capture the true essence and meaning of their stories.

The Content Matrix visually displays a data index for how the triangulated data were coded and crystallized. The shaded areas articulate and capture the categories, recorded reflections and broad coding patterns that were identified through in-depth researcher analysis. Some categories were identifiable for each participant. Others were present for fewer participants. Upon review of this matrix, the most common and recurring categories were able to emerge.

The Pattern Recognition Flowchart (Figure 1) was developed and originated from the data within the Content Matrix. Prevailing categories within the flowchart were similar, if not identical, to those found in the matrix. Upon repeated analysis and reflection of the most central categories, recurring categories were further refined into thematic patterns to generate meaning.

These patterns were analyzed and used to capture the essence from the triangulated data. As can be noted, many of these patterns are not linear and frequently overlap one another in content and in concert. Therefore, as these thematic patterns were further examined and investigated, it became evident that recurrent patterns could be refined into more specific themes. As a result, major and minor themes were identified as the guiding themes for this study. Major themes were defined as emergent patterns identified as being meaningful for at least six of the eight participants, whereas minor themes were emergent patterns for at least four of the eight participants.

Table 7  
Content Matrix

Descriptors	Amanda	Barbara	Christy	Debbie
Children are motivating influence & top priority	X	X	X	X
Want to provide a better life and future for children	X	X	X	X
Education is a 'means' to provide a better future for their children	X	X	X	X
Are laying new foundation for their children/Breaking the cycle	X	X	X	X
Identified and focused on career interest	X	X	X	X
Education is a 'means' to provide a better career	X	X	X	X
Was a good student in high school	X	X	X	X-in subjects she liked
Are confident in academic ability to do schoolwork	X--	X	X	X
Are confident in their ability to achieve goals	X	X	X	X
Able to cope and deal with issues/challenges	Not well (both parents passed)	X	X	X
Being a first-generation college student is an accomplishment & motivating factor in itself	X	X	X	X
Being 1 <sup>st</sup> gen provided a vicarious experience for others in their family	X	X	N/A	X
Accomplishing goals made them feel good	X	X	X	X
Had support network/encouragement	No	X Family	X Peers	X Family
Had childcare support	Not much	X	X	X
Children < 10 yrs old	X	X	X	X
Childcare support from who?	sisters/grandma or friends	Mom, family, father,	Daycare, dad (1), friend	Mom, friends
Struggled with time management overall	Yes	No	No (library)	No
Parents were encouraging about life in general	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Parents were supportive of educational aspirations	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
School was a positive escape/helped focus			Yes	Yes
Had role models within family	No	Sister	No	Yes, parents
Had role models outside of immediate family	No	Aunt/Ms. Giorgio	No	Yes, teachers
Had role models within career of interest	Yes	Ms. Giorgio	Yes	Yes
Overcame challenges which made them stronger/had strong perseverance	Yes, parents passed	Yes		Yes
Attended state/community college and host institution b/c of proximity and childcare	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Would have attended central host campus if local host campus didn't exist	No	No	No	No

Descriptors	Erika	Felicia	Gina	Hank
Children are motivating influence & top priority	X	X	X	X
Want to provide a better life and future for children	X	X	X	X
Education is a 'means' to provide a better future for their children	X	X	X	X
Are laying new foundation for their children/Breaking the cycle	X	X	X	X
Identified and focused on career interest	X	X	X	X
Education is a 'means' to provide a better career	X	X	X	X
Was a good student in high school	X	X	X, but unfocused, "lost"	No, dropped out
Are confident in academic ability to do schoolwork	X	X	X	X – Determined
Are confident in their ability to achieve goals	X	X	X	X
Able to cope and deal with issues/challenges	X	X	X	X
Being a first-generation college student is an accomplishment & motivating factor in itself	X	X	X	X
Being 1 <sup>st</sup> gen provided a vicarious experience for others in their family	X	N/A	N/A	X
Accomplishing goals made them feel good	X	X	X	X
Had support network/encouragement	X Family	No	X Kathy, doctors	X Son, faculty
Had childcare support	X	X	X	N/A
Children < 10 yrs old	X	1 is 13, 2 < 10	X	17 yrs old
Childcare support from who?	Mom, grandma	Son	Kathy(friend)	N/A
Struggled with time management overall	Perhaps Yes	No	Perhaps, Yes	No
Parents were encouraging about life in general	Yes	No	No	N/A
Parents were supportive of educational aspirations	Yes	No (meat dept girl)	No	N/A
School was a positive escape/helped focus		Yes	Yes	Yes
Had role models within family	Yes Mom, dad	No	No	No
Had role models outside of immediate family	Aunt, grandma	No	Yes	Yes
Had role models within career of interest	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Overcame challenges which made them stronger/had strong perseverance	Not really, partied too much	Yes	Yes, Cancer, divorce	Yes, cancer
Attended local state/community college and host campus b/c of proximity and childcare	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Would have attended central host campus if local host campus didn't exist	No	No	No	No

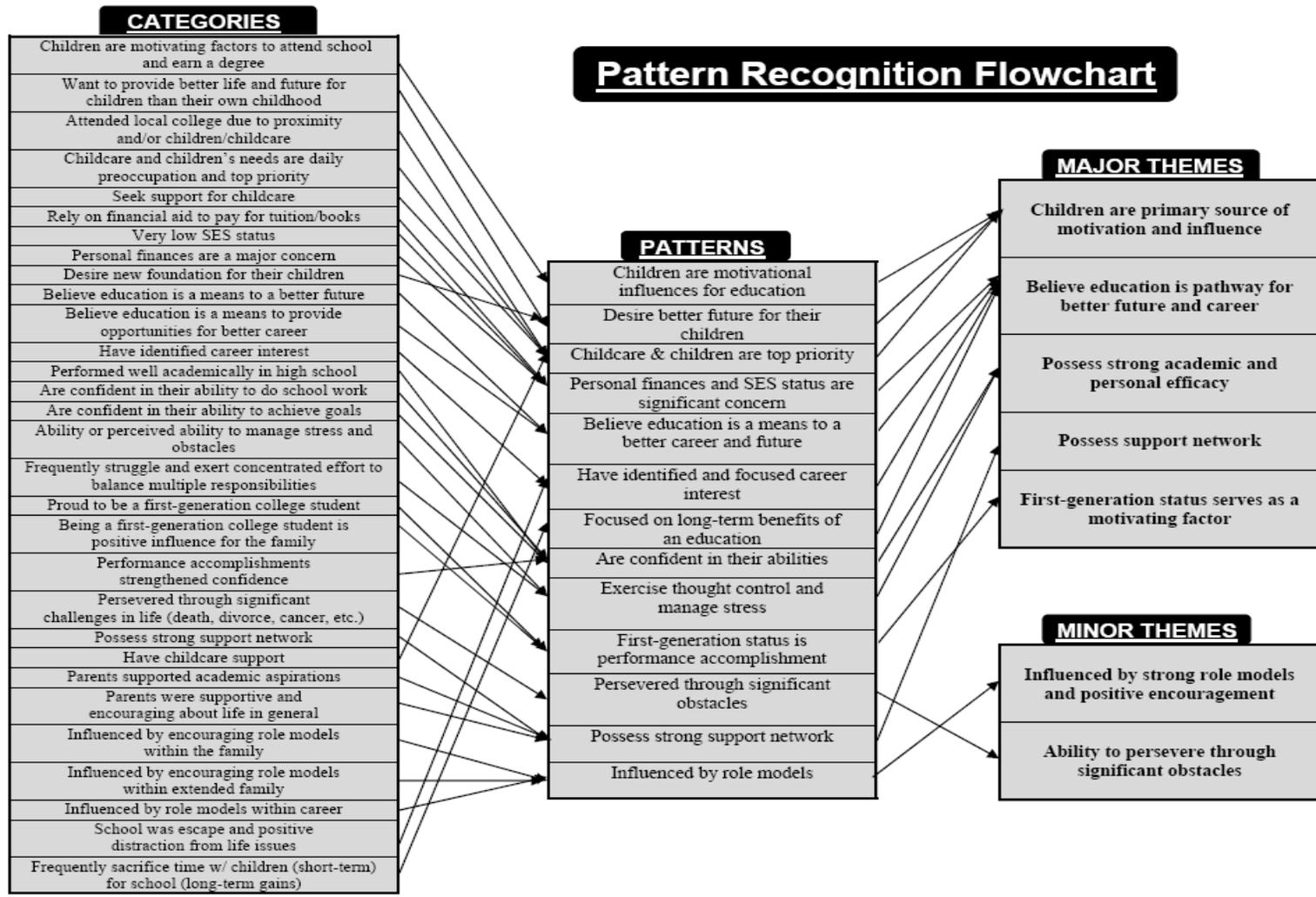


Figure 1. Pattern Recognition Flowchart

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## Major Themes

Major findings of this research study were supported by the data collected. Major themes were defined as emergent patterns identified as being meaningful for at least six of the eight participants. Major themes were identified after careful analysis and examination of the Content Matrix (Table 7) and Pattern Recognition Flowchart (Figure 1). These themes central to the experiences of participants included:

1. Children are a primary source of motivation and influence.
2. Participants believe that an education is the pathway for a better future and career.
3. Participants possess strong academic and personal efficacy.
4. Participants possess a support network.
5. Participants' first-generation status serves as a motivating factor.

Theme 1: Children are a primary source of motivation and influence.

“I want them to have a better life. They motivate me.”

What appeared evident throughout the interviews and data analysis, and what made this research population truly unique for the researcher, was that participants' children, regardless of age, served as the most important influence in their personal motivation, daily activities and career decision making. Childcare was discussed throughout each interview and was an especially important focus for those parents with children younger than 10 years of age. Understandably,

these younger children were less self-sufficient and required constant adult oversight. As was presented and discussed in Chapter 4, the average age of the participant's children was 7.5 years old. Of the 12 children overall, six were younger than this age. Based on the Background Questionnaire (Appendix B), all but one of the single parent participants had a child who was seven years or less. Moreover, only two of the participants had a household where all the children were above this age. Only Felicia's older son and Hank's son were old enough to fully take care of themselves and assist with a significant portion of the household responsibilities such as cleaning and cooking. The remaining research participants assumed the responsibility for focusing their daily attention on their children's needs. Furthermore, six of the participants stated they were the sole financial providers for their children and did not receive child support from the other parent.

As noted in the participant profiles, Amanda brought her son to the interview due to her childcare falling through at the last minute. Debbie was unable to meet face-to-face partly due to the childcare responsibilities for her two children, and we conducted our interview via telephone. Erika and Amanda also discussed situations where they needed to bring their children to class and how faculty seemed to be supportive and understanding of their needs as single parents.

In addition to childcare, most responsibilities surrounding the participants' work and class schedule, sleep, errands and when they planned to complete

homework revolved around their children. It was these children who were the primary inspiration for them to persist in college. As Barbara stated "... she's [daughter] what pushes me, you know. I want to do good for her. I want to make a better life for her, so, she motivates me" (TR 2, line 612). She continued, "She just motivates me, like in everything, every aspect of life, you know ... to be a better person, do well for her, do the right thing, you know, raise her right, be a good role model. She helps with all that" (line 888).

As Barbara spoke about her daughter, her eyes would brighten and a smile would form across her face. In fact, as I observed and journaled throughout the interviews, it was evident that as participants spoke about their children, they smiled, spoke proudly about, and reflected on the positive influence that their children provided in their lives. Participants became emotional and cried on several occasions throughout the interviews when they were asked about their children. It was evident that their children were positive motivational forces in their lives.

Like Barbara, Christy also believed her daughter motivated her to do more with her life. She wanted to be an inspiring role model. She commented:

... even though I was motivated to do it for myself, I'm even more motivated now to do it for her [daughter], to show her, instill in her, that you have to go to college. Like no one told me, like that's what you do. And she'll grow up thinking that. (TR 3, line 229)

Felicia also described the motivational influence from her children. She stated, "I want to leave more for my children. I want to give them more. So that's exactly

my motivation right there. When you have a kid you want to give them something” (TR 6, line 411).

When asked about her children’s influence, Gina sat further back in her chair, seemingly more relaxed, and shared:

... my kids are proud of me, and they are, they are my motivation too. Um, um, they are a big part of my motivation ... so I tell them all the time, 'you've got to go to college. You've got to go there before you get married, before you have children, you have to go do your education. Mom did that wrong.' You know, you gotta do this ... so, best lesson ever taught me ... it occurred to me that um, if I want to see them do well and succeed in college, I need to do well and succeed in college, and they are very proud of me that I graduated with honors, you know what I mean. (TR 7, line 603)

Amanda also shared, “He [son] motivates me ... I want for him to have a good education system and really the only way for me to do that is to get involved in the education system to help make changes for the better for these kids” (TR 1, line 430). She elaborated:

That’s one of the most important things to me is that we provide children with the foundation that they need to have a good life ... and I’d really like to see changes made so that our children and their children will have a much better shot at succeeding in this world. (TR 1, line 364)

Hank described his motivation to pursue education became even stronger when his son was born. He smiled and explained:

... what really changed me a lot is when my son was born. I think that’s who influenced me more than anything, cause I’m going, ‘What am I leaving for him? What kind of legacy, you know, am I, am I leaving in my life?’ You know, and, uh, you know, I, I, I, have this picture of this little boy looking out on this water and said, you know, it’s not, at the end of my life, it’s not gonna matter how much money I have in my bank, or a car, or, or clothes I’ve wore. But it may matter in the life of this child. You know, and, and I look back on it, and I think that’s why I pursued the passion ... of, of

education, especially the degree that I'm going into, it's uh, I can, I can, I feel like I can truly make a difference. (TR 8, line 264)

Debbie also described how the influence from her children was a primary motivating factor in her life. She stated, "My primary job is to raise my children into competent and healthy and emotionally stable adults" (TR 4, line 149). "My children have inspired me to look back on how my parents treated education and to not make the same mistake" (TR 4, 855).

Upon completion of each initial interview, I had contacted participants and sent a thematic summary of our discussion as well as a copy of the transcript. Their responses served as a member check to accurately substantiate and corroborate my overall interpretations and additional observational notes. Based on their responses, this initial theme of children being the primary source of motivation and influence was confirmed as accurate. Furthermore, as will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, confirmability for this first theme was also assured through the investigator triangulation from additional researchers interpreting the data. Three additional researchers found that children were a primary source of influence and motivation for the single parent participants.

Theme 2: Participants believe an education is the pathway for a better future and career.

"In order for me to be successful, I need that degree."

All of the participants believed strongly that an education would prepare them for a better future and career. Earning a bachelor's degree represented the only visible pathway to better employment, and it was that pathway the participants believed would lead to a better life not just for themselves, but also for their children.

During the course of this research, it became clear that the participants desired a better career and higher income level. As displayed in Table 6, the average household annual income for the participants ranged between \$10,000 and \$20,000. Only two of the participants, Hank and Erika, earned more with incomes between \$20,000 and \$30,000. Furthermore, five of the eight participants were employed and worked an average of 37 or more hours per week. It was apparent, through document reviews and analysis of the interview transcripts, that each of the participants preferred a better life, higher salary and better job. They believed an education and earning a degree was a means to achieve that desired outcome. Each of them described struggling to pay for tuition and books while also providing financially for themselves and their families. Six of the participants stated they were the sole financial providers for their children and did not receive child support from the other parent. Only three of the eight participants made any mention of having financial support from anyone, thus placing tremendous pressure and responsibility on their ability to manage the monetary obligations of life and school. Despite the fiscal burden of

tuition, the participants understood that an education would ultimately provide a better career, job, salary and life for themselves and their child or children.

