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A Study of the Perceptions of First-year
TRIO Student Support Service
Participants

by

Raquel Annette Morrow

July 2015

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
School of Education

A Study of the Perceptions of First-year

TRIO Student Support Service

Participants

by

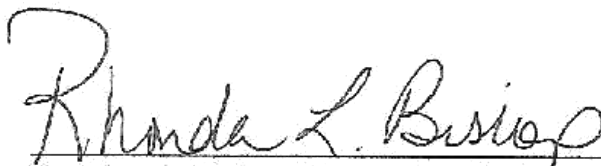
Raquel Annette Morrow

This Dissertation has been approved as partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

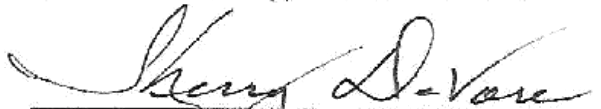
Doctor of Education

Lindenwood University, School of Education



Dr. Rhonda Bishop, Dissertation Chair

7-22-2015
Date



Dr. Sherry DeVore, Committee Member

7-22-2015
Date



Dr. Doug Hayter, Committee Member

7/22/15
Date

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

Full Legal Name: Raquel Annette Morrow

Signature: Raquel Annette Morrow Date: 7-22-15

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“...but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize...”

Philippians 3:13-14

Abstract

This qualitative study was designed to investigate the perceptions of participants in the TRIO Student Support Service (SSS) program, a government-funded student retention program for first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities. There was little research on the perceptions of students who represent the target population in this government-funded program. Tinto's (2012b) model of student departure was used to interpret the findings. The study was guided by three research questions used to investigate possible barriers or benefits to the participants while attending the university, and also asked participants for suggestions to improve the TRIO SSS program. Interviews with first-year TRIO SSS participants at a Midwest university were conducted. The students in this study discussed their experiences; and three themes emerged as issues with which they had to deal: adjustment, integration, and personal growth. These findings mirrored prior research on this target population, all of whom have been found to struggle with academic preparation, study skills, college procedural knowledge, and with wanting to fit into college both socially and academically (Johnson, 2012). The findings in this study are also consistent with the theory of student departure put forth by Tinto (2012b). Program improvement suggestions included, additional social gatherings, increasing the number of advisory meetings, provide a TRIO SSS program-specific orientation meeting, facilitate workshops to address study abroad programs and understanding income taxes. The TRIO SSS program services and staff were perceived by the participants as meeting the participants' needs and should continue the practices already in place.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In order for the United States economy to remain viable in the global marketplace, it is imperative to increase the number of students who earn postsecondary degrees (Engle & Tinto, 2008). With changes to the economy over the past several years, a college degree is considered necessary to compete for employment in our current and more demanding work force (Institute for Higher Education Policy, [IHEP], 2012). A college education is considered particularly essential for a person who would like to secure both social and financial success in life (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Some students view obtaining a college degree as the next step in their quest to becoming upwardly mobile in our society (Stephens et al., 2012).

The demand for a college education has increased substantially in the United States over the past few decades, with the total undergraduate enrollment rising by 73% between 1980 and 2011, with minority enrollment rising by 300% during that same time period (Tucker, 2014). Colleges and universities are being pressured into providing access to a more diverse population of students than ever before in history (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). This increased enrollment indicated higher education was within the grasp of the majority of people in the United States who would like to attend college (Tucker, 2014).

According to Petty (2014), there was also an increase in enrollment of students identified as first-generation college students; low-income, also considered low-socioeconomic status (SES), students from working-class homes living close to the poverty line; and students with disabilities. These subgroups of students were thought to face many challenges that might keep them from obtaining college degrees (Lundy-

Wagner, 2012). While a student's background cannot be altered before he or she enters an institution of higher education, the institution can provide services such as TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO SSS) to help increase a student's chances of earning a college degree (Pell Institute, 2009).

Wiggins (2011) described the TRIO SSS as a program developed to provide these students with support services, having a goal of increasing retention rates and improving graduation rates. In what has been an era of economic downturn around the world, TRIO SSS has assisted students in becoming highly trained and competent members of the work force and has enabled the United States to compete in the global marketplace (Council for Opportunity in Education [COE], 2014). According to Bergerson (2009), for postsecondary institutions to be successful in assisting first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities, they must implement a multifaceted approach in order to bring down the barriers faced by those students.

In this chapter, current research and information concerning TRIO SSS, as well as information concerning first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities, are discussed. The theoretical framework, which acted as a guide for the study, is introduced and explained. An account of the problem and the purpose of the study are also given. The research questions are outlined, and definitions for key terms used in the study are specified. Finally, the limitations and assumptions for this qualitative research study are addressed.

Background of the Study

During the tumultuous 1960s, many things happened to shape the United States into the country it is today, from the assassination of President Kennedy to the increased

awareness of the nation's citizens needing assistance with participating in postsecondary education as a means to improve the condition of their lives (Kenny, 2014). Lyndon B. Johnson, in his first State of the Union address, spoke about alleviating poverty in the United States (Groutt, 2003). The United States was considered one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world, but many of its citizens were suffering with the consequences of poverty (Groutt, 2003).

According to the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) (2014), TRIO programs and services came about because of legislation passed in the 1960s, which provided opportunities for impoverished persons to attend higher education institutions. Johnson (2014) suggested the students who qualified for help from the TRIO services programs faced problems in their efforts to become successful college students due to poor economic status, lack of academic preparation, and/or social problems faced when entering into a culture about which first-generation college students knew nothing. The title TRIO is not an acronym but is the actual name of the program. The TRIO program was the first program of its kind to address the issues of educational access and student retention in higher education (COE, 2014).

Currently, there are approximately 3,000 TRIO programs operating on campuses across the United States, serving approximately 750,000 students in those programs (COE, 2014). The rules set forth by Congress for TRIO programs require the participants be one or more of the following: first-generation college students; low-income students, defined by federal poverty guidelines as having an income of 150% or less of the federal poverty level; or students with disabilities (COE, 2014). With the largest portion of TRIO participants considered first-generation college students, it is important to note the

challenges this population of students faced, especially given that over a third of first-generation college students leave college before earning a degree (Petty, 2014).

According to Woosley and Shepler (2011), first-generation college students were far more likely to depart from college without obtaining a degree than students who are not considered first-generation college students.

Stebbleton and Soria (2012) endorsed the idea the first-generation college student population, many of whom were also considered low-income (Tucker, 2014), faced barriers to completing college. Some of the barriers Stebbleton and Soria (2012) identified included poor academic preparation; lack of participation in social experiences, such as group study sessions; few interactions with the faculty and staff of an institution; and/or not taking advantage of support services or activities outside of the classroom. All of these experiences could improve the chance for academic success (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). In addition, Jenkins, Miyazaki, and Janosik (2009) found a large number of first-generation college students were required to take remedial classes. First-generation college students expressed a lack of confidence in their academic readiness to complete the required course work in a higher education setting when compared to non-first-generation college students (Jenkins et al., 2009).