Gina described her education as a means to provide a better life for her children. She believed having an education would provide more opportunities for her and her children. She stated "... it [college] will give them [children] confidence, you know um, I think it will help them make informed decisions in lots of areas, it will teach them critical thinking, you know, reasoning, and uh, focus" (TR 7, line 716).

Christy recognized that college and earning a degree was the gateway to a better life. She explained, "... there really wasn't a question. I just knew that in order for me to succeed in life and have more than what I grew up with, that, that's what I needed to do" (TR 3, line 5). Debbie discovered her love and passion for teaching while she was volunteering for an extended day daycare program with her children. After that experience, she remembered:

Now my goal, full degree so that I can teach those kids, and so that I am a capable and amazing teacher who can bring my joy and my passion to that classroom. And make them laugh and make them discover and open this world to them. And, and make them see that learning should be fun. . And that's when my passion for college, that was when my reason for going became crystal clear. (TR 4, line 792)

Erika also believed that in order to be successful and to live a better future, she needed a degree. Erika shared that her extended family members were successful and she associated their achievements with a college degree. She stated, "... all of my family went to school and are successful, so like I said ... it [college] was always a priority" (TR 5, line 204).

Felicia explained her reasoning for attending college was so she could find a better job. She stated, "I definitely wanted a better job than working at the hospital" (TR 7, line 84). She continued,

I was divorced, and I was ready to go do something different. I've asked myself questions, do I want to stay here at the hospital and work, you know, kinda, not go anywhere or do I want to go back to school and see where it takes me. And I was divorced and decided to take school route, and that's why I'm here. (line 218)

Amanda remembered desiring to be a teacher ever since preschool. Her teacher, Ms. Betty, inspired her and becoming a teacher has been her passionate goal ever since. She knew that to live that life and have a career in teaching, she needed a college degree. Amanda shared:

I always looked up to all the different educators I've come in contact with like my preschool teacher, Ms. Betty, teacher Betty. She was very special to me and I know that to become an educator you have to have a degree. (TR 1, line 61)

Barbara and her family were convinced that an education would provide for a better career and future. She recalled her mom saying, "We don't want you to be stupid ... and you need an education. You have to get a good job ... you don't want to, you know, end up coordinating Kmart for the rest of your life or whatever" (TR 2, line 267).

Hank also believed that an education was the means for a better life and career. He described how his education would prepare him to become an influential teacher. He explained:

There's something greater than that. 'Cause it ain't all about me, man ... I just know I can make a difference. I know as a teacher, you know, and just like, uh, my Calculus I teacher told me, he said, "You know," he says,

“You struggling now is gonna make you a better teacher.” He said, “You’re, you’re going to have a kid in school that’s going to be struggling and you’re going to do whatever you can to help him overcome his obstacles.” I, I’m saying, “This is going to make me a better teacher. (TR 8, line 437)

Member check statements also affirmed that participants recognized the key to a better future and career was through obtaining an education and earning a degree. They agreed and believed strongly that an education would provide a better life for both themselves and their family. Of the eight participants, four had previous careers before attending college after high school. Once they realized that those professions were extremely limited without a better education they decided to earn a degree. In journaling my observations and interpretations after each interview discussion, this theme of education providing a better life was exceptionally apparent. Participants seemed extremely focused on the future and what benefits would result from their persistence in earning a college degree. They were able to visualize future outcomes through educational attainment. As will be discussed later in this chapter as a minor theme, several of the participants endured tremendous adversity and setbacks by believing that an education would provide a means for a better life.

Theme 3: Participants possess strong academic and personal efficacy.

“I’m not going to give up; I’m going to finish.”

Self-efficacy is a psychological process that results in attitudes and motivations of individuals towards accomplishment. Self-efficacy influences an

individual's thoughts, feelings, motivation, and behavior in given situations. As Bandura (1977) stated, efficacy is the conviction, certainty and confidence that one can "successfully execute the behavior required to produce desired outcomes" (p.193), and strength of efficacy is measured by one's confidence and certainty about successfully performing a given task (Zimmerman, 2000). Another element demonstrating the unique attributes of this research population, as was evident throughout the interviews and document analysis, was that participants possessed extremely high self-efficacy, both personally and academically.

As was described in detail in Chapter 2, sources of self-efficacy are constructed upon four main elements: performance accomplishment/mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal/social persuasion, and physiological/affective states. These four essential sources of self-efficacy will be explored in more detail in the discussion of findings in Chapter 6. However, for purposes of demonstrating how this third theme of possessing efficacy was derived, data analyses are presented in this section as well to demonstrate theme generation.

In commenting on being good students in high school, seven of the eight participants described having performance accomplishments. Furthermore, they stated they were able to complete the majority of work without difficulty. Hank was the only participant who did not discuss performance accomplishments in high school. Hank did discuss his experience playing football and that he later

dropped out of high school to earn his GED. All other participants in this study performed well in high school and felt confident about college-level work. The majority of the participants also mentioned on numerous occasions that they were able to complete the academic work at the local community/state college without much difficulty.

Participants expressed elements of having vicarious influences in their life as well. All of the students described someone in their lives whom they admired and respected. This mentorship served as a factor in their belief in education as well as desire and persistence to earn a degree. Each participant also recalled having multiple measures of support from family, friends, faculty and/or other individuals. These sources of verbal and social persuasion provided a positive motivational element that added to their efficacy development. Finally, triangulated data analysis identified that participants were able to cope and manage stress despite those issues causing adversity in their life. Of the eight participants, five had divorced and dealt with marriages ending in their lives. For three of these five individuals, their divorces occurred while they were in college. Furthermore, five of the eight participants dealt with death and sickness in their immediate family while in college. In fact, three of the participants, Hank, Erika and Gina, each discussed having cancer or being extremely ill. The ability of these students to endure and persist despite extreme challenges demonstrated their resilience and ability to maintain positive physiological and affective states.

It was also apparent, in the research analysis, that student participants had a strong belief in their ability to achieve goals, overcome obstacles, and earn their degrees. Seven of the eight participants self-reported that on a scale of one to five, five being most strong, their confidence for persisting in college was a five. The remaining participant, Amanda, rated herself with a four. Furthermore, despite having occasional challenges for childcare which might impact their ability to attend classes, all of the students shared statements of positive efficacy and feeling capable of not just completing work, but of competency, and attaining their goals.

Felicia quickly ranked on a scale of one to five, five being most strong, that her confidence for persisting in college was a five. She sat up in her chair with raised eyebrows and explained, "... yeah I could, I could stop, I could drop out or whatever. Yeah, because I'm just not going to give up ... I'm going to finish it. I mean what else am I going to do with the next two years to my life?" (TR 6, line 518). She elaborated that she didn't allow college to worry her. She tried to look at everything in a positive way and not look negatively upon anything. Like Felicia, Erika, without hesitation, described her confidence that she would succeed as a five. She explained, "Definitely a five, I know I can do it. Especially, I have support ... I feel ... like a little past the halfway point now, so if I've made it this far, clearly I can finish. It's just going to take determination, which I feel I have" (TR 5, line 399).

Barbara smiled and proudly explained several times during the interview that her internal drive was one of the factors that had most impacted her success and persistence in college. She replied:

I want to accomplish something. Like everyone in my family, they started but they haven't finished. I want to be the one who can finish ... [laughs] ... you know, and I can't teach until I have all this done, and I really want to teach, so have to get done what has to get done. (TR 2, line 692)

Gina also discussed her efficacious feelings towards schoolwork:

I can do the work academically and I do it well ... and I know how to take advantage of tutors if I had problems ... I know, I know I can do it academically. You know, I'm not scared of, of not being able to do the work. (TR 7, line 428)

Debbie confidently commented about her feelings of being capable of handling college-level work. When asked to describe her capability, she immediately responded, "Never questioned it ... so consequently, I, I tend to not get stressed out about school or anything in that arena. I've always felt very capable. It was one of the gifts my parents gave me" (TR 4, line 192). Debbie also identified that her belief in herself was the most significant factor that impacted her success and persistence in college. I noted the passion in her voice when she paused and then adamantly stated, "... my belief in myself. I think it really goes back to that" (TR 4, line 599). She continued:

I can find the plus side to anything ... I'm also incredibly optimistic ... I think, that's one of the keys to being able to handle college is that even when I'm having a tough time with something, I kinda go 'that's OK, even in 10 seconds the wind will change direction', you know, it's all going to change. I don't need to expend a lot of energy on this situation because it's not going to be this situation for very long at all. And that helps me deal with things and stay optimistic ... No matter how bad things get I always know, yeah 'just give a while, things will work themselves out and it'll all be

ok', and because I honestly believe that it helps me stay mentally clear, focused, and prepared for whatever's coming up. (line 672)

Amanda described her motivation as what she felt most impacted her success and persistence. She looked at her son in the room, then back at me and stated, "It [school] gave me something to want to wake up for every day rather than 'oh, I just have to get up and go to work', you know. I get to do something exciting today and that helped a lot" (TR 1, line 328). She believed her confidence played an important role:

There have been quite a few times where a lot of other people would've just stopped, or taken time off for an extended period, or just not have continued at all. And even if it's really hard I try to push through it and try to make it so that eventually I'll get my degree. I've been at this almost five years. But eventually, I'll get there. (line 333)

Hank shared that his motivation came more than anything from "within inside myself" (line 285). I observed Hank being extremely self-reflective, taking deep breathes and glancing out of my office window to carefully ponder my questions and his responses. At times he was emotional when describing his attitude and source of confidence. He described:

Life's amazing. I focus on the things I can control and let God handle the things I can't control. Like character building, it's how you deal with it, that's what you're made of. At the end of your life doesn't matter when you're born, or how you died, it's what you did in the middle. (TR 8, line 924)

Theme 4: Participants possess a support network.

"Without their support, it wouldn't be possible."

During the course of this research, it became evident through analysis of document reviews, member check statements, journaling and transcripts that each participant was surrounded by some significant form of support network. Whether this association involved family, friends, mentors, faculty, classmates or a combination, each student was positively influenced by individuals that helped them persist in college.

Participants worked an average of 37 hours or more per week, had childcare responsibilities and were enrolled in at least nine credit hours of upper division coursework. This demanding schedule often caused stress for participants. Many of them commented on their struggles to achieve life balance and manage their time most effectively. Often, the most helpful involvement from their support network was in the manner of helping with childcare. In fact, every participant in this study revealed they received support in childcare responsibilities from someone else in their life. Five of the participants (Amanda, Barbara, Debbie, Erika and Gina) commented that it would be impossible for them to continue in school without involvement and assistance from their support network. They confirmed these beliefs through member check statements.

As previously mentioned, five of the eight participants were divorced and four did not have fiscal childcare support from the other parent. Furthermore, none of the participants lived with family or had a roommate. Therefore, the support network provided help with childcare responsibilities and served as a surrogate parent to minimize the strain and tension of raising families on their

own. For example, Debbie credited her parents, specifically her mother, as being a tremendous support network. “My parents have been a huge support, a huge support. Without their help, just getting to [school], um, once a month would be difficult if not impossible” (TR 4, line 726).

Hank also replied that numerous people had been helpful and encouraging to him. He first mentioned his ex mother-in-law, then his son, God, his classmates, his internship supervisor, and some of the host campus faculty. About one of the faculty, Hank commented, “It’s not by chance that I saw Mr. H. yesterday. I needed to hear what he had to say. I look up to him, you know. He’s my mentor, no matter if he’s my advisor he’s still my mentor, he gives me advice” (TR 8, line 867). Hank explained:

I’ve been so surrounded by so many people that are, just like Dr. H., you know, just uh, just motivational people, individuals that just, you know, they don’t understand, you know, they don’t understand sometimes what people’s ... you know what I don’t understand, people that you meet every day, the words that they say, they don’t understand sometimes how the impact that they have, good or bad and I think that uh, the burning desire to me to make a difference has been probably, you know, because I see so many people out there that are making such a positive difference ... God has put so many people my life to surround me, I think that’s, that’s, that’s the thing, you know. (line 774)

Barbara remembered her third grade teacher, Ms. Giorgio, and credited her with initially inspiring her to become a teacher. Barbara stated, “I knew I wanted to be like her [Ms. Giorgio] because she was important to me when I was a little kid so I wanted to be like that” (TR 2, line 10). Another role model for Barbara was her aunt who ran a daycare. Her aunt attended college and this provided a positive influence for Barbara’s college aspirations. Barbara was

fortunate to have an encouraging support network within her family as well. Both her mom and grandma lived within two miles and were extremely helpful in taking care of her daughter as needed.

... I take her [daughter] to my mom and then she'd watch her and ... she [daughter] loves going to grandma's so it makes it easy because if she wasn't happy about it, I wouldn't be happy about it, but she's happy there, so I don't feel bad about it, but I hate leaving her. I love spending time with her. (line 551)

Barbara also shared that "If I didn't have my mom to watch [daughter], I wouldn't have come back here [school] ... yeah, I need them ... [laughs] ... to help me through." (line 961).

Like Barbara, Erika credited her family as being an encouraging support network. She described her support as follows:

... my mother of course and in most of my family in general, like if I need somebody in my family to watch my son, let's just say my mom couldn't, I would call my grandma or like now, with [father] being here if he didn't have football ... even my friends are really supportive like my best friend, like when I, I'm too busy or something she doesn't mind to go and pick up my son for anything ... they encourage me. (TR 5, line 743)

Christy described that her closest support network consisted of her classmates. She explained, "They're, you know, they're like my nursing family. You know, if I need anything, they're right there. That's really the only people that I have around or even converse with" (TR 3, line 455). She looked up to the faculty and considered many of them to be role models as well. Like Christy, Amanda credited faculty for being understanding and allowing her flexibility as needed with schoolwork assignments. "It's really the teachers who help me

because if they weren't so understanding, sometimes I wouldn't be able to do it"  
(TR 1, line 261).

Gina described her experience being a single parent and having no  
support network while planning to be a full-time student:

You know ... it's hard as a single parent, trying to when you don't have  
support, when you don't have parents, you don't have relatives, you don't  
have ... I didn't have anybody here because I had moved here when I met  
him [ex-husband], and I didn't trust people. That's hard ... [begins to cry] ...  
sorry ... (TR 7, line 202)

She elaborated:

See that's what being a single parent, it sucks when you don't have ... you  
know I said to, myself ... I'm not going to do this again. Move to a place,  
not know anybody, you know, not have any support system ... (line 420)

Once Gina met 'Edna', her 'adopted grandma', her life changed due to Edna's  
willingness to provide support and help with childcare. Gina remembered her  
coming up to her after a cancer support group meeting and stating, "I will help  
you with your children anytime ... I will help you ... and I live right across the  
street from the DBCC" (line 196). Now Gina comments about being encouraged  
by a strong support network:

My fellow classmates, um, my two adopted moms, uh, my kids, my kids  
are so supportive, they, they, they realize this is a good thing, and um, the  
you know, friends that are, even my Facebook friends are, you know very  
2supportive, and um, that's helpful. It's good now, it's a good support  
network. (line 1133)

Theme 5: Participants' first-generation status serves as a motivating factor.

"It's an achievement. I want to be the first to finish."

One of the most fascinating themes revealed after the triangulated data was repeatedly analyzed, and again, what made these participants intriguingly unique, was the role of first-generation status for each participant. Rather than their first-generation status being an encumbrance, each participant described being the first in their families to attend college being extremely motivating. Regardless of whether they felt supported by their families to attend college, their personal feelings of achievement by being the “first” actually helped to influence their motivation and persistence. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, this finding contradicts much of the existing literature.

This concept and unique theme of first-generation status serving as a motivating factor was confirmed through member check statements by the participants. Narrative texts from the participants themselves also enlightened this same finding. Moreover, the investigator triangulation efforts also corroborated a similar theme from the participants.

Felicia discussed being the first in her family to attend college as a significant accomplishment. She stated, “It’s an achievement, I, uh, definitely went further than they [parents] did ... I think that I’ve achieved a lot in my 30 years and it makes me happy” (TR 6, line 538). When Christy was asked about how it felt to be a first-generation college student, she replied,

I’ve never thought about it ... maybe it puts less pressure on me because no one’s ever instilled that in me. No one’s expecting me to do good, so no one’s, you know, breathing down my neck about it. I mean, there, I consider ultimately, now that I’m here and I’m doing this, they are proud of me, but did they expect me to do it, no, no. (TR 3, line 570)

Debbie also believed that her status of being a first-generation college student influenced and motivated her entire life:

... had my parents perhaps put a higher value on education, things might have been a little different for me, as I made the transition from high school to college ... So my children have inspired me to look back on how my parents treated education and not make the same mistake.  
(TR 4, 566)

Hank shared his desire, growing up, to be a cowboy. He explained his experience as a first-generation college student being similar to what it must have been like for American settlers pioneering the travel route from east to west across the frontier. He shared:

I always wanted to be a cowboy anyway. When I was a little boy, I always wanted to grow up and have a ranch and be a cattleman, you know in just ride the range. And I feel like I'm, kind of like that cowboy, you know, getting knocked off, getting thrown off, and I just keep getting back on that horse and keep riding away, you know, and blazing the, blazing a path, but I may be setting, not maybe for my son, but for his child, you know, generation to generation, feeling like a cowboy as well. (TR 8, line 804)

Even though Amanda's parents did not attend college, they were extremely supportive of her aspirations and were proud that she was going to be the first in their family to earn a degree. She stated, "They [my parents] wanted me to go and they really didn't know what the situation was going to be like, but they were very excited for me to be the first in our family to at least attempt it" (TR 1, line 23). Like Amanda, Erika's parents and family encouraged her to attend college. When asked about being first-generation being a first generation, she stated:

... it feels good ... I feel like I shouldn't take college for granted because she [mom] wanted to go but she just couldn't because she was, she was

sick ... I shouldn't take it [college] for granted ... There's nothing wrong with me so I need to go ahead and get it done. (TR 5, line 453)

When asked why being a first-generation student motivated her, Barbara said, "I'm the one they always pick on and make fun of everyday ... [laughs] ... so it's kinda 'in-your-face' kinda thing I guess. It's always ... [laughs] ... like everyone in my family, they started but they haven't finished. I want to be the one who can finish" (TR 2, line 699).

### Minor Themes

Minor findings of this research study were supported and identified after careful analysis and examination of the triangulated data within the Content Matrix and Pattern Recognition Flowchart. Minor themes were defined as emergent patterns interpreted as being meaningful for at least four of the eight participants. These themes included:

1. Participants were influenced by strong role models and positive encouragement.
2. Participants persevered through significant obstacles

Theme 1: Participants were influenced by strong role models  
and positive encouragement.

Through data analysis and member check statements, several of the participants indicated and confirmed the presence of strong role models in their lives and that they had received positive encouragement from these individuals.

One of Erika's role models was her aunt. She shared, "My aunt who graduated from [the host campus] with her bachelor's and her master's degree, she had a kid when she was 15 and still somehow managed to go to school" (TR 5, line 281). Erika elaborated, "She had a kid that young so, and she still went to school and was able to be successful so it kinda lets you know that it still can be done and I looked up to her a lot" (line 289). Regarding encouragement, Erika also discussed the support she received from her family. She said, "... my family never discouraged me, as a matter of fact when I went to school, my grandma took my son because daycare was so expensive" (TR 5, 222). Barbara also received positive encouragement from her aunt who was a role model for her. She recalled,

My Aunt Donna, she ran the daycare that I worked at during the summers, and she just, was the one who always kinda pushed for it, because she went to school, and like her kids all went to college, so she was the one who pushed for it and told me, you know, what I needed to do, and she knew I wanted to be a teacher. (TR 2, line 186)

Like Erika and Barbara, Amanda's friends and parents provided significant encouragement while she was growing up. They supported her aspirations to attend college. She described their support:

... well friends and parents. My parents definitely. They wanted me to go and they really didn't know what the situation was going to be like but they were very excited for me to be the first in our family to at least attempt it. And I had a lot of support from our extended family and things like that because nobody has really made that transition. (TR 1, line 23)

Amanda also identified the influence of her role model, Ms. Betty, beginning in prekindergarten. She stated, "I always looked up to all of the different educators I've come in contact with ..." (line 61).

Gina's parent did not provide much, if any, encouragement when she recently decided to return to school. However, she frequently commented about the encouragement she received from her adopted grandma 'Edna,' as well as her doctors with whom she came in contact.

... also of major current and important influence and support is my cancer counselor and her husband. I likely would not be alive if not for their guidance through cancer experience. It was truly amazing getting hooked up with them. (TR 18, line 876).

Like Gina, Debbie's parents never placed a great importance on schooling. However, they did support her and provided continuous encouragement. Debbie remembered her parents always emphasizing to her that she was an incredibly intelligent person and was capable of anything she put her mind to. She shared, "... every interaction we had, [they said] you are capable, you are able to do it, we believe in you, you should believe in yourself" (TR 4, line 216).

Theme 2: Participants persevered through significant obstacles.

Through the research analysis, it became evident that many of the research participants encountered and persevered through considerable obstacles. Although it can be assumed that all people are confronted by challenges throughout their lives, these student participants overcame

extraordinary adversity through divorce, poverty and bankruptcy, sickness and even deaths of immediate family members. Five of the eight participants had dealt with unsuccessful marriages and were divorced. Two of the participants had been married more than once. Furthermore, for three of these five individuals, the divorce(s) occurred while they were in college. Five of the eight participants dealt with death and/or sickness in their immediate families. In fact, three of the participants (Hank, Erika and Gina) discussed having cancer or being extremely sick. That these students were able to continue their education despite tremendous challenges demonstrated their resilience and ability to persist through significant obstacles.

This notion of resilience surfaced throughout the participants' stories and lives. As defined by the American Psychological Association (2010), resilience is the process of adapting in the face of adversity, tragedy and stress and recovering from these obstacles, setbacks and potentially detrimental events. Resilience is also the phenomenon of one's ability to recover and cope with prolonged adversity while sustaining competence (Masten et al., 1990; Ungar, 2004). A combination of factors contribute to developing resilience, including having supportive and encouraging relationships, possessing a positive belief system, having future goals, and the capacity to manage emotions.

Each of the participants in this study described moments in their lives where their resiliency helped them persevere through significant obstacles. When asked to describe an example of having experienced a setback in her life,

Gina responded, "Which one?" (TR 7, line 890). She continued, "Oh my gosh, uh, well, I mean obviously the cancer was ... you know what though, the divorce from the crack-head was the biggest one. Cancer was easy compared to that nightmare" (line 894).

Amanda spoke to me about both her parents passing away within the past seven years. Being the oldest daughter, she faced tremendous responsibility to manage extra tasks and be dependable for everyone in her family. She remembered:

I did the International Baccalaureate program at Spruce Creek High School and then my dad passed away, so I had to stop and I didn't finish the entire degree, but I still wanted to finish my school experience so I started right out of high school into college and I haven't stopped since. (TR 1, line 7)

Amanda continued, "The hardest one [challenge] was when my mom passed away and that was really hard to, um. It was really hard, I mean, it's taken me a while to get to this point where I feel ready to start working on things that are for me again" (line 276).

Debbie recalled one of her greatest challenges occurring during her first semester after returning to school. She recalled how she overcame the devastation in her personal life:

... dealing with that first semester when my life fell apart ... And still trying to uh, do the work in a college course that you need to do. And in all honestly, I think that that semester, having those 2 courses really saved me, because it gave me something to focus on other than my life. (TR 4, line 556)

Debbie continued and explained that persevering obstacles keeps her motivated.

She commented:

I know that when things are hard, do them, you grow stronger, so there are going to be things now that are going to be hard, just finding time, you know ... but I know I have to find the time, have to, you know, I know I'm going to do it. I know I'm going to make it, so no matter what, I'm going to do it, and then I know it will be over eventually. (TR 4, line 654)

Hank also discussed persevering through tremendous setbacks and life tragedy.

In 2005, he was diagnosed with stage three cancer and was given only 75% chance of survival. After going through 25 rounds of chemotherapy every 21 days, he beat the cancer. Hank described his attitude about persisting through life's challenges with a story:

A little boy and his mom were walking in the park and they saw this butterfly breaking out of its cocoon. And the little boy was all excited, he wanted to see the, uh the butterfly, and he rips open the cocoon for him and the butterfly flies and all of a sudden he dies. And he was all upset. And the little, the little boy says, "Mom," he says, "why'd the butterfly die?" She says, "The struggles that he was doing was good on his wings. And when you opened it, it made it easy for him. He couldn't strengthen his wings, so he couldn't fly. (TR 8, line 460)

### Results from Investigator Triangulation

In an effort to (a) validate the emergent research themes, (b) avoid subjective interpretation, and (c) minimize any researcher bias in the interpretation of findings, three experienced researchers were contacted to review and interpret one randomly selected interview transcript. Given the rigor and complexity of the qualitative data, this process of multiple coding can provide credence and yield discussions which ultimately further refine and complement

interpretations and explanations, leading to more valid and reliable data (Barbour, 2001).

The three experienced researchers each had different and unique backgrounds as compared to my own. The first researcher was a Caucasian, Italian-American male in his 60s who had earned his doctorate in 1995. He currently was employed by the same institution where this investigation took place. The second researcher was a Caucasian female, in her 30s, and a fellow doctoral student who had previous research experience with conducting qualitative studies. She also had successfully completed two qualitative courses at the same host institution. The third researcher was an African-American male, in his 40s, who had previously earned his Ph.D. from a Research I university in the northeastern United States.

Initially, the researchers were emailed a transcript for review along with a request for their overall interpretation of the transcript in relation to self-efficacy and the two research questions of this study. I provided no further information to them in order to minimize any bias or influence. My intent was to ensure comprehensiveness and a more reflexive analysis of the data (Mays & Pope, 2000). In each separate telephone conversation, the researchers informed me of their interpretations and findings before I revealed my own interpretations.

Though each discussion provided a supplemental perspective, each of the interpretations complemented my initial findings from the transcript analysis. Overall, the researchers found most evident that (a) childcare was of paramount

priority, (b) children served as a great inspiration, (c) finances and paying for college were a grave concern, (d) education would lead to a better future and career, (e) students were confident in their ability, and that (f) students each had some type of support network. Additional insight from one researcher suggested a remarkable openness of the one specific research participant who shared extensive detail and background information. This researcher assumed that the participant and I were acquaintances. However, this was not the case as this participant and I had just met minutes before the initial interview. Another researcher found it interesting that in one particular interview, my discourse as the researcher seemed to model the language of the participant. After careful review of the transcript, I recognized that indeed I did, inadvertently, model the participant's language style. Overall, these additional investigator interpretations did not suggest any unrelated or contradictory research findings from my initial analysis. Rather, the investigator feedback and interpretations supported the major and minor thematic findings previously discussed in this chapter.

### Summary

This chapter presented a descriptive analysis of the emergent categories and recurring thematic patterns as identified from the triangulated data through in-depth interviews, document reviews, member check statements, observations and personal researcher journaling. A content matrix and pattern recognition flowchart were formulated upon data index analysis to demonstrate how the

findings were recognized. Both major and minor themes were identified and discussed in detail and interpretations of findings were congruent with those of three experienced researchers. Major themes from this research study were defined as emergent patterns for at least six of the eight participants. These themes were connected to narrative texts and included:

1. Children are primary motivating influence for life and career.
2. Participants believe an education is the pathway for a better future and career.
3. Participants possess strong academic and personal efficacy.
4. Participants are encouraged by a support network.
5. Participants' first-generation status serves as a motivating factor.

Minor themes from this research study were defined as emergent patterns identified for at least four of the eight participants. These themes were connected to narrative texts and included:

1. Participants were influenced by strong role models and positive encouragement.
2. Participants persevered through significant obstacles.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the results as they relate to the conceptual framework.

## CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESULTS

### Introduction

In this chapter, the conceptual framework for the study is readdressed, analyzed, and discussed in relation to the thematic findings discussed in Chapter 5. The research questions are also examined with reference to the results and literature review. A summary will conclude this chapter.

### Understanding the Conceptual Framework

People's beliefs about their personal efficacy constitute a major aspect of their self-knowledge, and these beliefs are constructed from four principal sources of information: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal and social persuasion, and physiological and affective processes (Bandura, 1993, 1997). As evidenced in the triangulated data analysis, participants exhibited strong levels of both academic and personal self-efficacy which may have influenced their ability to persist through adversity before and during college. A comprehensive examination of the sources and processes of efficacy are addressed in this chapter as they relate to the findings of this research study.

### Performance Accomplishment/Mastery Experiences

Mastery experiences and performance accomplishments are the most influential sources of efficacy, because they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one has the determination to accomplish tasks. The development of

efficacy beliefs through mastery and performance accomplishments creates the cognitive and self-regulative capacity for effective performance. Performance successes demonstrate to individuals that they have what it takes to accomplish tasks despite challenges and setbacks (Bandura, 1997).

The participants in this research study recalled numerous examples of mastery experiences and performance accomplishments which enhanced their levels of self-efficacy. Through their previous positive experiences, they recognized they had control over many situations and outcomes in their life. All of the participants except one shared that they performed relatively well, if not exceptionally well, during high school. For example, Amanda described herself as a good student in high school. "I was a good student, I mean ... I always had 'A's' and 'B's'" (TR 1, line 99). She continued, "I've always been fairly confident in my abilities" (line 133).

Christy also stated, "I always made good grades and overall enjoyed school" (line 28). Even though Gina felt as though she was "lost" (TR 7, line 3), she still described herself as being an 'A' student, graduating with highest honors. Felicia also recalled, "I had always been on honor roll and never really tried hard for it." (TR 6, line 7).

Hank, Gina and Debbie additionally shared stories of personal mastery and triumph through adversity. Hank and Gina described powerful stories of beating cancer and becoming healthy once again. Debbie, Hank and Gina also demonstrated their resilience as they persisted through divorces which they

explained were extremely difficult and complicated. Despite these significant life events and barriers, the participants in this study did not express an absence of control over their outcomes, as explained by learned helplessness. Rather, they appeared extremely resilient to external events and situations that they did not have influence over. Furthermore, they were able to recognize which outcomes were controllable and which were not, and energies were focused on those manageable activities and responsibilities.

#### Vicarious Experiences/Role Modeling

Self-efficacy can be influenced by relevant modeling when people have had little prior experience on which to base their capabilities. Therefore, vicarious influences enhance efficacy beliefs and thereby improve performance (Bandura, 1997). All of the participants in this study indicated a vicarious influence of at least one individual who was modeling desired behavior and outcomes. Amanda wanted to be a teacher ever since preschool due to the influence of Ms. Betty. She stated, "... my preschool teacher, Ms. Betty, teacher Betty. She was very special to me and I know that to become an educator you have to have a degree" (TR 1, line 61).