Students who qualified for TRIO SSS also faced issues related to their ability to integrate into the culture of a postsecondary institution; they often felt socially incompetent in navigating their new settings (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Similarly, Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) found this group of students sometimes did not assimilate into campus culture either because of their underprivileged backgrounds or because of their participation in a support program, which unintentionally acted to

segregate them. The students served by TRIO SSS also tended to originate from working-class homes with reduced financial resources, which required they find employment in order to pay for expenses (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). The low-income students who worked to support themselves had little extra time to fully experience everything a postsecondary institution had to offer and limited time to begin integrating into the campus culture (Stephens et al., 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's (2012b) theory of student departure from college provided the framework that guided the current study. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Tinto (2012a) introduced his theory regarding the issues contributing to students' early departures from college. By doing so, he hoped to provide a model for institutions to utilize in their quest to combat the issue of student attrition (Tinto, 2012a). Tinto (2012a) examined the experiences of college students and the impact of those experiences and found a number of reasons students departed early from college. Tinto's (2012a) theory took many factors into account when reviewing student departure; he considered demographic information, cognitive factors, as well as the social integration of students.

Tinto (2012b) determined if students were unable to negotiate through major adjustment phases successfully, they might choose to depart a higher education institution early. These phases described by Tinto (2012b) included pre-entry attributes; initial intentions, goals, and commitments; institutional experiences; integration into the higher education community, including both academic and social integration; and later goals and commitments. Similarly, Barnett (2011) believed it was a student's integration into college activities, course work, and extracurricular activities that forecasted whether or

not that student persisted through to graduation. Tinto (2012b) asserted outcomes were shaped by the experiences and interactions within all of the phases identified.

Tinto (2012a) also maintained a student's success in school and completion of a college degree was impacted by being given clearly understood and consistent guidelines of what was needed to be successful in a postsecondary institution. Students required information related to degree requirements, policies, and procedures to be able to function in a successful manner (Tinto, 2012a). Furthermore, Tinto (2012a) found a student's decision to stay in college was also determined by social forces, both on and off campus; these included a student feeling he or she had an affiliation with peers as well as a connection with the faculty and staff on campus. Closely related to those findings were the results of a recent study by Swecker, Fifolt, and Searby (2013), who found student interactions with staff and perceptions of successfully integrating into the academic and social aspects of an institution were the elements that led to student retention.

In the target program of interest to this study, information was provided to TRIO SSS participants by TRIO SSS staff members about the guidelines and rules all students on campus were expected to follow (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The TRIO SSS program also provided academic tutoring and intrusive advising on a variety of topics for first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities to prepare the students for the rigors of college courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). These types of support services for students were viewed as vital by Tinto (2012a), as the support services addressed the issues related to academic and social integration issues sometimes faced by students.

Tinto (2012b) offered suggestions for improving student outcomes, making Tinto's theory of student departure a good choice to guide the current study of this Midwest TRIO SSS program, a program which provides supports to address the key areas outlined by Tinto in his seminal work. Overall, the TRIO SSS program can be seen as an academic and social support system, as well as a means of providing extracurricular activities that can lead to a student's improved integration into the college setting (Barnett, 2011). By using Tinto's (2012b) theory of student departure to frame this study, the major factors mentioned in Tinto's work were reviewed to determine if similarities existed between his theoretical ideas and the perceptions of TRIO SSS program participants.

Statement of the Problem

A review of current literature revealed limited scholarly research on the perceptions of current first-year TRIO participants. Most of the recent research on the effectiveness of TRIO program services has been quantitative in nature, focusing on program outcomes by assessing grade point averages, retention rates, and graduation rates (Chaney, 2010; Pell Institute, 2009). Similarly, the research available on the TRIO SSS program spoke to the benefits of the program by demonstrating increased graduation rates and grade point averages of TRIO SSS participants (Chaney, 2010).

Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) reported colleges were under increased pressure to provide access to at-risk and diverse student populations, while still improving student outcomes through increased grade point averages, higher retention rates, and better graduation rates. As such, researchers were constantly assessing the programming provided in an effort to improve these student outcomes (Chaney, 2010). Unfortunately,

by only looking at quantitative data assessing these outcomes, these researchers failed to take into account the perceptions of the individuals who were participating in the programs (Chaney, 2010; Pell Institute, 2009).

The TRIO SSS program offers a variety of services to meet the holistic needs of students served, and many of these services cannot be evaluated easily in quantitative terms. The TRIO SSS staff must measure the performance of the program in relation to the grant objectives in empirical terms; thus, the research method used previously to report progress on the TRIO SSS program was quantitative and not designed to take into account the perceptions of TRIO SSS participants (Chaney, 2010). Providing TRIO SSS program administrators with insight from TRIO SSS participants currently enrolled in the program would be a new avenue of research in the history of the TRIO SSS program.

The TRIO SSS participants' perceptions about the benefits and potential barriers the program services provided could potentially offer administrators a fresh perspective and new information about the program they manage. In addition, TRIO SSS participants offering programming ideas about support services not currently in place might lead to an increase in the program's effectiveness for future participants. Due to the lack of insight into the perceptions of TRIO participants available in the previous research, this study was designed to address this gap in the current research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine which services provided to TRIO SSS participants at a Midwest university were viewed as beneficial and which services acted as barriers to the pursuit of a college degree. A further objective of this study was to add valuable insight into the common factors, both positive and negative, that shaped these

students' experiences. The TRIO SSS program was designed to provide assistance to low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities, as they pursued their dreams of earning college degrees (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012). The assistance TRIO SSS programs provide is typically through provisions such as advising, counseling, tutoring, and remedial instruction in a variety of areas (COE, 2014; Pell Institute, 2009). According to information provided by the COE (2014), most students who participated in a TRIO SSS program saw an increase in their grade point average, and there was an increase in the number of students reported to having passing grades while participating in TRIO SSS programs.

The research questions guiding this study were developed and designed to allow for study of the perceptions of first-year TRIO SSS participants at a Midwest university and to gain valuable knowledge about what participants found to be beneficial components of the program, from specific services to personnel. While the intent was to seek the positive qualities of the program services, there also existed a need to take into account any services or personnel that might act as obstacles to the participants in achieving their educational goals. Since the participants in this study were currently enrolled in the program, they provided acumen into services that could enhance the program in the future.

Research questions. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What aspects of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university were reported by first-year participants as supportive in regard to successful academic achievement?
2. What aspects of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university were reported by first-year participants as prohibitive in regard to successful academic achievement?

3. What supportive aspects of the program did first-year participants of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university report as areas they would like considered for implementation?

Definitions of Key Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms were defined:

Federal TRIO program. The federal TRIO program is a student services program designed to identify students from underprivileged backgrounds and to provide opportunities for academic development, to assist students with basic college requirements, and to help the students persist through college and earn degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b).