Barbara remembered her role model third grade teacher, Ms. Giorgio, and credited her with initially inspiring her to become a teacher. "I knew I wanted to be like her [Ms. Giorgio] because she was important to me when I was a little kid so I wanted to be like that" (line 10). Moreover, Barbara's aunt attended college

and so did all her aunt's children and this provided a positive influence for her college aspirations as well.

Erika also shared that several members of her extended family attended college and were successful. One of Erika's role models was her aunt. She shared, "my aunt who graduated from [the host campus] with her bachelor's and her master's degree, she had a kid when she was 15 ... she had a kid that young so, and she still went to school and was able to be successful so it kinda lets you know that it still can be done and I looked up to her a lot" (line 289).

Both Hank and Gina recalled several examples of role models in their lives who made a positive impact and influenced their belief in themselves. For Hank, it was his teachers, his son, God, and even his classmates who he looked up to. For Gina, it was her adopted grandma, her cancer counselor, and some of her doctors.

Christy described that she looked up to the faculty and considered many of them to be role models. Debbie also shared that several faculty positively influenced her as a future teacher. She vicariously enjoyed observing their teacher style which had made a tremendous impression upon her.

### Verbal and Social Persuasion

Verbal and social persuasion serves as an additional means of strengthening people's beliefs they hold in their capabilities to achieve desired goals. People who are influenced and persuaded that they can achieve desired

tasks are likely to exert greater commitment and effort than if they lack self-confidence in their ability to obtain their goals. Verbal and social persuasion can promote a positive belief system in having proficiency to attain goals and strengthening personal development (Bandura, 1997).

At various levels, each of the participants in this study received verbal and social persuasion that fostered and enhanced their levels of self-efficacy. Debbie credited her parents, specifically her mother, as being a tremendous support.

She described:

... it was kinda that self-fulfilling prophecy, everyone tells you that you can do it, you go into it believing you can do it, then you do it, and everyone comments on the fact that you did it, and that they knew you could do it. And then it becomes a circular ball of goodness ... (TR 4, line 623)

Erika's parents also encouraged her to do well in school and they supported her aspirations to attend college. She explained, "they both still just really wanted me to be, I guess, do better than they did kind of thing" (TR 5, line 71). In fact, her mother provided awards for her if she performed academically well in school.

When asked to indicate who had provided him with verbal and social support, Hank replied that numerous people had been helpful and encouraging to him. He first mentioned his ex-mother-in-law, then his son, God, his classmates and some of the faculty. Gina credited her doctors, counselors, her adopted grandma, her faith, and her children as influencers who inspired her to complete her degree. Amanda also commented about receiving significant verbal and emotional support from her parents while growing up.

## Emotional & Physiological State

Anxiety can potentially encumber performance. As a result, people are more likely to persist when they are not overwhelmed or agitated. People who cope well with anxiety and view their state of arousal as enhancing their performance are more likely to view their capabilities constructively. Furthermore, a positive psychological capital has demonstrated a strong relationship to positive and effective performance (Luthans, Luthan, & Luthans, 2004). Participants in this study expressed a positive attitude and an ability to cope and manage stress and anxiety well, thus feeling more competent and capable in their abilities.

Christy attributed her competence and internal motivation to her desire to break the cycle and beat the odds. She proudly stated, "I just want to be the one to prove that you can break the cycle ... you can turn it around, because I mean, if you knew me from high school and I dropped out, I was hanging out with the wrong crowd" (TR 3, line 248). When Felicia first started attending classes, she recalled feeling slightly anxious and nervous due to her age. However, because of her competence, she didn't let those feelings overwhelm her.

Hank described his passion and motivation for making a difference as a way in which he manages stress and adversity. He shared, "You gotta really love and enjoy what you do, cause it doesn't matter how much money you make" (TR 8, line 673). Debbie also discovered her love for teaching while she was volunteering for an extended daycare program with her children. Now, her entire

career goal is to "... teach those kids, and so that I am a capable and amazing teacher who can bring my joy and my passion to that classroom" (TR 4, line 792).

### Affective Processes

People's beliefs in their coping abilities affect their motivation as well as how much anxiety and stress they experience. Affective states are self-regulated by efficacy beliefs through the exercise of personal control over thought, action and affect (Bandura, 1997). People who possess self-efficacy to excel through stressors have a propensity to control self-defeating thought patterns, whereas those who do not have a strong belief in their capabilities focus on ruminative thought, dwell on their deficiencies and experience impaired functioning.

The findings of this study revealed that the participants were fairly well able to cope and adjust to the stress they were experiencing. Many of them indicated stress with childcare rather than schoolwork (Major Theme 1) and the significant portion of their concerted effort on a daily basis was focused on providing for their children. Participants were able to find a way, many times struggling, to provide for their children while still juggling other responsibilities. For each of the participants, their identification and utilization of a support network made it possible to better manage their responsibilities, provide for childcare and reduce the amounts of stress and anxiety they experienced. Furthermore, having encouragement and positive influences from others also provided the needed support to stay optimistic and persist.

## Cognitive Processes

Efficacy beliefs influence cognitive thought patterns that potentially can either undermine or improve performance. The stronger the perceived capabilities to manifest desired outcomes, the more committed people become to persist through goal attainment. Those who possess a high sense of efficacy visualize attainable success scenarios that provide positive guides for performance (Bandura, 1993, 1997).

It was evident that all participants believed a bachelor's degree was attainable and that earning this degree would provide for a better career (Major Theme 2). Participants were also convinced that an education was the key for providing those opportunities leading to positive change for themselves and their families. Contrary to learned helplessness, they felt in control of their future and that a degree would not only open doors for better employment in a career of interest, but also result in a higher salary and better standard of living. They chose to take action and improve their life circumstances.

Barbara, Amanda, Debbie and Hank were preparing to become teachers and recognized that attending college to obtain teacher certification was a requirement for this career. Additionally, Felicia and Erika explained that earning a degree would provide for more career opportunities and advancement. Felicia stated, "I definitely wanted a better job than working at the hospital" (line 84). She continued:

I was divorced, and I was ready to go do something different. I've asked myself questions, do I want to stay here at the hospital and work, you

know, kinda, not go anywhere or do I want to go back to school and see where it takes me. And I was divorced and decided to take school route, and that's why I'm here. (line 218)

Christy knew that in order to be a nurse and advance in her career, she had to earn her nursing degree. Finally, Gina also had a desire to work in a law office and she clearly understood the importance of her education and aspired further for a law degree.

### Motivational Processes

The capability for self-motivation and action is embedded in cognitive thought and activity. People construct beliefs about what they can accomplish, they anticipate outcomes, and they map courses of action intended to manifest future goals. Efficacy beliefs, therefore, serve an essential function in the cognitive regulation of motivation. Those who have a strong belief in their capabilities possess greater motivation, exert more effort and, as a result, their perseverance contributes to performance accomplishment (Bandura, 1997).

As evidenced in the analysis of interview transcripts, document reviews, member check statements and personal observations, all participants discussed and demonstrated a strong belief in their capabilities. Each expressed significant motivation and effort to achieve desired goals. Seven of the eight participants indicated on a scale of one to five, five being most strong, that a five is how they would rank their belief in their success. Felicia explained that she believed her persistence to have been most impacted by her motivation. She stated, "... well,

just for myself, I want to do it. I'm going to do it" (TR 16, line 138). She emphasized that a major factor for her is that she really wanted "to give my kids a good childhood. I want them to be happy and I want to take them places and do things and teach them somehow and show them things as much as I can" (line 231). Christy also indicated that much of her confidence was inspired by her desire to do more with her life. When asked where she felt these feelings of being capable originated, she replied "Um, I think maybe from people putting me down, me wanting to prove people wrong, that I could do more" (TR 3, line 95). She continued, "What motivates me to do it is people telling me I can't" (line 443).

Amanda, Barbara, Debbie, and Hank's desire to make a difference influenced their motivation, effort, and belief in their capabilities as future teachers. Amanda stated, "That's one of the most important things to me is that we provide children with the foundation that they need to have a good life" (TR 1, line 364).

Barbara also stated. "It's [college] something I want to do, so I just have to manage my time and prioritize what needs to be done, and just push through it" (line 619). She stated that overcoming obstacles keeps her motivated. She commented:

I know that when things are hard, do them, you grow stronger, so there are going to be things now that are going to be hard, just finding time, you know ... but I know I have to find the time, have to, you know, I know I'm going to do it. I know I'm going to make it, so no matter what, I'm going to do it, and then I know it will be over eventually. (line 654)

Debbie described the manner in which she perseveres and attains desired goals:

... one of the mantras that keeps going through my mind is it's [school] three months, that's all. You can do anything for three months. So, if I don't get quite as much sleep as I need, or whatever. I just need to keep telling myself it is three months ... I just have to get through December, actually just November, cause classes end at the beginning of December, so I just have to get there. And if I can do that, everything else will be fine. So, it keeps me going. (line 521)

### Selection Processes

Choices are influenced by beliefs of personal capabilities. Therefore, beliefs of personal efficacy can serve an essential role in determining one's selection of choices. People avoid activities and situations they suppose surpass their capabilities but select situations they believe themselves competent of handling. In this respect, selection processes are differentiated from cognitive, motivational, and affective processes because people must choose to engage in different possible activities.

The participants selected college and chose to persist because they believed themselves capable of performing the work and earning a degree. In ranking themselves on being able to succeed in college, all but one of the participants ranked themselves as a five on a scale of one to five, five being most strong. Although the remaining participant, Amanda, ranked herself as a four, she still stated that she felt confident she would earn her degree. Students' primary concerns were finances, childcare and time management rather than their competence in accomplishing school related tasks.

Christy indicated that she believed she made the right choice to attend college and that she was proud of her persistence. She stated, "... I made the right choice. I think later on down the road when I look back, they're [friends and family] probably going to be doing the same things" (line 84). For Gina, her education was a means to provide a better life for her children. Having an education can provide more opportunities for her and her children. She stated "... um, I think it will give them [children] confidence, you know um, I think it will help them make informed decisions in lots of areas, it will teach them critical thinking, you know, reasoning, and uh, focus" (TR 7, line 716).

As will be discussed more in the subsequent section, participants also indicated an inherent element of sacrifice that was required to persist while being a single parent. They recognized that school and completing homework assignments required time away from their children which did not bring pleasant thoughts, especially since the majority of children were under the age of 10. However, the participant's cognitive understanding that their education would result in a better way of life made this sacrifice seem worth the investment.

### Discussion of Results

For this research study there were two guiding research questions which focused on the experiences and beliefs in capabilities of single parent, first-generation college students who had transferred to a bachelor's degree institution. Triangulated data was collected through the in-depth interviews,

background questionnaire, personal journaling, member check statements, researcher observations and investigator triangulation. The data, indexed and incorporated into the content matrix and pattern recognition flowchart, were also repeatedly analyzed and studied to address the research questions.

### Research Question 1

What are the experiences of single parent, first-generation college students who transfer to a bachelor's degree institution?

Although emergent major and minor themes were able to be identified throughout the interview process, the responses from the research participants varied greatly. Students' experiences were unique, and no two students' backgrounds were identical. To generalize experiences for single parent, transfer, first-generation college students in this study was not plausible. However, after careful review and repeated analysis of the collective data sources mentioned throughout this research, broad, general experiences for these participants can be identified and explained.

For most single parent students, devotion to family, necessity of employment, and various obligations and responsibilities at home take priority over school (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Scaramuzzo, 2009). Being the only parent in the household, single parents must often balance their studies with their need to work. Single parents must also focus on child care, most certainly if children are young, and provide a support system. As a single parent with responsibilities for childcare, regardless of children's age, each of the participants

in this study was committed to providing for their children. Whether they were divorced or never married, the participants in this study were the sole providers for their children. Their children were of utmost and primary importance, taking precedence over school and work if warranted, and their daily schedule revolved around caring for their children. Students with children under 10 years of age were extremely reliant on childcare and were preoccupied with finding reliable care to ensure their children were safe. Time invested on campus, unless for class attendance, was minimal. Participants typically discussed a routine that involved immediately leaving campus for work or childcare. Therefore, the experiences of these participants were extremely focused and schedule-oriented, not leaving much time for themselves. Time management was often cited and discussed as a significant frustration and something that was managed as best as possible. When specifically asked how they manage their multiple life roles, participants commonly responded that they were not exactly sure how they did it all. Furthermore, not only were children the primary responsibility for these student participants, they were also an essential and significant source of motivation.

The research participants seemed genuinely interested and committed to their education. As a result, they wanted to perform well academically and take advantage of the opportunity to earn their degrees. Students connected their academic major and degree attainment with their future careers. They were not limited to their current habitus and socioeconomic level and believed that an

education would provide a pathway for a better future for themselves and their families. Therefore, these students were extremely focused and committed to their education.

As London (1989) found, relationships served a significantly important role and influence for first-generation college students. MacAllum et al. (2007) also reported that encouragement to attend college was consistently cited as a top reason for students' aspiring to attend and eventual matriculation in college. The majority of participants in this study reported experiencing a tremendous amount of support and encouragement from others. Whether it was from their immediate family or relationships outside the family, most of the participants shared very positive experiences with individuals who supported their academic aspirations and assisted with childcare. Most described positive interactions with role models and surrounded themselves with an encouraging support network. These positive experiences and interdependent relationships helped them manage stress and persist through obstacles.

As the literature has suggested, parental involvement has a significant relationship with children's college aspirations and attendance. For first-generation college students, aspiring to attend and attending college is an experience involving the entire family (Engle et al., 2006). This was true for only half of the research participants in this study. Three of the participants' parents and families were supportive and three were not. The remaining two participants did not have a relationship with their families. As London (1996) identified, some

family members might feel that first-generation college students are alienating their roots by attending college. In this study, the unsupportive parents had been successful without having advanced formal education and most likely did not understand why their children needed to attend college. However, students did not feel as though they were alienating their roots; rather, they aspired to college in order to attain the careers they desired and to live a better life. London's (1996) supposition, therefore, was at least, in part, correct. For the three students with unsupportive parents, the lack of support they felt from their parents fostered a sense of tension and anxiety.

The three participants who reported having positive family support experienced less anxiety and London's (1996) findings were not applicable. These students attributed their success to their parents' support and involvement. Rather than a constraint, the families of these participants were a helpful and critical resource in some instances. As Gofen (2007) reported in his study, all first-generation college student participants credited their families for their successful breakthrough to higher education. Rather than hindering college success, their families actually were essential in enabling it.

The participants in this study displayed high levels of independence as well. While they shared experiences and stories of relying on others for childcare, they exhibited significant independence in other tasks such as accomplishing goals and performing work. Many described a "can-do" attitude about life, being extremely resilient when facing setbacks and confident in their personal abilities.

Most had identified a system or process by which they could manage their time most efficiently and prioritize what needed to be accomplished on a daily basis. Several participants did acknowledge time management challenges and struggling to balance attention to their obligations. However, when asked to describe a typical day, most participants replied with an impressively detailed outline of various activities and demands interwoven with timetables. Furthermore, participants each lived independently with their children and did not live with parents or friends. They also provided their own transportation. While two commented on receiving financial help from their parents, the remaining participants did not comment on reliance on family for income.

Van T. Bui (2002) found that first-generation college students were more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic background and be concerned about financial aid for college. Bradbury and Mather (2009) also found, in their qualitative investigation of first-generation college students, that the ability to finance college was one of their greatest challenges. They found, as one might expect, that as a result of their lower socioeconomic status and financial need, many first-generation college students were employed in order to pay for college and other college-related expenses. The participants in this study each came from, and experienced, lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The average range of annual household income was between \$10,000 and \$20,000. All but one of the students expressed concern and apprehension that, at some point, they would not be able to pay for college. Each participant received financial aid, many

referencing the Pell Grant, and other community resources, such as the Early Learning Coalition, that helped them manage their childcare responsibilities while attending school. Furthermore, all but three of the participants in this study were employed and worked an average of 37 hours a week or more.