First-generation college student. A first-generation college student is defined as a student whose parents never received a bachelor's degree (Stebleton & Soria, 2012).

Low-income individual. A low-income individual is one whose family's taxable income does not exceed 150% of the poverty level amount (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a).

Service. Service is defined as any activity or event designed to amend or improve the cognitive and/or affective traits of a program participant (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Student with a disability. A student with a disability is a person who has a disability which entitles him or her to protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

TRIO Student Support Services (SSS). TRIO SSS is a program providing opportunities and services to assist students in their academic development to ensure they meet college requirements and persist through graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Tutorial services. Tutorial services provide academic instruction and remediation to the TRIO participants which enable the participants to complete their course work (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Limitations and Assumptions

The following limitations were identified in this study:

Data collection. The use of interviewing as a data collection tool is a limitation and can be taxing due to the amount of time and labor it takes to meet with each individual as well as transcribing and coding the data for further analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Instrument. The interview questions were considered a limitation as they were written by the researcher and piloted with students similar to the proposed participants in this study.

Researcher bias. The bias of the researcher may also have an impact on the results obtained in this study. The researcher, in this case, identifies as a first-generation college student. In order to address this bias, the researcher did not share personal information with the participants about her first-generation college background so as not to influence the information shared by the participants (Creswell, 2013).

Sample bias. The study was limited to first-year TRIO SSS participants at one Midwest university, so the total number of participants was limited. Due to the

participants being from one university, the results reflected only their experiences, which might not generalize or be widely applicable to other TRIO SSS programs at other geographic locations (Merriam, 2009).

The following assumptions were accepted:

1. The assumption was made participants offered their responses honestly and without bias.
2. The assumption was made participants understood the interview questions they were asked.

Summary

In this chapter, the information shared indicated how the changing United States economy requires job seekers to move toward careers requiring advanced training and/or a college education in order to compete in the current job market. Also discussed in this chapter was the recognition of the need for economically deprived persons to obtain college training in an effort to eliminate poverty, which is an issue dating back to the 1960s (Groutt, 2003). Although more people are attending college, not all people have been equally equipped to persist in obtaining a college degree (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014); therefore, a review of Tinto's (2012b) work on student attrition was briefly discussed in this section.

A statement of the problem that led to the purpose of this study was presented, along with a description of that purpose and the research questions to be addressed. Definitions of key terms used in this study were then presented, followed by a brief

review of the limitations and assumptions of this study. The next chapter includes an extensive literature review providing background and research findings on Tinto's theory; first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities; TRIO programs; and student retention theories.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of first-year students who participated in the federal TRIO Student Support Service (SSS) program at a Midwest university to determine if they found the services in which they participated to be helpful or to be barriers to their success in college. In this chapter, the theoretical framework will be viewed through the lens of Tinto's (2012b) theory of college student departure and the major phases he suggested in his model. A discussion of the challenges faced by first-generation college students, low-income students and minorities, and students with disabilities when they attempt higher education will also be reviewed in this chapter.

The literature reviewed provides readers with a review of Tinto's theory, the target population served by the TRIO SSS program, the history of the federal TRIO programs, and information on student retention issues. The chapter concludes with research and information on the current state of student retention and attrition in the United States' higher education system. The research contained in this literature review is not exhaustive but will provide a context through which the reader can understand the background of the students participating in the study as well as the programs being reviewed. Because few studies were found related to TRIO participants' perceptions about the programs, this study will fill a gap in the research.

Tinto's Theory

Tinto has been considered one of the fathers in the study of early student departure; he developed a widely used foundational theory of early college student departure which is still used by institutions as a guiding force in policymaking and

programming to deal with student retention and attrition (Tinto, 2012a; Tinto, 2012b). Tinto (2012b) originally developed his model of student attrition in the mid-1970s to explain why students departed from colleges before earning a degree. Tinto's (2012b) theory was based on students who voluntarily withdrew from institutions, not students who were dismissed due to academic or behavioral reasons.

Tinto (2012b) highlighted the interactions, both formal and informal, among students, faculty, and staff of an institution over a period of time and identified the impact these relationships had on student departures. It was Tinto's (2012a) hope, and still is today, to influence policymaking in higher education that will lead to improving retention of college students in general. Tinto (2012b) has continued to revise his model concerning student departure from college, in response to the changing student body and institutional transformations seen today.

Tinto's (2012b) model of student departure was designed to explain and give a framework for the longitudinal process of student departure within a college or university. Tinto (2012b) and Woosley and Shepler (2011), suggested students enter college with pre-existing attributes that affect their goals and commitments to the college or university of. These goals and commitments, in turn, affect the experiences students seek out while in college (Tinto, 2012b). According to Tinto (2012b), the number, types, and quality of those experiences, both academic and social, determine whether students feel integrated into the higher education system. Swecker et al. (2013), reported the depth of integration students feel largely determines their final goals and commitment to successfully complete their degrees.

Tinto (2012b) proposed if students were unable to negotiate through these major phases successfully, they might choose to depart a higher education institution early. For ease in identification, these phases were categorized as follows: pre-entry attributes; initial intentions, goals, and commitments; institutional experiences; integration; and later goals and commitments (Tinto, 2012b). The outcome of whether to remain in college or depart early would be shaped by all the experiences and interactions that occur during these five phases (Tinto, 2012b). Each phase is now explained in greater detail to afford a better understanding of the model used in this study.

Pre-entry attributes. Students attending colleges and universities bring with them a unique set of experiences from their families of origin and the communities from which they came (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Some of the pre-entry attributes which were found to impact students' choices to persist in college included personal attributes such as gender, race, or limited financial resources (Lundy-Wagner, 2012). Family attributes included the education levels of parents and the socioeconomic status of families (Lundy-Wagner, 2012).

The most relevant community attribute found was the size of a student's home community (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 2012b). Furthermore, it was concluded students arrive at college with a variety of educational experiences, with some students having better academic preparation than others (Wright, 2014). Tinto (2012b) posited each of the aforementioned attributes could have an indirect influence on a person's decision to either depart from college early or to continue formulating his or her educational commitment and intent to complete a degree.

Initial intentions, goals, and institutional commitment. The second phase Tinto (2012b) identified included the intentions, goals, and institutional commitments students have when they initially enroll in a higher education institution; these are plans that might change as the student negotiates college. When students enter higher education with their pre-entry attributes, those attributes will lead them to set initial intentions and commitments with regard to their educational futures (Tinto, 2012b). A student may enter college with a specific career goal in mind and will likely choose a specific institution to make a commitment to attain this career goal (Tinto, 2012b).

In his book, Tinto (2012b) cautioned a student might develop a commitment to an institution with either appropriate or inappropriate information. Either way, this information would impact the student's academic expectations and could impact many of the formal interactions he or she experience on campus (Tinto, 2012b). Taking into account a student's goals and commitments, coupled with his or her pre-entry attributes of financial, intellectual, and social capital, sets the stage for how the student will interact socially and academically within a college or university setting (Tinto, 2012b).

Institutional experiences. Students' experiences while attending a college were also considered important when looking at departures of college students (Tinto, 2012b). The interactions a student had with other students and/or the faculty and staff of an institution could influence a student's intention and commitment to an institution and ultimately lead to a student deciding to stay or leave prematurely (O'Keefe, 2013). These institutional experiences transpire formally, such as with academic performance as measured by grades on assignments, and informally, such as with the social interactions that take place student-to-student and faculty-to-student (Tinto, 2012b).

In his work, Tinto (2012b) posited the informal interactions among students, faculty, and staff are vital to students developing both socially and intellectually; these interactions lead to improvements in students' commitments to their goals and ultimately to them attaining degrees (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Oseguera and Byung (2009) also concluded, like Tinto (2012b), that a student's experiences with peers, as well as the faculty and staff of an institution, influences the student's likelihood of persisting through until graduation and the attainment of a college degree.

Integration. Tinto (2012b) found through his research students' academic and social integration into a higher education system was also vital to their persistence to graduate. Students who had positive experiences while in college were more likely to continue with their initial intentions, goals, and commitments (Tinto, 2012b). Students who encountered negative academic and social experiences while in higher education sometimes reformulated their goals and intentions, which sometimes led to their departures from the institution without receiving their degrees (Johannsen, Rump, & Linder, 2013; Tinto, 2012b). In Tinto's (2012b) study, he asserted a student who had little academic, intellectual, or social integration in an institution was more likely to leave the institution early due to this lack of integration.

Later goals and commitments. According to Tinto (2012b), students have initial intentions, goals, and institutional commitments which are impacted by the positive and negative experiences and depth of integration achieved while negotiating the college environment academically and socially. Tinto (2012b) proposed these initial intentions, goals, and commitments become altered, and if based on positive experiences

and strong integration, will lead to an increase in the intention to stay and commit to the institution to realize an educational goal.

Ulriksen, Madsen, and Holmegaard (2010) discovered it is through this interactional process between the students, the experiences they bring with them, and the interactions with the established culture at an institution that lead students to modify their goals and commitments after spending some time at an institution. Others have uncovered similar findings. Oseguera and Byung (2009) concluded with regard to students, their backgrounds, experiences, and even attitudes have an impact on their probability to persist in college. Furthermore, Oseguera and Byung (2009) went on to report that in colleges and universities, the traits of the institutions also had an impact on whether a student decided to stay or depart the institution.

Students Served by TRIO Programs

The focus of this research was to evaluate a TRIO SSS program housed at one Midwest university. The TRIO SSS program, discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, was developed to assist students who were at risk for dropping out of college without earning their desired degrees or training (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The groups targeted by this program include first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). To have used the services, a student had to fall into at least two of these three categories. For that reason, literature on these three groups was reviewed to identify common characteristics and challenges to achieving a postsecondary degree.

First-generation college students. Less than one-third of all students attending college are considered first-generation college students, a percentage which is

significantly lower than for non-first-generation college students (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Other researchers have utilized varied definitions to identify first-generation college students, so depending on the definition used, researchers identified different outcomes for students and the institutions they attended (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the first-generation college student definition is one in which neither parent earned a bachelor's degree (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012).

Tinto (2012b) believed the first year of college can be difficult for all students, but especially for first-generation college students. First-generation college students experience academic, cultural, emotional, and often financial challenges while in college (Dumais, Rizzuto, Cleary, & Dowden, 2013; Housel & Harvey, 2011). Similarly, Woosley and Shepler (2011), in an attempt to understand the challenges first-generation college students faced, examined pre-entry characteristics of first-generation college students, academic issues, and social issues, including how first-generation college students decided to go to college, how their college goals were determined, and how the lack of family support impacted them.

Woosley and Shepler (2011) found all the issues faced by first-generation college students, could create barriers to students accomplishing their goals. Attaining high achievement and also self-development was found to be vital to first-generation college students in the areas of academics, social, and cultural development (Petty, 2014). The following sections will provide the readers with information about common first-generation college student academic issues, time and work constraints, the need to function within two cultures, and the impact of social needs, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and motivation.

Academics. Approximately 94% of ACT-tested, first-generation college students reported they would like to earn a postsecondary degree (ACT, 2013). To meet that goal, roughly two-thirds of the first-generation students evaluated during that study took ACT's recommended core curriculum of four years of English and three years each of math, science, and social studies to prepare for college attendance (ACT, 2013). Despite meeting this goal, first-generation college students tended to have poorer reading, writing, and oral communication skills when compared to students whose parents were college graduates (Housel, 2012; Jehangir, 2010).

In another study, immigrant students were found to make up a large portion of first-generation college students, and they often exhibited weak language skills that hampered their success in the classroom (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). First-generation students' poor academic skills might also have stemmed from attending lower-quality high schools, leaving them poorly prepared for the academic rigor of college (Stephens et al., 2012). This idea of first-generation college students having poorer academic preparation was supported by a report released by ACT in 2013 titled, *The Condition of College & Career Readiness-First Generation Students*, which revealed nearly 52% of all ACT-tested, first-generation students failed to meet the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks for basic college readiness preparation. ACT (2013) reported roughly two-thirds of the ACT-tested, first-generation students took ACT's recommended core curriculum to prepare them for college attendance, the skills learned in the classes they attended were not adequate for student success in college.

Generally, first-generation college students are less prepared and less likely to take more advanced high school courses and fewer humanities courses than their non-

first-generation college student counterparts (Petty, 2014; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). According to Stephens et al. (2012), first-generation college students experience difficulties before and during their college attendance that often led to lower academic performance. Hicks (2006) found the first-generation college students' divergent college expectations, weak academic abilities, poor social skills, and low-income backgrounds were quite formidable educational barriers to overcome.

According to Housel and Harvey (2011), first-generation college students encountered more potential barriers to academic success than non-first-generation college students. Similarly, it was established first-generation college students found the transition to college and persisting on to graduation quite difficult (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). First-generation college students often had additional characteristics that placed them at-risk, characteristics such as poor coping mechanisms, lack of encouragement, and financial insecurities that might not be shared by their non-first-generation counterparts (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Stebleton & Soria, 2012).

First-generation college students tended to have lower retention and graduation rates than other student groups in college (Reid & Moore, 2008; Woosley & Shepler, 2011), with attrition rates significantly higher than for students who had two college-educated parents. In addition, these students tended to have less or insufficient knowledge about the process and preparation needed to apply for and succeed in college (Dumais et al., 2013; The Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2012). Finally, first-generation college students took longer to obtain their college degrees and had lower degree ambitions when compared with non-first-generation college students (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Colleges and universities should strive to provide learning environments

that boost first-generation college student strengths and invite them to develop as successful students (Jehangir et al., 2012).