Fallon (1997) and Terenzini et al. (1994) reported that first-generation college students were more likely to delay enrolling in college immediately after school and were more likely to consider institutions close to home. Only two of the participants in this study immediately enrolled in college after earning their GED or graduating from high school. Saenz et al. (2007) found that a significantly greater and increasing proportion of first-generation students attended college within 50 miles from home. All of the participants in this study attended the host regional institution due to proximity and convenience. Even though all students lived independently, they commented that they needed to remain local for childcare and/or employment and indicated that traveling to the main campus would not be feasible.

First-generation college students also deal with issues related to multiple life roles and developing a sense of belonging on a campus. They have been determined to be more likely to attend college solely to take classes (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007) and less likely to be involved in co-curricular activities, campus organizations, intercollegiate sports, and other campus events as compared to their non-first-generation peers (Asrat, 2007). As Rood (2009) found in his qualitative research, some first-generation college students did not

feel a strong connection to college partially due to not having the time to be engaged on campus outside of classes due to family needs, childcare responsibilities, and off-campus employment. Each of the participants' experiences and beliefs in this study corroborated those previous findings. These students had multiple life roles, were physically on campus solely to take classes, were less engaged in activities and organizations, and prioritized family needs over campus events. The decision to attend the regional campus for these students was due solely to close proximity for their work and/or family.

#### Research Question 2

How do single parent, transfer, first-generation college students' beliefs about their capabilities affect their experiences in college?

The research participants in this study expressed they were extremely capable of performing college-level work. Most of the participants described themselves as good students in high school. Based on their performance accomplishments in high school, they believed they would be successful and were confident in their abilities. They recognized that a college education would provide a better life and more opportunities for themselves and their children. Therefore, college served as a means to an end. They did not express apprehension or an inability to perform assignments. In fact, most participants commented that they never questioned their ability to do the work and successfully complete assignments. If any concerns were addressed, it normally was related to childcare, time management or financial issues. Outside of these

issues, the participants were confident in their academic abilities. Their future career inspired them to enter college, prepare themselves as best they could, earn a degree, and live a better life.

Several of the participants also described that the experience of coursework at the host campus was more difficult and demanding. As compared to their classes at the local community/state college, they felt the requirements and expectations for their new college campus were more rigorous. However, many expected this type of transition and commented that they were feeling better about their occupational preparedness as a result. Their mental energy was focused on performing the work, meeting deadlines, and completing assignments well rather than questioning their ability to do the work itself. Participants believed that when they put their mind to the academic task, they could perform extremely well in classes and on homework assignments.

Participants' beliefs about their capabilities were also evident in their rich descriptions of factors which they felt impacted their success and persistence. Each of them commented on their sense of efficacy being a factor in their drive to excel and pioneer as a first-generation college student. Their belief in themselves, as well as their internal drive, helped them persist and overcome obstacles that otherwise might challenge them to drop out of school. Unlike the concept of learned helplessness, they believed they did have the ability to control their outcome. The more people perceive situations as controllable, the more

able they are to manage situations and the more likely they will take action to bring about change in their lives (Henry, 2005).

It was reported in the literature that many first-generation college students do not have confidence in their academic abilities and possess low aspirations for attending college. It was found in this study, however, that participants were extremely confident in their academic capabilities and ranked themselves high on being able to be succeed in college. As a result, they aspired to earn bachelor's degrees and believed that to be an attainable goal. Similar to Engle et al.'s (2006) findings, students who possessed increased confidence in their academic abilities had higher levels of college aspirations and believed that college was a realistic option. Furthermore, the research participants in this study reported that their first-generation status was a motivating factor that influenced their belief system and persistence to achieve desired goals and outcomes.

Buteau (2007) conducted a phenomenological investigation of 14 single mothers who were also first-generation college students. These research participants stated they were pursuing an education in order to achieve a better life for themselves and their children. They believed education was the pathway to achieve this goal, despite needing to balance multiple roles as parent, worker and student. The results from the present study corroborate Buteau's (2007) previous findings. Participants in this study recognized that persistence to earn a college education would provide a better life and more opportunities for themselves and their children.

Similarly to Buteau (2007), Haleman (2004) investigated 10 single mothers in college and found that they viewed their enrollment as a means to move out of poverty. They viewed education as an opportunity for personal growth and development that transcended economic benefits, both for them and their children. In accordance with those findings, the participants from this research study also believed that an education would provide the gate key for their future employment and an avenue for positive economic change. As has been previously stated, the majority of participants in this study earned less than \$10,000. These participants were not satisfied with their current careers, wanted a better life for their children, and believed a degree would serve as a primary factor in helping them attain their goals. While participants did not focus on desiring to make a high salary after degree completion, they did express their belief that a degree would help them attain a position earning them and their children a better standard of living.

Haleman's (2004) participants also commented that their personal struggles would serve as a positive learning experience for their children and an example which they could follow. They believed that their personal determination, perseverance, and sacrifice were essential in breaking through the challenges and obstacles that existed in their pursuit of higher education. Similar findings from this study revealed that the participants encountered numerous setbacks and obstacles while in college. Many of these challenges involved life issues of childcare, finances, bankruptcy, divorce and sickness. However, participants

reported their focus on school helped them to cope and manage their home life and personal setbacks and obstacles by placing focus on course requirements.

Participants also indicated an element of sacrifice that was required to earn their degree while also being a single parent in school. They recognized and discussed that time in school and completing homework assignments required time away from their children. While this reminder occasionally surfaced unpleasant thoughts, the participant's beliefs and future vision of a better job and way of life made this reality seem worth the sacrifice. Furthermore, the participants endured and believed that they were setting a positive example for their children.

Bandura (1993) stated that higher levels of efficacy translate into greater persistence to overcome challenges and earn a college degree. While the literature review suggests that first-generation college students typically possess lower levels of efficacy and their efforts to persist and excel are less determined, the participants from this research study reported high levels of efficacy and expressed a confident attitude of persisting through adversity. As was discussed in Chapter 5, it became evident that many of the research participants encountered and persevered through considerable obstacles. These students were able to continue their education despite tremendous challenges and demonstrated their resilience and ability to persist through difficulties because of their high self-efficacy.

Also, as was discussed in Chapter 5, participants' resiliency and their ability to recover from significant setbacks and challenges was a common observation. It should be noted that many of the factors which contribute to developing resilience, such as having supportive and encouraging relationships, possessing a positive belief system, having future goals which are believed to be obtainable, and the capacity to manage emotions are also positive elements that develop self efficacy as well. Thereby, the more self-efficacious a student, the more likely they are to be resilient to life challenges and setbacks. Each of the participants in this study described moments in their lives where their resiliency helped them persevere through significant obstacles. Contrary to learned helplessness, the participants felt in control of their behavior and had confidence their actions would yield positive outcomes.

In summary, therefore, the findings from this study suggest that the participants' beliefs about their capabilities did impact and influence their experiences in college. Students reported feeling capable and confident in their academic course work, experienced numerous performance accomplishments, and believed their persistence in education would lead to a better life. Furthermore, whereas the literature reported children and first-generation status as risk factors and motivational inhibitors in school, the participants in this study revealed that their children and first-generation status were significant motivational influences. These students also were convinced that their sacrifice and perseverance was setting a positive example for their children.

## Summary

This chapter revisited the conceptual framework for this study as it related to the findings and themes from the research participants. A discussion of results was also presented as it related to the research questions and the literature review. The final chapter of this research study, Chapter 7, will provide recommendations, implications and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 7 RECOMMENDATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

### Introduction

Based on the findings from this research study and the extant literature, in combination with my knowledge of and experience working with single parent, first-generation transfer students, this chapter provides several important recommendations. These recommendations are directed toward students, their families and/or support networks, high schools, community/state colleges and bachelor's degree institutions, and faculty, staff, and administrators. They are designed to not only support and improve college aspirations and experiences of single parent, first-generation transfer students, but also to improve their retention and provide programs and services that meet their needs. Implications affecting various constituents will also be provided. Finally, considerations for future research will be presented followed by the researcher's reflections and final conclusion.

### Recommendations

#### Institutions, Administration, and Staff

Researchers offer a variety of recommendations regarding the role higher education institutions can play to help students become academically and socially integrated into college (McConnell, 2000; Tinto 1988). Both community/state colleges and bachelor's degree institutions have a responsibility

to understand and meet the complex needs of single parent, first-generation transfer students. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), all institutional constituents and types of institutions need to better understand students on their campuses as well as the experiences and expectations they bring along with them. While both types of institutions are unique and serve distinct and varied purposes, the recommendations provided in this section can be applied to community/state colleges, bachelor's degree institutions as well as administration and staff members.

To better facilitate single parent, first-generation students' transitions to higher education, institutions and those responsible for orienting new students must first be educated and made aware of the challenges these students face. To identify what these challenges are, institutional staff and administrators should provide discussions and workshops that outline the empirical research and characteristics of at-risk student groups such as single parents and first-generation transfer students (McConnell, 2000). This knowledge will enable administrators and others to locally address and understand the concerns specific to these student's needs at their respective campuses. When needs are met, students are more likely to succeed and persist. Furthermore, understanding students in a holistic manner, whereby extra pressures are recognized, can minimize students feeling marginalized and not overlooked (Kodama, 2002). Therefore, understanding single parent, first-generation transfer students' experiences is paramount (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003).

Van T. Bui (2002) suggested that campus support programs can foster success for first-generation college students by offering services that specifically address their concerns. Based on the literature and findings from this study, it is recommended that administrators and support service personnel develop unique programming for single parent, first-generation transfer students. McConnell (2000) suggests that institutions can improve their academic integration by incorporating pre-college and summer bridge programs, mentoring programs, workshops, and other initiatives such as career counseling. With initiatives such as these in mind, institutions should intentionally collaborate and communicate better between K-12 institutions by sharing information and resources. To improve and increase single parent, first-generation student's social integration into college, activities should be provided that increase student's time and involvement on campus and help foster a sense of belonging (Astin , 1993, 1999). Particularly beneficial activities would also be those that include the entire family (Huff & Thorpe, 1997; McConnell, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

The participants in this study shared that child care assistance, time management, financial concerns and stress management were common personal challenges they faced. Therefore, institutions should provide programs, workshops and services that address these topics. As was previously suggested for students, both the local community/state college and the host campus provided various services and resources for at-risk students such as single parent, low-income, and first-generation college students. Examples of services

include tutoring, various development workshops, mentoring, personal counseling, career advisement, financial assistance, scholarship resources, and various community referrals. These programs are critical to meet the needs of these students and help them persist.

Institutions can also enhance a student's academic and social integration into the campus by helping them identify and receive more on-campus employment opportunities (Astin, 1994, 1999; Tinto, 1988). Researchers have found that students who work on campus are more likely to feel connected to the institution, better understand institutional policies and resources, and develop meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, and students (McConnell, 2000). Tinto (1999) found that one of the most interesting environmental factors affecting, and even facilitating, student retention was part-time campus employment. Similar to residential living, a student working on campus is spending more time on campus, thus increasing the interaction amongst other students, faculty, and staff. Furthermore, relying on the college as a source of income can result in greater sense of belonging and attachment to the institution (Astin, 1999).

Institutions should also conduct needs assessments and focus groups in order to identify the needs of these students. Based on direct student feedback, intentional services such as learning communities, workshops and support services might be offered. As was revealed in this study, childcare and finances were the two top concerns faced by the research participants. Therefore, institutions and administrators, as well as the host campus, should more

intentionally connect these students, via focus group and/or learning community, and inform them about resources designed to lessen or minimize their concerns. Also, as was found in this study, student's first-generation status served as a motivating factor that supplemented and enhanced student's desire to persist. Institutions should therefore communicate and utilize the findings from this research study to help other first-generation college students recognize the dynamic legacy they are leaving not just for themselves, but also for their families and future generations. Whereas much of the extant research suggested that first-generation status was an inhibiting factor, for the participants in this study it was a motivator.

Retention builds on interactions and relationships that are geared to the needs of each student. It is these interactions and relationship that assist each student to make choices that result in academic and social integration and thereby success, thereby fostering the essence of retention (Tinto, 1988). Institutions should therefore develop and implement mentorship programs specifically designed for student groups most at-risk for attrition. All students identified to be a member of an at-risk subgroup, such as single parent and first-generation college students, should be encouraged to participate in a mentorship program where they will be paired with both a faculty/staff representative as well as an upper-class student. This mentorship program will provide opportunities for participants to interact and connect with others having similar needs and career interests. As a result these students can potentially organize an additional

support network to share ideas, develop informal learning communities, and provide encouragement.

Institutions can promote successful transfer retention by offering and improving their quality of academic advising as well as helping students identify and connect to a particular career of interest. Designated transfer advisors can help provide this informational and advisory support for prospective transfer students. These individuals can intentionally outreach to those students enrolled at community/state colleges who are most at-risk of not aspiring towards a bachelor's degree and ensure these students understand the benefits of transfer and degree completion. Effective transfer advising can also enhance the academic experience of students by offering a clear academic plan and sequence of courses for students. For the students in this research study, an identified career of interest was a substantial motivating influence in their desire for not only transfer, but also excelling and persisting in their degree program. Currently the host campus supports a transfer advisor who supports and guides those students who have aspirations to transfer to the host campus from the local community/state college. Other institutions should model this advising support and relationship between community/state colleges and bachelor's degree institutions.

Institutions should support faculty and consider how to integrate technology, where appropriate, to provide hybrid, or blended course, formats and online courses that do not require weekly face-to-face class meetings, thus

allowing single parent students, as well as other students, to remain at home with families, provide childcare assistance, work if necessary, and complete coursework assignments at more convenient times. Many institutions throughout the United States, such as The University System of Maryland, University of Texas, and Minnesota State Colleges, now require students to enroll in hybrid or online courses. Moreover, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, pointing to the host campus as a model, has made blended learning a cornerstone of its new \$20-million education-technology grant program (Online Learning, 2010).

Furthermore, institutions should review and consider modifying the faculty evaluation and reward system to incorporate credit for mentoring and additional outreach activities involving at-risk student groups. Evaluation of service and service criteria for faculty could also include initiating leadership for developing and integrating successful strategies for recruitment and retention of a diverse study body.

Institutional support services should also work closely with students to identify those who exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy. Counselors, faculty, academic advisors, admissions representatives and other staff could identify these students indicating lower levels of efficacy and guide them in ways that result in increased self-perception and confidence in their abilities. Purposeful interventions designed to promote and enhance self-efficacy through incorporating Bandura's four sources of efficacy is especially imperative for single parent, first-generation transfer students (Walpole, 1998). Providing role

models and mentors is one strategy that can be implemented to empower and support single parent, first-generation students in college. Mentors would be beneficial for first-generation college students who exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy. Peers of similar backgrounds could be paired together, one with higher levels of efficacy, to support one another and provide encouragement resulting in improved levels of self perception. Leadership workshops and other personal development activities and initiatives should also be considered to be available for these students. Increasing students' levels of self-efficacy should have a positive impact on their college experience and persistence by motivating them to feel more competent and exert more effort thus impacting their success (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

Self-efficacy can be positively influenced, and Luthan et al. (2004) outlined a confidence-building development program based on the framework of self-efficacy drawn from the work of Bandura (1977). Such a program could be developed, supported, and implemented by the administration at any K-12 school or higher education institution to build and enhance the efficacy and positive psychological capital of students. The program would be based on mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and physiological arousal. Luthan et al. (2004) suggest activities focused on each of these sources of efficacy in accordance with an accompanying interactive action plan.