Time and work constraints. Many college students work while taking classes and first-generation college students often have to work due to commitments they have outside of college (Petty, 2014). Pike, Kuh, and Massa-McKinley (2008), reported part-time student employment can have a positive impact on students' grades, but as a student approaches full-time employment, grades might actually decline. According to Petty (2014), many first-generation college students may spend more time at work than on their studies in an effort to relieve the financial burden of tuition.

Gardner and Holley (2011) posited a lack of temporal capital and/or time to devote to studies sets first-generation college students apart from continuing-generation students in college. Due to the demands of work and family, these students tend to be less involved in the learning process than non-first-generation students (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). In addition, due to their busy schedules with work and school commitments, first-generation college students often do not have the opportunity to participate in activities that would enhance their learning, activities such as seminars or studying abroad (Jehangir, 2010; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Tinto, 2012b).

The activities mentioned could help promote social engagement and a sense of belonging; without this type of engagement, first-generation college students face additional challenges in trying to connect with their peers and other students on campus (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Some of the effects of working could be countered. Tinto (2012b) found students who were able to work part-time jobs on campus through the work study program were able to recoup the commute time they would have spent going

to an off-campus job and could use this time to attend classes, complete homework, and interact with people on campus. Unfortunately, first-generation college students are less likely to live on campus and have more work hours off campus; they are also less engaged with faculty and report being less satisfied with campus life, in general (Petty, 2014).

Straddling two cultures. The difficulties first-generation college students face with regard to social and cultural integration into a college setting is also an area of concern (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). According to Housel and Harvey (2011), first-generation college students experience difficulty integrating the two different cultures of college life and their family backgrounds. Jenkins et al. (2009) asserted first-generation college students interact with less-educated family members while at home and with mainly college-educated individuals while at school, which leads to a cultural mismatch in their interactions in both settings. Each entity has its own set of values and social rules with which students have to contend (Housel & Harvey, 2011). According to Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011), first-generation college students are at odds with family expectations, making their transition to college difficult.

The work of trying to balance two cultures could overcome first-generation college students, as they try to meet all of the demands placed upon them while navigating college life (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). While trying to traverse the two cultures, first-generation college students also struggle with social integration into postsecondary institutions (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). This can be quite difficult for some of these students (Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

According to Housel (2012), first-generation college students have to operate in both the culture of their home of origin and in the college culture in their quest for a post-secondary education, while still trying to maintain their cultural identity (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Housel (2012) discovered first-generation college students often came from a working-class home culture and enters into middle- to upper-class academic culture. In addition, Stephens et al. (2012) pointed out the culture of a university is that of educated people who emphasize independence, while the working class culture emphasize interdependence. Higher education settings share common values, norms, and behavioral expectations for all students to follow as a way of establishing a common culture (Jenkins et al., 2009).

Along that same line, Housel and Harvey (2011) viewed cultural capital as knowledge of how a college operates, skills to navigate college, and adequate educational preparation, all of which make succeeding in college seem possible, yet many first-generation college students do not possess cultural capital. Furthermore, they lack the social capital needed to be successful in college due to the lack of exposure to things such as the cultural arts (Housel & Harvey, 2011). Gardner and Holley (2011) report first-generation college students exist in a shadowy space between the two cultures; they do not fully fit in either culture completely once they begin college.

First-generation college students lack the social skills of knowing how to debate, how to set appropriate boundaries with professors, and how to understand what behavior is appropriate in a college setting (Cushman, 2007). First-generation college students also lack social networks of people who could help them navigate in their new environment (Cushman, 2007). It was suggested this issue is due to less parental

involvement in the students' education and coming from families who might not emphasize education to their children; if the families of first-generation college students were non-supportive, it would act as a barrier to college success (Housel & Harvey, 2011; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011).

Cushman (2007) reported first-generation college students sometimes felt they were outsiders who were excluded from the club of insiders. In Korsmo's (2014) study of over 200 first-generation college students, about 60% of students from low-socioeconomic status families reported they feel as if they do not fit in with other students on campus. According to Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011), first-generation college students fear talking out in class because they were not sure the information they share would make sense to their peers.

Students' inability to fit into or match the culture of their school could prohibit them from having positive relationships, which in turn could influence their perceptions of the school setting (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Stephens et al., 2012). Korsmo (2014) noted the tendency for a first-generation college student to sense being an outsider in college which could lower the student's self-esteem and overall satisfaction with the college experience. First-generation college students who internalized the feeling of not belonging experience the emotions of failure, guilt, or even anger (Gardner & Holley, 2011). According to Petty (2014), the need to belong is a critical piece in engaging and motivating these first-generation college students to succeed in a college setting.

Several researchers found first-generation students were aware that non-first-generation college students differed in the ways they spoke, dressed, and spent leisure time, which left some first-generation college students feeling marginalized socially,

ethnically, and emotionally in a campus setting (Housel & Harvey, 2011). Indeed, Korsmo (2014) discovered first-generation college students struggle to understand the way their peers communicate and behave in college. The constant internal struggle to fit in can lead first-generation college students to feel isolated on campus (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). According to Housel and Harvey (2011), first-generation college students feared being discovered by the other students if first-generation students said something incorrectly or if someone picked up on the fact they were mimicking the behaviors or mannerisms of others.

Social needs, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and motivation. Besides the areas of academic preparation and work and time constraints, first-generation college students experience issues with feelings of belonging, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (IHEP, 2012; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). People have basic needs that need to be met, according to Maslow (1954) in his theory of the hierarchy of needs, which is widely used in research today when looking at motivation. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is designed in the shape of a pyramid and contains five stages (Petty, 2014). According to Maslow (1954), the needs at the base of the pyramid must first be met before moving up to levels beyond the basic needs. First in the pyramid is the basic physiological need for food and air, which is followed by the need for safety (Maslow, 1954).

Maslow (1954) proposed an individual would have the social need to be included, to be beloved, and to belong to a group. The next higher need involve esteem needs of self-respect and recognition (Maslow, 1954). These earlier needs must be met before an individual would be capable of reaching the point of self-actualization, the top level, and experience his or her full potential (Maslow, 1954). In evaluating first-generation college

students, Petty (2014) found needs for social acceptance, self-esteem, and self-actualization can act as obstacles to success in college if the student has not been able to meet the more basic needs. People will behave in a way that will allow them to meet their need for acceptance, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Petty, 2014).

Addressing the third level of the hierarchy, Petty (2014) reported people in general have a need to belong, to feel included in a group, and to gain social acceptance. Yet some students do not feel supported or understood and accepted by their parents with regards to their desire for a college degree (Gardner & Holley, 2011). The need to belong and feel supported for first-generation college students can be provided for in activities promoted by the college, allowing first-generation college students to feel included and involved in the higher education culture, increasing their feelings of social integration, and leading to them enjoying their college experience (Petty, 2014).

In the fourth level of the hierarchy, people need to feel respect from others and respect for others while experiencing a sense of self-confidence (Maslow, 1954). Hicks (2006) discovered first-generation college students tended to suffer from low self-esteem and identified it as a barrier to excelling academically. A high level of self-esteem has been shown to lead to an increase in self-confidence, worth, as well as a feeling of being capable, adequate, and useful in the world (Hicks, 2006). Encouragement from family as well as college faculty and staff can foster increased self-esteem in first-generation college students (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

In addition to their social needs and self-esteem, first-generation college students need to feel a sense of self-efficacy to be successful; self-efficacy is people's judgment of

their abilities to perform tasks and motivate themselves to achieve goals (Moriarty, 2014). According to Gardner and Holley (2011), feelings of self-efficacy provide first-generation college students with a sense of success in formal education as well as promotes the idea of continuing to learn throughout their lives. Furthermore, Blackwell and Pinder (2014) discovered self-efficacy is based more on a person's belief about what he or she could accomplish, rather than what might actually be true for that individual.

According to Moriarty (2014), when students had negative perceptions of their ability to achieve a goal, they were unlikely to put forth the effort necessary to be successful, even if they actually had the ability to be successful. A belief in one's own capability to succeed drives motivation in an individual, and first-generation college students need self-motivation, with confidence in them, so they can succeed in college (Dumais et al., 2013). External factors that affect a person's motivation to succeed can include influences from parents and other individuals with whom the student associates regularly (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Positive support and reassurance from family members of first-generation college students can have an impact on self-efficacy and motivation (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014).

Blackwell and Pinder (2014) postulated the way in which people behave can be predicted and linked to their belief they can accomplish a goal. Students with high expectations of themselves may improve their performance and be more willing to persevere to accomplish a goal such as graduating from college (Petty, 2014). According to Moriarty's (2014) review of Bandura's work, self-efficacy would be a good predictor of a student's performance on future tasks. First-generation college students may enter college with perceived obstacles to their success based on past negative school

experiences (Jehangir, 2010; Stebleton & Soria, 2012), and some may realize they need remedial assistance to address their deficits due to these past negative educational experiences (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) found, however, many first-generation college students resist assistance from programs aimed to help them and/or remediate deficits because they feel the need to be self-sufficient.

Students who have parents who completed college tend to have higher confidence in their ability to succeed in college (Stephens et al., 2012), which is an experience first-generation college students do not have to draw upon to bolster their confidence. Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) recognized first-generation college students' parents may have limited skills in helping their children make important college decisions; however, they are able to encourage their children and show they understand the value of earning a college degree. Bringing first-generation college student families to campus can be beneficial; although it is likely some families would not attend because of feeling intimidated and not being sure they would fit in at these types of events (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011).

Low-income students. According to Blackwell and Pinder (2014), the road to a college education is not equal for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and for minorities, who tend to face obstacles first-generation college students might not face. In one study, Korsmo (2014) found a lack of parental support for low-income students. Specifically, Korsmo (2014) reported only 17% of low-incomes students thought their families valued them getting a degree, whereas 50% of middle-income students thought their families placed a high value on them attaining a degree. Approximately 35% of the low-income first-generation college students in Korsmo's (2014) study reported being

satisfied with the amount of non-monetary support they received from their parents to pursue higher education, whereas only 20% of middle-income students reported these same feelings.

In a recent study, Karimshah et al. (2013) found approximately half of students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, experience the following types of stressors: financial problems, health problems, family issues, and relationship issues. However, they also found low-income students experienced a higher percentage of issues related to financial problems, which may lead low-income students to depart from college early (Breier, 2010). When experiencing multiple stressors, low-SES students were impacted in a way that affected their studies to a moderate degree (Karimshah et al., 2013).

Another important issue that mimicked first-generation college students was Bernhardt's (2013) finding that a significant number of low-income students were not taking rigorous enough academic courses to prepare them for college. Yet, research has shown enrollment in challenging high school course work improves the chances a student will attend and succeed in college (Kelley-Kemple, Proger, & Roderick, 2011). Engberg and Allen (2011) suggested improving a low-income student's academic performance is perhaps the best way to improve a student's opportunities for a postsecondary education.

In addition to problems with appropriate course work, students from low-income families often possessed a different style of communication that might not match the formal communication style employed in higher education, which could lead to issues with professors (Housel & Harvey, 2011; Stephens et al., 2012). As such, first-generation college students from working class or low-socioeconomic families might

question professors in a manner that seems confrontational to the professor—due to using working-class communication styles (Housel & Harvey, 2011).

There is also a high probability low-income students and low-income, first-generation college students attended high schools that did not adequately provide supports and information to help students navigate the college enrollment process or even manage an appropriate college search for these students (Roderick et al., 2009). There is evidence that low-income students and first-generation college students focus their search just a few colleges due to a lack of knowledge about the college selection process (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Most of these students worry about how to pay for college, and students who take out loans to pay for college worry they may not find a job after graduation or make enough money to pay back their student loans even if they do find a job (Johnson, 2012).

Overall, several researchers noted low-income and first-generation college students who wanted to attend college and attain a degree often had not been adequately educated on the college application process and did not fully understand how to apply for federal financial aid funds (Roderick et al., 2009). Being successful at completing their college and financial aid applications were areas with which low-income and low-income first-generation college students struggled (Roderick et al., 2009). Access to financial aid resources was identified as vital for low-income and low-income, first-generation college students to succeed in school and to offset their financial stress (Gardner & Holley, 2011). According to Joo, Durband, and Grable (2009), financial stress poses a threat to a student's academic achievement and could result in lower academic performance. Low-income first-generation college students generally operate without an economic "safety

net” to help protect them when a hardship, such as losing their job, occurs (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 1181). The failure to complete the application process, inability to obtain financial aid, and poor academic preparation were found to be three substantial barriers to college success for low-income students (Bernard, 2011).

Students with disabilities. Students with disabilities, which affect their mobility and/or ability to learn, also attend college and have their own unique challenges and abilities that must be considered and planned for in a higher education setting. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2011), about 10% of the world population age 15 years and up suffer from some type of a disability, and Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes (2012) theorized as many as one in 10 college students may be one of those individuals. In recent reports, the enrollment of full-time, first-time college freshmen with disabilities was approximately 11% of students attending college (Raue & Lewis, 2011).

Students with disabilities have rights to access educational programs and are protected by federal laws. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) is the governing law for students attending post-secondary education (Kelepouris, 2014). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the governing law enacted for students who attend elementary and secondary schools (Kelepouris, 2014).

The IDEA (2004) stipulates students with disabilities are entitled to a free education and all supplementary aides and services the students would require in meeting their unique needs. The IDEA (2004) also specifies elementary and secondary schools must identify students in need of special assistance and provide them with appropriate evaluations and written individualized plans of instruction. The IDEA (2004) requires

elementary and secondary schools provide a great deal of support for students with disabilities.