An institution's cultural elements can also influence student satisfaction, and ultimately whether a student persists and graduates (Kuh, 2001). The

research and literature of Berger (2001) and Kuh (2001) suggested that organizational cultures exert influence on student persistence decisions as well as other important dimensions of the student experience. Institutions should, therefore, focus more attention on creating a cultural milieu that supports single parent, first-generation transfer students' academic success and retention. By influencing and making concerted efforts toward a positive, welcoming environment, student success and achievement can be attained. For students most at-risk for early departure, such as single parent, first-generation college students, institutions can minimize cultural and organizational boundaries which might otherwise create obstacles and hinder success. These initiatives should begin as early as during the admissions process and through orientation. Suggestions to achieve this goal include specific admissions advisement sessions, transfer orientation breakouts, and other activities and initiatives for transfer students who are both single parents and first-generation transfers.

Tierney (2000) further suggested that institutions have a responsibility to impact institutional commitment by modifying their cultures to accommodate students who are at risk of departure. At-risk students are more likely to persist if their identities are affirmed and incorporated into the cultures of respective institutions (Tierney, 2000). Socialization to institutional culture does not only occur at college entry, especially for single parent, first-generation college students and others who lack tacit knowledge about what is required to succeed at the university. Creating a culture of student success starts well before a

student matriculates, and only a web of interlocking and responsive initiatives can shape an institutional culture that encourages and fosters student learning, persistence, and success (Kuh, 2001). In order to intentionally affect the nature and quality of student cultures, secondary and postsecondary institutions must partner and implement initiatives to involve students more actively and early in the intellectual and social cultural life of the campus. Student service departments must be charged and supported to take lead on these initiatives and to ensure that students are aware of these activities and resources.

Greater awareness about the organizational nature of student persistence can help campus leaders be more intentional about the patterns of organizational behavior in which they engage as they fulfill their professional roles. By becoming more intentional, campus leaders can become more deliberate about the ways in which the campus impacts student retention (Berger, 2001). Institutions can help ease the transition for first-generation college students to college life by teaching them about campus culture and helping them cultivate the behaviors needed to success academically and socially.

To summarize the recommendations for institutions, administrators and staff:

1. Institutional staff and administrators should provide discussions and workshops that outline the characteristics of at-risk student groups and enable administrators and others to address and understand the concerns and needs specific to these student's needs.

2. Conduct needs assessments and focus groups in order to identify the needs of single parent, first-generation transfer students and, based upon assessment results, target intentional programming and services such as learning communities, childcare resources, financial assistance, time management workshops, stress management seminars, and other support services to meet their needs.
3. Develop and implement peer mentor and mentorship programs specifically designed for single parent, first-generation transfer students.
4. Work with faculty to integrate technology, where appropriate, to provide hybrid course formats and online courses that do not require weekly face-to-face class meetings.
5. Review and consider modifying the faculty evaluation and reward system to incorporate credit for mentoring and additional outreach activities/programming and retention initiatives involving at-risk student groups.
6. Identify and work closely with those students who exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy and guide them in ways that result in increased self-perception and confidence in their abilities.
7. Minimize cultural and organizational boundaries which might otherwise create obstacles and hinder success. Provide specific admissions advisement sessions, transfer orientation breakouts, and other

activities and initiatives for transfer students who are both single parents and first-generation transfers.

### High Schools

Research has revealed that first-generation college students experience a disadvantage in regard to access to and information about college. Many have lacked the knowledge needed to appropriately aspire for, prepare, apply, and pay for college. If, or when, they do receive this information, it is oftentimes during the senior year, which is too late. By this time, many have missed out on the preparatory academic and social opportunities that build a firm foundation for life in higher education (Fallon, 1997). Engle et al. (2006) found that a key factor to ensure first-generation students have college access was to provide information as early in high school as possible. A significant portion of their research participants stated that they would not have considered college before senior year, would not have known how to prepare for college, or that they needed to apply for college before high school was complete. Therefore, first-generation students need special assistance and guidance in high school to understand what college information is most important.

Parents and students alike must understand the benefits and expectations of enrolling in postsecondary education. Cabrera et al. (2003) observed that those students who were best prepared for college took advantage of high school resources before their junior year. These students were significantly more likely

to matriculate. MacAllum et al. (2007) also found, in their focus group research, that a significant portion of the first-generation students regretted not initiating the college search process sooner. Therefore, high schools should provide opportunities for students, especially those most at-risk for not attending college such as first-generation college students, to take advantage of high school resources and prepare as early as possible for college. Furthermore, institutions should extend outreach and recruitment efforts to include information for those students who are younger than their senior year.

Informing students and parents about college is helpful whereas helping them prepare and aspire for college is essential. Information alone is insufficient. Teachers, guidance counselors, and school administrators can each serve a role to ensure that all students, especially those most at-risk for not attending college such as low-income, minority, and first-generation students, have information about college and potential career opportunities. This career exploration and postsecondary information should be provided for both students and parents early and often through school assembly presentations, classroom curriculum and activities, guidance counseling sessions, and other types of workshops. Content should incorporate the benefits of college attendance, types of institutions, entrance requirements, financial aid opportunities, and other important concepts.

TRIO programs are one example of how high schools can improve knowledge, access, and assistance for at-risk students who likely will not

consider college. TRIO is a set of federally funded college opportunity programs designed to motivate and support eligible students from disadvantaged backgrounds in their entry into and pursuit of a college degree (TRIO, 2010). TRIO defines eligibility as either low-income, first-generation and/or students with a disability. Two-thirds of the students in TRIO programs come from families with household incomes less than \$30,000 and where no parent attended college. These programs provide tutoring, counseling, mentoring, financial assistance, and other support services intended to improve educational aspirations, postsecondary access, and retention. Inaugural programs were named Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services – hence the initial term “trio.” However, now additional programs have been created and have become a vital pipeline for opportunity for high school, college, and graduate students.

It is imperative for high schools and postsecondary institutions to incorporate three specific programs, Talent Search, Upward Bound and AVID, and encourage involvement for low-income, minority, and first-generation college students as early as possible. Talent Search and Upward Bound programs are two of the TRIO programs designed to effectively reach students in grades six through 12 and provide information, counseling, assistance with college admission, and financial aid assistance (TRIO, 2010). AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is a college-readiness program designed to increase the number of students who enroll in higher education. AVID typically focuses on first-generation and low-income or minority students and challenges them with a

college curricular track. These students receive support in an academic elective class, called AVID, taught within the school day by a trained AVID teacher who focuses on a rigorous curriculum. AVID students are more likely to complete their college eligibility requirements and enroll in postsecondary education as compared to other students who are not enrolled in AVID. Each of these initiatives, Talent Search, Upward Bound, and AVID, help high school students explore possible careers of interest, understand the benefits of college, how they can afford college, and other various expectations and requirements.

Many first-generation college students have not been challenged and exposed to a college preparatory curriculum giving them the academic skills for college success. Because of this weak academic preparation, many first-generation college students perform poorly on college admissions thereby significantly limiting the types of colleges to which they can apply (Fallon, 1997). Therefore, high schools should identify and reach out to those students enrolled in lower-level and non-college preparatory courses to encourage them to aspire for college and to help prepare them for tests and other college requirements. As Choy et al. (2000) found, students who received college preparatory help from teachers and staff in their college application and entrance examinations significantly increased the odds of college attendance.

Butlin (1999) reviewed extensive research on those factors that could determine whether a high school graduate attended college. He found that only 11% of those students who failed a grade actually attended college. Students

who do fail a grade are therefore at significant risk for not aspiring for or attending college. Guidance counselors and high school administrators can easily identify who these students are and work with them and their parents to identify the challenges which influenced them to fail the grade. Providing encouragement for these students and bringing them back to speed might influence them positively to graduate high school and attend college.

Most of the participants in this study expressed high self-efficacy through performance accomplishments, vicarious influences, and verbal/social persuasion in regards to their high school experiences. Whether it was a result of positive encouragement, their commitment level, their desire to attend college, or for other reasons, they shared feelings of high self-efficacy while being a high school student. Their efficacy may likely have been a determining factor in their desire to attend college and in their ability to feel competent about completing the work successfully. Therefore, high schools must recognize the importance of positive psychology and self-efficacy and make efforts to improve the self-efficacy for all students. Teachers can achieve this by instructing students how to set goals, monitor their learning progress and guide their motivation in ways that build their sense of efficacy for managing their academic activities (Caprara et al., 2008).

Finally, as was found in this research study, each participant had a clear vision for the type of career they wanted to pursue. For five of the eight participants, this career of interest was identified while in high school.

Furthermore, this desire and commitment to an identified future career was a significant influence in their aspirations for attending college and persisting through adversity. They knew that in order to have that intended career, they needed a college degree. As a result, high schools should invest significant time and resources into helping students identify possible career interests and opportunities. As previously stated, it is never too early to begin career exploration and students in high school should reflect often on what type of job they would enjoy and perform effectively.

To summarize the recommendations for high schools:

1. Teachers, guidance counselors and school administrators should provide early opportunities (i.e. school assemblies, counseling sessions, curricular activities) to help students, regardless of school year, understand the benefits of college attendance.
2. Promote, sponsor and embrace federally funded programs such as TRIO's Upward Bound and Talent Search as well as the AVID program.
3. Assist students intentionally with exploring and identifying possible careers of interest and pathways to obtain desired employment.
4. Reach out to at-risk students (first-generation, minority, low socioeconomic) demonstrating at-risk behavior (low GPA, non-college prep courses, failing grades) and provide support services and mentoring.

5. Engage students with programs and workshops that support and enhance their psychosocial development and positive psychology. Utilizing the theoretical framework of self-efficacy, students can be coached to improve their belief system and sense of capability to achieve desired outcomes.

### Support Networks

Those who serve as a support network for single parent, first-generation transfer students must recognize the integral roles they serve. Whether they are family members, friends, mentors, role models or teachers, they must acknowledge that their relationship and involvement plays a central and key role in the educational aspirations, persistence, and achievement for these students. Each of the participants in this study commented on the invaluable assistance of their support network, whether it was by providing childcare, vicarious influence, mentorship, financial support, encouragement or emotional support.

All participants had managed to find a support network if it was not embedded within the immediate family. For half the research participants, this support network was indeed their parents, most commonly the mother. For the remaining participants, their support network was fostered through friendships, role model relationships and other external relationships. As was previously stated, the average age of each participant was 32 with an age range of 23 through 49. Four participants were 30 years old or higher, while three were 23

and one was 27, respectively. Therefore, the role of the parents, especially for the older participants 30 years of age or older, was not as engaged as it might have been if these participants were younger.

Support network members must continue to provide single parent, first-generation transfer students with encouragement and support. For some students, this might be the only positive encouragement they receive. If possible, support network members should ask these single parent, first-generation college students how they can provide assistance. Many of these students have complex needs. Having resources to provide occasional help can lighten their burdens of juggling so many tasks at once.

To summarize the recommendations for members of support networks:

1. Recognize the impact of their relationships on influencing educational aspirations, persistence and achievement for single parent, first-generation transfer students.
2. Continue to provide support and encouragement for these students. Proactively inquire about how they can assist these students.

### Faculty

Several research participants in this study described the positive influence faculty served in their personal lives and academic pursuits. Whether as a role model or as a compassionate instructor, faculty interaction and influence was a factor in the success and persistence for single parent, first-generation transfer

students. Many of the students expressed their admiration and respect for faculty, their experience and their careers. Other students simply appreciated the faculty's flexibility in working with them if childcare needed to be a temporary priority over school work. Regardless, faculty made a difference in these participants' lives.

According to Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, frequent student-faculty contact is one of the most important factors in student motivation and involvement. Astin (1999) also found that frequent faculty interaction is more strongly related to satisfaction, thereby involvement and retention, than any other type of involvement. Students who interact frequently with faculty members are more likely than other students to express satisfaction with all aspects of their college experience. Therefore, just as previously suggested for support network members, it is recommended that faculty recognize their potential influence and take an opportunity to identify and acknowledge the additional challenges of single parent, first-generation transfer students as well as members of other at-risk student groups (McConnell 2000; Richardson & Skinner, 1990).

As suggested throughout the extensive literature review, it is often the faculty who have the most contact with single parent, first-generation transfer students. Once class ends, most students immediately leave campus and return to work or home in order to take care of their children. Single parent, first-generation transfer students are also less likely to be involved in the clubs and

social activities of campus life. This is not necessarily a matter of choice. Rather, it is a matter of obligation and circumstance which impedes the ability of these students to be fully integrated into the social aspects of campus culture (Fallon, 1997). For each of the participants in this study, minimal time was spent on campus other than for class. Therefore, it is the faculty who might be in a better position to be an influence and help single parent, first-generation transfer students build confidence and adjust to college. Faculty interaction is invaluable to student retention, and the more time faculty give to these students and make intentional use of in-class activities, the more likely these students will persist.

The classroom provides a rich learning experience and has become an increasingly important locus for not only social and academic integration, but also for creating a success-oriented campus culture (Kuh, 2001). Tinto (1975, 1988) suggested that faculty should utilize classroom time to incorporate collaborative learning environments and learning communities that promote academic integration and engaging environments for students, and these benefits might be most advantageous for at-risk students who need it most. Any endeavor to improve the classroom experience and connect the student to the institution has great merit because the students are already in class (McConnell, 2000; Tinto, 1988). Researchers have suggested the benefits of group work to students, e.g., practicing and learning teamwork and communication skills, improving critical thinking skills and gaining more insight regarding a specific topic (Knefelkamp, 1991; Love & Love, 1995; Tinto 1988). Hand and Payne (2008) suggest that

instructors can foster a relationship-building culture by structuring an interactive classroom environment. Chickering and Gamson (1987) also suggest that good practice encourages cooperation among students and active learning. As students learn to support one another, they will be more integrated and likely to succeed in their academic pursuits.

Tinto (1998) found that learning increased dramatically for students when classes were structured around peer learning and group work both in and outside the classroom. For the students in this research study, in-class group projects were the primary source of peer interaction. Therefore, how faculty structure student-student interaction patterns in the classroom has an effect on how well students learn, their attitudes toward school and the teacher, their relationships with other students, and their level of self-efficacy (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Through this collaborative pedagogy, faculty should structure and modify their curriculum and classroom culture to be inclusive and supportive of all students, with special emphasis and support for minority, single parent, transfer, and first-generation college students.

As was stated for high schools, faculty can modify their curriculum to incorporate career exploration activities, presentations, and in-service learning opportunities. These initiatives will help students explore and identify possible careers of interest which will, resultantly, help them persist through degree attainment. Each participant in this research study possessed a clear vision for the type of career they wanted to pursue, and this commitment was a significant

influence in their aspirations for attending college and persisting through adversity. They knew that in order to have that intended career, they needed a college degree. As a result, faculty should consider modifying their curriculum, where appropriate, into helping students identify possible career interests.