The implication accommodations are needed to help students succeed also suggests there must be barriers which a disabled student needs assistance in overcoming (Mole, 2012). The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires both public and private institutions provide disabled individuals not only with physical access to the institutional structure, but also access to curriculum and necessary information and equipment to support the student with a disability in a classroom setting. According to Mole (2012), most accommodations for disabled students are launched in retrospection instead of in a proactive manner.

Because extensive supports and services are available to students at the elementary and secondary levels, students with disabilities may have difficulty transitioning to the more limited services provided in higher education. According to Kelepouris (2014), students with disabilities come to rely upon the extensive types of support and watchfulness they receive while attending elementary and/or secondary schools in a public education setting. So, although higher education institutions must guarantee a disabled student will not be discriminated against on the campus or within the classroom, these institutions do not have to provide services and supports to the extent found in secondary education (Kelepouris, 2014).

Higher education institutions following Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) guidelines are not required to identify students with disabilities; rather, students with disabilities must identify themselves and provide appropriate documentation evidencing any disability. Only then will the students be deemed eligible for support

services and accommodations in higher education (Mole, 2012). Proving the existence of a disability in higher education is typically harder to accomplish than in a secondary education setting (Kelepouris, 2014).

In a study conducted by Wray (2013), some of the common problems students with disabilities experience while in college were examined. In higher education, students with disabilities often experience difficulty keeping up with the teacher or get distracted by things going on in the classroom (Wray, 2013). When being assessed or tested, many students with disabilities were found to have problems completing assessments in the classroom due to time constraints or distractions (Mole, 2012). If a student has an approved accommodation plan, he or she may be given the opportunity to take an assessment in another location, perhaps with accommodations, such as appropriate technology or extended time, so the assessment can be provided without disturbing the educational process for other students (Mole, 2012).

Students who are disabled and who are also first-generation college students are at risk for suffering difficulties in adapting to college and completing degrees due to issues with their disabilities and their status of being first-generation college students (Lombardi et al., 2012). They may also come from a low-income family, which may present an additional barrier for first-generation college students who are also disabled (Joo et al., 2009). As such, there may be many differences in the support services that are needed and provided for disabled students as they try to make it to the completion of their degrees (Lombardi et al., 2012).

TRIO Programs

History of TRIO programs. The Federal TRIO program came about in part from work done during President Lyndon Baines Johnson's tenure as President of the United States. Johnson wanted to combat disparities he saw in education, and he called the nation and Congress to action in his 1964 State of the Union speech before Congress (Groutt, 2003). Through his use of government programs creating a pathway to higher education, he hoped to alleviate the suffering poverty caused and also to help prevent poverty from occurring (Kenny, 2014). The speech given to Congress by President Johnson would act as a catalyst for many programs and began what was considered a war to help impoverished people that Kenny (2014) posited is still being fought to this day. Jean (2011) contended education is the only organized and methodical system people can use as a ladder to climb out of poverty.

President Johnson's war on poverty actually began when he signed into effect the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) (1964), which brought about reform in higher education and led to the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to help the impoverished and minorities have access to a college education. The OEO was created to oversee the experimental programs developed to help minority students and low-income students achieve college degrees (Groutt, 2003). The provisions of the EOA (1964) created opportunities, such as job corps, that focused on education, training, work experiences, and conservation of natural resources for youth in rural and urban areas.

The EOA (1964) work-training programs focused on unemployed youth to increase their employability skills or education skills through work-training programs. In addition, the EOA (1964) provided work-study programs that would give funding to

colleges and universities to hire part-time student employees from low-income families to aid them in financing their educational goals at a higher education institution.

The Higher Education Act (HEA) (1965), signed into place by President Johnson, was designed to give access to higher education institutions for people who were underrepresented either socially, economically, or both, by providing funding for education to this group of students (Johnson, 2014). Groutt (2003) posited the HEA was the most inclusive and far-reaching act ever passed with regard to higher education. The major provisions of this act were designed to make the country stronger by helping people find solutions to problems related to housing, poverty, and employment (Johnson, 2014). The HEA was reauthorized recently to continue the work of federal TRIO programs by providing funding and guidance for the current programs in accordance with the original HEA of 1965 (Chaney, 2010).

Specific TRIO programs. Students who would like to participate in the federal TRIO program must meet eligibility criteria and guidelines set forth by the federal government (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Access to the TRIO program comes under the oversight of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education (2008), and requires strict adherence to the regulations for TRIO programs to maintain funding.

Upward Bound. Under the EOA (1964), the Upward Bound program, the first of the TRIO programs, began as a pilot project to enable and prepare low-income students to attend college and therefore accomplish the provisions of the EOA. The guidelines for participation in the federal TRIO Upward Bound program are rigorous and specific, stating student participants must have completed the eighth grade, be between the ages of

13-19, and must show a need for academic support that would enable them to pursue a college education (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The program guidelines set forth by the U.S. Department of Education (2008) require two-thirds of the participants are both low-income and also first-generation students, meaning neither parent has obtained a bachelor's degree.

The first Upward Bound program consisted of 17 programs for 2,061 participants, of which approximately 1,500 were recent high school graduates (McCants, 2003). The Upward Bound program is the oldest TRIO program and provides services throughout the year for the participants who meet eligibility criteria (Bergerson, 2009). According to McCants (2003), the first Upward Bound session occurred in the summer of 1965, where groups of disadvantaged youths attended programs on college campuses around the United States and received academic tutoring while also participating in activities to provide them with cultural enrichment. Of the participants who attended the very first Upward Bound sessions, 80% were admitted to college in the fall of 1965, and of those who entered college, 69% of the freshman remained and graduated from college, which was deemed a success for the inaugural Upward Bound session (McCants, 2003).

The Upward Bound program currently supports students as they prepare to enter college by providing high school students from low-income families, where neither parents holds a bachelor's degree, with instruction in reading, writing, study skills, and other subjects necessary for success in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). In addition, the TRIO program also encourages students to participate in academic counseling, experience cultural events, receives tutoring services, be given information about postsecondary education, and be given assistance in completing applications for

college admittance, financial aid, and work-study positions (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). TRIO programs, including the Upward Bound program, are required at this time to provide financial literacy education as a service to participants (Yang & Kezar, 2009). TRIO programs provide participants and their families support in choosing appropriate institutions for students to attend (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Talent Search. According to Groutt (2003), the Talent Search was created as a marketing tool to disseminate information about the accessibility of funds to states and qualifying individuals. The Talent Search is the largest program in number of students serviced of all of the federal TRIO programs (Chaney, 2010). The Talent Search program is a higher education access program serving impoverished students from middle school through high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The program first identifies students in adolescence that has the potential of succeeding in a college or university setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The Talent Search program provides students with financial counseling to support them in their quest to graduate from high school and continue on to college (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

The goal of the Talent Search program is to increase the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who obtain their high school diplomas and to serve as an escort to those students when enrolling in higher education institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The Talent Search program provides many of the same types of services as the Upward Bound program, but the Talent Search program provides services for students at a much younger age than does the Upward Bound program (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The Talent Search places an emphasis on influencing students' self-efficacy through program offerings and services (Bergerson, 2009).