Finally, as the research participants in this study discussed, time management and juggling various priorities was a daily battle. Thus, requiring fewer class visits while still enhancing learning outcomes is capable through online technologies. If not doing so already, faculty should consider how to integrate technology, where appropriate, to provide hybrid (also called mixed mode or blended) course formats and online courses that do not require weekly face-to-face class meetings. This would allow single parent students, as well as other students, to remain at home with families, provide childcare assistance, work if necessary, and complete coursework assignments at more convenient times. In 2004, less than one million students were enrolled in online degree programs. In 2014, it is estimated that nearly 4 million students will be enrolled. Moreover, 12% of students in 2004 enrolled in at least one online course, whereas in 2008 this number jumped to 25% (Online Learning, 2010). Clearly, in the era of exponential technological growth, faculty and institutions alike can meet the needs of students through innovative educational technologies.

To summarize the recommendations for faculty members:

1. Faculty should recognize their classroom and mentorship influence and take an opportunity to identify and acknowledge the additional challenges of single parent, first-generation transfer students.
2. Tailor and foster collaborative learning environments whereby students can engage in group work and peer-to-peer learning.
3. Modify curriculum to incorporate career exploration activities, presentations, and in-service learning opportunities in order to help students explore and identify possible careers of interest which will, resultantly, help them persist through degree attainment.
4. Integrate technology, where appropriate, to provide hybrid (i.e. mixed mode) course formats and online courses that do not require weekly face-to-face class meetings. This would allow single parent students to remain at home with families and complete coursework assignments at more convenient times.

### Students

It was evident throughout this research that participants' children, regardless of age, were a primary focal point in their lives and a source of tremendous motivation and positive influence. As a result, one principal concern that participants shared involved childcare. The children who were older, specifically who were 17 and 13, were much more self-sufficient and did not require the supervised childcare and attention that a child under the age of 10

might need. Therefore, single parent students with younger children need to proactively seek out affordable and reliable childcare options when they plan to attend college. This is especially important for single parents who do not have the childcare support from members of their immediate family. Single parent students need to foresee how they can provide for their children during the times they are in class, whether it be through family, friends, daycare or other support services. Some options for childcare are community-based and are low-cost, if not free. Several participants in this research study shared utilizing resources such as the Early Learning Coalition which helps subsidize childcare costs substantially. CCAMPIS is a grant-funded childcare assistance program through the local community/state college Women's Center specifically for students who are low-income parents.

Single parent students should also identify and build relationships with other single parents. By connecting with others having similar needs, they can organize a support system whereby they can exchange and coordinate childcare responsibilities, class schedules, transportation, meals, and develop informal learning communities. Each of these initiatives would lessen the responsibility and burden for each individual parent, especially those with smaller support networks and childcare support outside their immediate family network. Identifying with other single parent students would also provide the additional encouragement and social outlet needed when overwhelmed with multi-tasking and juggling daily demands.

As was presented in Chapter 4, the participants in this study had a vivid focus on earning a bachelor's degree to pursue a desired career. They viewed education as a means to establishing themselves in careers which they believed would provide a better life for themselves and their children. Therefore, it is recommended that single, parent first-generation students take time to reflect on and identify a career of interest that they feel is obtainable. The academic degree they are pursuing should match the pathway for reaching their professional goal. For students who need assistance in identifying what careers might be of most interest, they should take time to utilize high school and institutional support services which provide career/guidance counseling, personality assessments, internship opportunities, and academic advising. Career exploration should begin as early as possible, ideally early in high school, and it should be a continual reflection process.

Students who are single parent, first-generation students should investigate and take advantage of the numerous resources and services that exist at both the campus and community levels. For the participants in this study, numerous programs exist at both institutions which are intended to support their educational and personal needs. The local community/state college offers Fresh Start for both men and women, New Directions, Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), TRIO Student Support Services and the Academic Support Center. Each of these programs provides free services and resources to eligible participants including tutoring, personal development

workshops, mentoring, personal counseling, career advisement, financial assistance, scholarship resources, emotional support, clothes closet, a lending library, and community referrals. The host campus where this study took place provides a Student Services office and first-generation college student program where students can learn more about, and take advantage of, resources that are geared for their success. The central campus of the host regional campus also houses the Multicultural Academic and Support Services (MASS) office which provides a program for first-generation college students titled, The First-Generation Program. This program provides services and resources designed to help first-generation college students excel. Community resources such as the Early Learning Coalition, CCAMPIS, and the Children's Advocacy Center are additional examples of programs that provide support services and childcare to low-income single parents. Each of these programs previously mentioned are free and provide resources supporting the needs of single parent, first-generation transfer students. However, these opportunities are only beneficial for those students who take advantage of them.

Another significant concern that participants shared throughout this research involved finances. Several indicated that they were not confident in their ability to pay for tuition, books and living expenses. Therefore, single parent, first-generation students should seek out financial assistance and explore scholarship resources so that their main focus and investment can be on their children and school. Both the host campus and the local community/state college provide a

financial aid office that provides staff representatives to assist with FAFSA applications and financial aid opportunities. Also, each institution offers a host of scholarships, grants and other financial resources for first-generation, single parents and low-income students. There are numerous opportunities for these students to obtain aid, but they need to be proactive in accessing these resources.

For the research participants in this study, persisting through higher education would not have been possible without involvement and encouragement from a support network. All participants described being positively influenced and encouraged by others. For three of the participants, the support network consisted of their families. For the remaining five participants, support was provided through an external network outside their immediate family. Members of these networks were role models, teachers, friends, extended family relatives, and fellow classmates. Therefore, single parent, first-generation college students should make concerted efforts to identify and involve themselves in a supportive, constructive and encouraging network. Having an engaged support network was extremely important in providing the social and verbal encouragement these students needed to persist.

With technology advances, it is more convenient than ever to connect with others. Whether it be through texting, email, social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter, and other forms of virtual communication such as instant messaging, single parent students can correspond immediately and quickly.

Fostering a support network and utilizing technology can therefore be advantageous for helping with childcare responsibilities, the prime concern for the participants in this research study, sharing community resources, offering encouragement and being available to find help during emergencies.

Finally, single parent, first-generation transfer students, as well as all students and society in general, need to develop a positive belief system that reinforces their capabilities to attain goals and persevere through obstacles. Challenges and setbacks will always occur along life's path, and one of the best approaches to persisting through adversity is by developing positive self-efficacy and a resilient attitude. When faced with overwhelming odds and frustrations, many individuals are unable to, or choose not to, persist. The most successful people, however, are those individuals who forge ahead through challenges and accept setbacks or failures as learning opportunities. Therefore, it is of ultimate importance that single parent, first-generation transfer students work to develop a 'victor' mentality, not a 'victim' mentality. The institutional resources previously mentioned offer topical seminars on building self-esteem, health and wellness, and making positive life decisions. First-generation students should take advantage of these programs and services.

To summarize the recommendations for single parent, first-generation transfer students:

1. Proactively seek out childcare resources, if applicable, and have a plan for childcare before matriculating in college.

2. Reflect and identify an obtainable career of interest.
3. Seek out institutional resources for assistance, such as TRIO services, financial assistance, tutoring programs, and other various campus support services.
4. Make concerted efforts to identify and involve a support network, whether that be family, friends, classmates, faculty and/or mentors and utilize technology and social media outlets.
5. Develop a positive belief system and be confident in working toward achieving identified goals.

#### Implications for Practice

Findings from this research study provide important implications for educators and policymakers who consider and make decisions that impact the services for, and experiences of, single parent, first-generation transfer students. Furthermore, understanding how various levels of self-efficacy relate and influence the experiences and success of single parent, first-generation transfer students has significant implications for institutions, faculty, staff, administrators, and society. First-generation college students continue to present new and increasing challenges for institutions, particularly as this college population continues to grow (Hand & Payne, 2008). Given the known characteristics, risk factors and considerable obstacles facing first-generation college students who represent at least 35% of the undergraduate student population, it is imperative

for faculty, staff, and administrative policy makers to understand the unique characteristics and needs of this population and the factors that contribute to their successful path through the educational pipeline (Rood, 2009). Moreover, as approximately 10% of single mothers earn a degree beyond high school and 90% of those who do not persist live in poverty, it is imperative for single mothers to aspire towards college and earn a degree. Their educational attainment can, and does, impact their socioeconomic achievement (Smart & Pascarella, 1986). The implications of these individuals not aspiring or persisting through degree attainment will manifest negative economic and societal implications.

Economic experts have shared that in order for individuals to prosper and our nation to compete globally, we must increase and improve our levels of postsecondary attainment. Whereas by 2018 it is estimated that 60% of all jobs will require some form of postsecondary education, only 38% of the current workforce in 2010 has earned a two-year degree (Merisotis, 2010). It should be concerning that as tuition rates continue to rise at institutions across the country, and as a nation we continue to endure the effects from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, those low-income students who need an education most will unfortunately be those least likely to afford and receive it. Cost, therefore, is as much a factor as academic preparation discouraging low-income, first-generation students from attending college (Giegerich, 2010). The implications for keeping college affordable for those who cannot afford it is therefore enormous.

As Giegerich (2010) reported, community/state colleges have served as an oasis for those students unable to access nor afford the steep price tag of a university. As an alternative, these students choose community/state colleges for at least their first two years of postsecondary education and recently have made community/state colleges become the fastest-growing segment of higher education. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2010), average enrollment had increased 24% at over 1,200 community/state colleges from 2007 to 2009. Additionally, many states have expanded, and more are planning to expand, associate degree programs to four-year baccalaureate programs as the demand for education increases and tuition rates rise (Wellman, 2002).

Transfer from community/state colleges to bachelor's degree institutions deserves priority attention from state policymakers and administrators for numerous reasons. As has been previously discussed, the baccalaureate degree is increasingly becoming an entry point into the professional workforce. More students than ever are beginning their postsecondary education at community/state colleges and then choosing to transfer to a bachelor's degree institution. As more high school students graduate, as more minority and first-generation students enter higher education, and as tuition rates continue to rise, it is imperative for this transfer function to work well in order for institutions to meet enrollment demand. If the transfer function is ineffective, students who initially enroll in community/state colleges will be less likely to transfer and earn a

bachelors degree. Even for those students who do transfer, a weak transfer policy will likely result in a longer, more frustrating, and a more expensive degree completion timeline. Improving the effectiveness of community/state college to baccalaureate transfer is therefore essential to our country's success as well as national progress in closing the degree achievement gap among racial and socioeconomic groups.

The results and insights provided by this research study contribute important and needed information for policy considerations. Given the findings regarding childcare assistance, financial need, identified career of interest, part-time attendance, and employment, policymakers should rethink support services and financial aid policies. The research participants in this study have illustrated that financial considerations and childcare needs have a significant impact on student's ability to enroll and become integrated in the campus community. Moreover, their confidence in their degree program and career pathway was evident in their persistence and determination to transfer and persist. Policymakers should review and consider whether current institutional programming, admissions, orientation, and financial aid policies are sufficiently intentional and equitable for single parent, first-generation transfer students.

Based on the findings from this study and other research focused toward single parent, first-generation transfer students, it is recognizable that these students carry additional risk factors and unique challenges before and during college, particularly in balancing childcare, school, work, and other activities.

Because of these characteristics, demographics and academic experiences, single parent, first-generation transfer students are more likely to achieve lower GPAs, attend part-time and delay attending college. However, based on incremental gains in earnings, they stand the most to benefit from a postsecondary degree (Baum, Ma & Payea, 2010). By understanding their challenges and the formidable odds they face, policy makers can make efforts to identify these students and make decisions to minimize barriers, improve efficacy and autonomy, and thereby improve their educational attainment. Purposeful interventions designed to promote and enhance self-efficacy through incorporating Bandura's four sources of efficacy is especially imperative for single parent, first-generation transfer students who because of cultural, social, or economic conditions may be less likely to experience a social context that naturally facilitates efficacy (Walpole, 1998).

Faculty, staff and administrators must make concerted efforts to know these underserved students, especially at a time when single parent, first-generation college student enrollments continue to increase (Kelly, 2006). The characteristics of single parent, first-generation students mirror several of the student-related barriers to retention including low socio-economic status, poor academic preparation, part-time college attendance and other important risk factors. Educators should consider these characteristics when developing strategies for identifying at-risk students who may be in need of academic advising, tutoring and utilizing other support services. Campus support programs

for these students can foster success by offering services that specifically address their concerns, thus serving a strategic role in an institution's overall retention strategy. Institutions should also teach these students how to seek out services and take advantage of the resources being offered. For many of the research participants involved in this study, they indicated utilizing minimal resources from the host campus. In fact, when asked directly about which resources were most beneficial, many students commented they were unaware of which resources existed. If colleges and universities expect to improve retention and graduation rates in the future, they are going to have to better inquire about students needs, develop intentional programming that helps them excel, and generate policy decisions that support their persistence.

Institutions can offer single parent, first-generation transfer students an improved opportunity for success by intentionally providing a welcoming support structure, utilizing faculty to integrate a responsive classroom community and adapting their institutional policies to foster an environment and culture conducive to success. When institutions recognize the power of this ability to influence organizational culture and student success, they will support a holistic student development approach and begin to maximize their effectiveness to minimize student departure.

Finally, the findings from this research study as well as the literature suggest that single parent, first-generation transfer students believe a college education is an investment and the ultimate pathway to economic success and

security. Their college aspirations and persistence provide, in their minds, an avenue for positive change. For low-income single parents, an education can be the difference between leaving or remaining in a low socioeconomic or poverty cycle. Therefore, understanding the barriers these students face, and how they can meet their challenges, is extremely important in supporting these students in their educational persistence and their social mobility. It is equally important, however, to understand that single parents face an exceptionally difficult challenge of simultaneously balancing multiple roles as parents, financial providers and students. These roles and priorities often conflict and force single parents to prioritize their obligations as parent first.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations and delimitations of this research study, its findings, methodological procedures, implications, and the existing literature, there are several important recommendations suggested for practical, future research that would add tremendously in understanding this unique student population. The first recommendation warranted is to employ the identical research methodology but to limit the participant sample to non-persisting, single parent, first-generation transfer students. For unknown reasons, such non-persisting students discontinued attending college. Their reasoning for departing would provide institutions and researchers with a unique and rich understanding of their experiences and what factors inhibited their ability to persist and attain a

degree. Furthermore, a comparative analysis research study between persisters and non-persisters might provide insightful factors, such as academic, personal, or financial, and meaning to explain why some students were retained and others were not.

A second recommendation for future research is to interview graduated single parent, first-generation, transfer students and conduct an assessment of their experiences as students who did persist and completed their education. In this current research study, five of the eight students were new juniors who recently entered the university in Fall 2010. It is possible that although they transferred and were currently persisting, they might not graduate due to present unforeseen circumstances. Therefore, employing a research study on those who earned degrees would strengthen the findings and results in relation to their persistence.

A third recommendation for future research is to conduct a longitudinal study, such as an in-depth case study, to follow a select group of single parent, first-generation, transfer participants over an extended period of time. A longitudinal approach might provide more rich data and deeper understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by these students.

Another recommendation for future research is to include parents and families in the interviews and/or data collection process. As was provided in detail throughout the literature review, family background and socioeconomic status does influence first-generation college students' ability to aspire, gain

access to, and persist in college. Involving parents and families in the research would help researchers understand how habitus, social networks, and cultural and social capital might influence research findings. Within this research design, it would also be advantageous to learn more about the socioeconomic levels of the families from which the research participants grew up. It is not clear in this study whether the participants grew up in poverty. The only socioeconomic information obtained was current self-reported annual household income from the participants themselves which indicated that the majority of participants were living at poverty level. Many of the participants indicated a significant reason for their aspirations to attend college was to provide a better life for their children and to find better employment. Therefore, including future research that more closely examines factors such as socioeconomic upbringing, family involvement, cultural capital and habitus is another recommendation deserving significant attention and mention.

A fifth recommendation for future research is to conduct a comparative analysis of a sample of single parent, first-generation transfer students to a sample of single parent, non-first-generation transfer students. Due to the results found in this study, whereby first-generation status actually served as a motivating influence for many of the participants, comparative analysis might yield additional information about single parent students and their family backgrounds. Utilizing first-generation status as the variable might further

strengthen or conflict with findings from this current study as well as the extant scholarly literature.

Among all racial/ethnic groups in the United States, Hispanics are the fastest growing population, yet they continue to exhibit the lowest educational attainment levels (American Council on Education, 2010). Therefore, a recommendation for future research is to initiate a study to investigate the college experiences and factors affecting persistence for this Hispanic, single parent, first-generation transfer student population. By employing similar methodology as was utilized in this study, focusing specifically on Hispanic students, researchers and policy makers can better understand the issues and factors that could possibly lead to increasing the educational attainment of Hispanic students.

Finally, a recommendation for future research is to replicate this same phenomenological approach at another bachelor degree-granting institution as this study was not designed to generalize to a larger population. Examining data from a comparable or extremely dissimilar institution would yield extremely interesting results which might assist in better understanding this unique group of college students.

### Summary

This final chapter provided recommendations for students, support network members, high schools, community/state colleges, bachelor's degree institutions and university faculty, staff, and administration. Implications for

practice, suggestions for future research, and a concluding statement were also offered.

### Researcher's Perspective

As I listened to the participant's stories and examined the research data, I became immersed in their world. These participants were willing to open their hearts and lives to share experiences with a relative stranger. Many times I journaled that the highly personal aspects of their lives far exceeded my expectations. Reviewing the transcripts, it is evident that these students enjoyed sharing their 'life story' and how they have overcome significant odds to be a student at the university. Interestingly, many participants commented that they had never been asked some of the thought-provoking questions I was presenting. As was described in Chapter 4, by revealing highly cathartic experiences, many of the participants became so emotional they cried numerous times during the interview.

Each experience was truly unique and I found each participant fascinating. I frequently envisioned myself in their same situation - back in college yet older and having no family who attended before me, also having a child, living by myself and being a single parent. Throughout the data analysis, one question continued to surface in my mind: "*How* do they do it all?" At times I felt myself feeling sympathetic to their stories and at other occasions I felt extremely proud. It was difficult not to visualize myself in their same circumstance and question

how I would deal or cope with their exact situation. I acknowledge that at times during the interviews and analysis, I found it extremely difficult not to interject my own feelings and distort my objectivity. As these thoughts and prejudices surfaced in my mind though, I would document any assumptions or bias and later include them as journal entries to minimize subjective interpretation and conjecture.

As I continued to deconstruct and analyze the data, I finally came to terms with a conscious understanding of “how” these students managed their numerous responsibilities and still persisted in college. Indeed, their achievement was influenced by the interrelated web of factors including the positive influence from their children, their support and encouragement networks, their identified career as well as their own self-efficacy and desire for a better life. These themes and factors have been discussed extensively throughout Chapter 5, 6 and 7. As important as these issues are though, they are no panacea for single parent, first-generation transfer students aspiring for and persisting in college. Contemplating the data and analyzing it from an abstract paradigm, one concept has thus emerged and prevailed which has captured the true essence of these students’ experiences – that conception is *meaning*. Each of the participants in this study had momentous meaning and purpose in their lives for attending college.

As Victor E. Frankl (2006) writes in his epic memoir *Man’s Search for Meaning*, reflecting on his survival from the Nazi death camps, one’s search for

meaning is the primary motivation in life. As humans, we are inspired to find significance in the very act of living. The participants in this study who successfully persisted found meaning in their lives and through their struggles. They believed their future goals would manifest through earning a degree, and this provided meaning and purpose for both them and their children. As Frankl (2006) states, "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*" (p. 76). Therefore, I believe this conviction and purpose in their life is the primary explanation why these students were persisting in college.

One of the main features of human existence is the capacity to rise above such conditions and to grow beyond them. The participants believed that education provided a means to a better life and career, no matter how traumatic their lived experiences, and this certainty motivated and drove them to persevere and achieve educational goals that no one in their family had yet accomplished. Each individual also viewed their education as a means to break through their current socioeconomic level and rise above the expectations that others may have had. They recognized that they were the master of their own fates. They demonstrated and expressed an extremely strong will and resilient spirit despite being confronted by significant odds and challenges. It was the influence and emergence of self-efficacy which positioned itself and fostered their determination to defy the odds and persist through adversity.

## Conclusion

The most fascinating aspect of this research study was the distinctively captivating stories shared by each participant. The depth of participants' experiences provided an intense visit into their lives and world as single parent students who are pioneering through higher education. The grief some have endured through losing parents, the adversity some have overcome through beating illness, the frustration others have experienced through divorce and the complex juggling act of balancing work, school, life and children all represent the multifaceted issues these students collectively face. Despite these setbacks, considerable odds and life challenges, the student participants in this study defeated the odds by persevering through compounding risk factors and identifying education as the means to create a new life, a better future, and a fresh pathway for themselves and their children.

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

<u>Title of Project:</u>	Single Parent, First-Generation College Students who Transfer to a Bachelor's Degree Institution: A Phenomenological Investigation
<u>Principal Investigator:</u>	Kevin Snyder, Doctoral student
<u>Faculty Supervisor:</u>	Dr. Rosa Cintron (Chair) Dr. Tammy Boyd (Co-chair/Advisor)

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

As part of my dissertation to complete my Doctorate in Education, I am conducting a research study on the college experiences of first-generation college students who are also single parents and who have transferred from a community/state college to earn their bachelor's degree. My research objective is to identify findings that will help faculty, staff, and administrators better understand the experiences of these students so they may assist and help them persist in college to earn a bachelor's degree.

By participating you will be contributing to a growing body of literature and research. If you are interested in volunteering to participate in this research study, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Be a first-generation college student. First-generation college students are those students who are the first in their family to attend college. Neither their mother nor father attended college or took any college courses following high school completion.
2. Be a single parent. Single parents are those fathers/mothers who have custody of the child/children and who are not married or living with a spouse.
3. Be a transfer student. Transfer students are those students who earned their associate's degree at a community/state college prior to current enrollment
4. Be currently enrolled in at least 9 credit hours (3 classes) at the host institution.

Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study is to fill a definitive gap in the literature in regards to understanding single parent, first-generation college students who transfer to a bachelor's degree institution and to contribute knowledge and research regarding their college experiences and psychosocial development during college.

Participation: Eight students who meet the selection criteria and agree to participate will be given (either hard-copy or email) a consent form and asked to schedule a face-to-face meeting for one initial interview, ranging from 45 to 75 minutes. This interview session will be audio taped with permission from each participant and immediately transcribed. The format for the interview will contain various open-ended questions which are designed to elicit detailed responses from participants about their background, their educational aspirations, and their academic and social experiences at the college. Before the first interview, participants will verbally consent to be interviewed and also be asked to complete a brief background questionnaire.

Following the first interview and after careful transcript review by the researcher, participants will be asked to briefly meet again and further clarify any information obtained during from first interview. This meeting should last 30-45 minutes and will be scheduled within two weeks from the initial meeting. If the researcher feels that any further clarification is still needed after the second meeting, then the participants will be asked to meet again. This meeting should last 30-45 minutes and will be scheduled within two weeks from the initial meeting. This final meeting will provide another opportunity for the researcher to confirm and clarify interview themes and findings with each participant.

Participant confidentiality will be ensured by employing pseudonyms of research participants, thus minimizing any revealing information. Digital audio recordings and the interview transcripts will be kept in a private, secure location and will be available only to the researcher and dissertation committee members. Participants will be allowed to review their respective transcript verbatim to ensure accuracy and researcher interpretation. Once the research study is complete, the digital audio recordings and transcripts will be destroyed.

IRB Contact Information: Research at the institution involving human participants must be approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research study has been approved by the University IRB. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact:  
Institutional Review Board, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ or via telephone at \_\_\_\_\_.

Researcher Contact Information: If you are interested to participate or if you have questions, please contact me, Kevin Snyder, at \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_. Due to restrictions on the number of participants, it is possible that not everyone who volunteers will be chosen to participate in this research study. Upon your agreement to participate, I will contact you to discuss logistics, confirm eligibility, and to schedule an interview appointment. You can also reach my doctoral program advisor, Dr. Tammy Boyd, at \_\_\_\_\_ (\_\_\_\_\_).

APPENDIX B  
BACKGROUND DATA QUESTIONNAIRE

Code Number \_\_\_\_\_ ( to be completed by researcher)

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Race \_\_\_\_\_ African-American  
\_\_\_\_\_ Caucasian  
\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic  
\_\_\_\_\_ Asian-Pacific Islander  
\_\_\_\_\_ Native-American  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Classification \_\_\_\_\_ Junior  
\_\_\_\_\_ Senior

Are you the first in your family to earn any education beyond high school?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

What was the highest educational attainment of your parents?

Mother \_\_\_\_\_

Father \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a single parent?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ How many children live with you? \_\_\_\_\_

What are the ages of your children? \_\_\_\_\_

What type of parental support do you have in caring for your children?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Have you been married?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are you the sole financial provider for your child/children?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If no, please indicate other financial support you receive for your children:

---

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How much time elapsed between earning your high school diploma and attending college Check one:

Six months or less \_\_\_\_\_  
Between 6 months and 1 year \_\_\_\_\_  
Between 1-2 years \_\_\_\_\_  
More than 2 years \_\_\_\_\_

Did you earn your associates degree prior to your current enrollment?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, from what institution did you transfer from \_\_\_\_\_

Current Enrollment Status (for Fall 2010) – Check one:

12 credit hours or more \_\_\_\_\_  
Between 9 and 12 credit hours \_\_\_\_\_  
Less than 12 credit hours \_\_\_\_\_

Are you employed? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, number of average hours worked per week: \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate the range for your household level of annual income:

\_\_\_\_\_ \$0 - \$9,999  
\_\_\_\_\_ \$10,000 - \$19,999  
\_\_\_\_\_ \$20,000 - \$29,999  
\_\_\_\_\_ \$30,000 - \$44,999  
\_\_\_\_\_ \$45,000 - \$59,999  
\_\_\_\_\_ \$60,000+

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## Interview Protocol

**Introduction to participant:** How are you? Thank you for taking time to talk with me about your background and college experiences. Your time and input is extremely valuable to me and to this research study.

**Explanation of research study to participant:** This research study is focusing exclusively on single parents who are first-generation college students and who have transferred to earn their bachelor's degree. Based on your verbal consent and understanding of the selection criteria, you meet eligibility for this study, correct? Therefore, I will be asking you a series of open-ended questions that will help me understand how being a single parent, transfer, first-generation student has affected your college experiences and persistence in college. This entire interview should last approximately 45-75 minutes. Following this first interview, you will be emailed the transcript and asked to briefly meet again, for 30-45 minutes, to further clarify any information obtained during from the first meeting. If any further clarification is needed after this second meeting, you will be asked to briefly meet again, lasting 30-45 minutes.

**Explanation of interview proceedings to participant:** In order for me to accurately and carefully reflect and analyze our discussion, I will need to audio record this interview so that I may transcribe our dialogue. Do I have your permission to record now?

**Confidentiality:** I will protect your confidentiality and anonymity. I will not use your name in the research report nor will I reveal any information that might indicate your identity. If at anytime during our discussion you feel uncomfortable or have questions, please let me know.

**Do you have any questions before we begin?**

**Excellent, let us begin!**

---

### Pre-College Question

**1) Tell me about when you first remember desiring to attend college.**

(Probing questions below – if needed)

- a. Describe your feelings about college at that time.
- b. How did this belief/feeling about college motivate you?
- c. How did this belief/feeling about college hinder you?
- d. Who influenced your feelings about college?
  - i. How did they encourage you to attend college?
  - ii. How did they discourage you to attend?
- e. How did your family support your desire to attend?

- f. How did your children(child) feel about your desire to attend?
- g. Describe any role models for you who had been successful in college? How did they influence you?

**2) Before you actually enrolled in college, what beliefs did you have about your ability to be successful?**

(Probing questions below – if needed)

- a. Where do you think those thoughts and conviction came from?
- b. What types of concerns did you have about attending college?
- c. Provide an example how your beliefs about your abilities have influenced your behavior and persistence?

**College Experience Questions**

**3) After earning your associates degree, describe your reasoning and feelings to continue toward a bachelor's degree.**

(Probing questions – if needed)

- a. Describe your thought process.
- b. How did you prepare for the transition?
- c. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being most strong and 1 being least strong, describe your confidence level that you would succeed in college.
- d. Describe your beliefs that you would be successful and earn a bachelor's degree.

**4) Being a first-generation, single parent college student who has persisted towards a bachelor's degree, how have your current college experiences differed as compared to when you were earning your associates?**

(Probing questions – if needed)

- a. Describe and compare your adjustment at both institutions.
- b. Describe an example how you have balanced your multiple roles as single parent, student, and other responsibilities?
- c. What types of barriers, anxiety, or stress have you encountered?
- d. How did you cope with that situation and those feelings?
- e. How has having a child (or children) impacted your experiences?

**5) Describe an example of how you have experienced and overcome a significant challenge or obstacle while in college.**

(Probing questions – if needed)

- a. What was it about this situation that motivated and influenced your ability to persist?
- b. Describe your confidence that you knew you would be successful and overcome this challenge.

- c. How did that achievement influence your motivation and beliefs?
- 6) Describe a difficult situation or circumstance when you experienced a significant set-back or obstacle.**  
(Probing questions – if needed)
- a. How did that situation make you feel?
  - b. How did that experience affect/influence your motivation and self-confidence to persist?
  - c. Describe how you dealt with that experience.
  - d. How did that situation influence how you might handle and react to future set-backs?
- 7) What factors do you feel have most significantly impacted your success and persistence in college?**  
(Probing questions – if needed)
- a. What role do you feel your confidence and motivation have played?
  - b. What factors have been the most challenging to deal with?
- 8) Describe your support network and who has influenced you.**  
(Probing questions – if needed)
- a. How have they been supportive?
  - b. Who are some of the people you have observed and identified as positive influences that have helped you be persistent?
  - c. How have they specifically been supportive of you?
  - d. How has/have your child/children influenced you?
  - e. What role has your family played?
  - f. What role have your peers played?
  - g. What role have faculty played?
  - h. What services have been most beneficial to you at the institution?
- 9) Is there anything that you would like to tell me about you or about your college experience that we have not discussed?**  
(Probing questions – if needed)
- a. Is there anything else that has affected or influenced your college experiences?
  - b. Is there anything we have not discussed that you feel has affected the confidence level in your ability to persist and succeed?

**Thank you for taking your valuable time to talk with me and share your insight. Your feedback is extremely important.**

APPENDIX D  
OBSERVATIONAL FIELD NOTES

<b>Personal Observations</b>	<b>Non-verbal</b>	<b>Impressions</b>	<b>Other</b>

APPENDIX E  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Kevin Snyder, Rosa A. Cintron Delgado, Ph.D.**

Date: **August 09, 2010**

Dear Researcher:

On 8/9/2010, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Initial Review  
Project Title: Single Parent, First-Generation College Students who Transfer to a Bachelors Degree Institution: A Phenomenological Investigation  
Investigator: Kevin Snyder  
IRB Number: SBE-10-07047  
Funding Agency: None

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Bielitzki, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Janice Turchin on 08/09/2010 11:41:46 AM EDT

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janice Turchin".

IRB Coordinator

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