The eligibility criterion for the Talent Search requires the students be between the ages of 11 and 27 and having completed the fifth grade. At least two-thirds of the participants must be low-income and first-generation college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). If for some reason an Education Opportunity Center is not available in a target area, a person older than the set age range may be served, and veterans, regardless of age, are always allowed to participate if they meet the other eligibility criteria (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Success has been documented for students who participated in the program in the area of applying for financial assistance and enrolling in a college or university (U.S. Department of Education, 2009)

Student Support Services. Amendments to the HEA of 1965 were passed which transferred the governance of the Upward Bound program to the Department of Education, where it joined Talent Search and the latest program to help impoverished and minority youth—a program called Special Services for Disadvantaged Students (SSDS), now named Student Support Services (SSS) (Groutt, 2003). The intent of the HEA (1965) was to offer remedial and special services for students who demonstrated potential in the area of academics. Students considered educationally deprived, from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, or handicapped would benefit from the services offered by institutions, and grant money would be dispersed to these higher education institutions (HEA, 1965). The objective of these programs was to increase college retention and improve graduation rates of students participating in the program and help them transition from undergraduate to graduate level in higher education (Kenny, 2014).

According to Groutt (2003), with the addition of SSDS to the Talent Search and Upward Bound programs already in place, the first TRIO program to help the

disadvantaged gain entrance into college was born. Groutt (2003) posited the student population of disadvantaged and at-risk students obtaining admission to colleges and universities was growing at a brisk pace in the late 1960s, and due to their lack of preparation, they needed a program like TRIO to bridge the gap to higher education admission and help them persist to earn college degrees.

The TRIO SSS is the second largest program under the Federal TRIO program umbrella, trailing just behind the Talent Search in number of students served (Chaney, 2010). Under the TRIO SSS program, students are provided with tutoring and remedial instruction to aid students in developing appropriate academic skills and counseling services to deal with mental health issues that might hamper progress in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Students are mandated to meet with an academic advisor who employs an intrusive advising strategy developed to alleviate student issues triggering early departures, academic difficulties, and/or social maladjustment problems (Schwebel, Walburn, Klyce, & Jerrolds, 2012). All this is done while encouraging students to build a relationship with the advisor in an effort to reduce student attrition due to poor grades or not adjusting socially to college life (Schwebel et al., 2012).

The TRIO SSS program also helps students with completing the necessary college and financial applications by giving career planning information and by providing a mentor to guide them in their pursuit of a college degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), for students to receive assistance under SSS, they must meet two out of the three criteria of being a low-income student, a first-generation college student, or a student with a documented disability in need of the support services of TRIO SSS to realize their goal of completing a college

degree. Of the students who qualify for TRIO SSS assistance, two-thirds must be either disabled or first-generation college students from low-income families, and one-third of the participating students with a disability must also meet the guidelines to be considered low-income as well (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Students participating in the TRIO SSS program must also meet the federal qualifications to participate in the program of being in their first two years of college and of receiving federal Pell grant funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Students who participate in TRIO SSS programs are generally given leeway in participating in as many parts of the program or services as they would like, as long as they meet the eligibility criteria and the services are offered at their institution (Chaney, 2010).

According to a U.S. Department of Education (2009) report, the effects of the TRIO SSS program on student outcomes increase with the level of the students' participation in activities provided by the program.

Veterans Upward Bound. After the Vietnam War, with thousands of combat veterans returning to the United States, the legislators of the day were concerned with veterans' adjustment and acclimation back into civilian life (Groutt, 2003). Therefore, Congress set aside funds to develop the Veterans Upward Bound (VUB) for returning Vietnam veterans who wanted to attend college, and this program continues today (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The VUB program provides basic academic skills training for participants, as well as short-term refresher courses for veterans who hold a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). It also provides assistance in navigating services from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, state agencies, veterans associations, and other agencies (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Veterans wanting to participate in VUB programs must meet the eligibility criteria for military service requirements and be low-income and first-generation college students who are planning to attend a qualifying college or university (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Like the other TRIO programs' eligibility criteria, VUB requires at least two-thirds of the participants are both low-income and first-generation college students, with the other one-third of the participating considered either low-income or first-generation college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). To date, the United States has service members returning from war and transitioning back into civilian life, and the VUB is still available to help these soldiers in their quest to obtain a college education.

Educational Opportunity Center. Under the Education Amendments of 1972, a fifth program was initiated and added to the Federal TRIO program portfolio, a program known as Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC) (Groutt, 2003). The creation of EOCs was to provide services to all persons, regardless of age, who were interested in obtaining a college degree and lived in targeted high-poverty areas of the United States (Groutt, 2003). The EOC is charged with increasing the number of participants who enroll in a college or university (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

The EOC, like the other programs, provides an array of support services for participants (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), EOCs are housed in both public and private colleges and universities and occasionally reside in secondary schools. Students who qualify to participate in EOC activities must meet the federal guidelines of being residents of a target area, being at least 19 years of age, and as with all TRIO programs, two-thirds of the participants must

be low-income and a potential first-generation college student (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). If services generally provided under the Talent Search portion of TRIO are not available in an area, a person younger than 19 may be served as well as a veteran, regardless of age, who is otherwise deemed as eligible, according to the criteria set forth by the Department of Education (2008).

Ronald E. McNair program. The Higher Education Amendments of 1986 established the Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, currently known as the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program (MCN), which is also serviced under the federal TRIO program umbrella (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The McNair program was named after Dr. Ronald E. McNair, an astronaut who was killed in the space shuttle Challenger incident (Gallardo, 2009). The Robert E. McNair program exists today in a variety of colleges and universities across the country, from small institutions to large research facilities (Gallardo, 2009).

The purpose of the MCN program is to prepare disadvantaged students for doctoral studies through immersing these students in research and scholarly activities to build their understanding of scholarly work (Gallardo, 2009). The MCN provides enrichment activities for participants and activities, such as research opportunities, that allow them a glimpse as to what graduate school will look like (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Opportunities to develop a relationship with an advisor are also provided, along with on-the-job training via an internship experience in a field they are interested in investigating (Gallardo, 2009). The MCN also provides education and guidance for students as they apply for financial aid and admission to graduate programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

The MCN provides workshops and educational seminars to students on a variety of topics related to attending graduate school, with the goal of clarifying the culture and expectations of graduate school (Gallardo, 2009). The participants must meet the federal eligibility criteria of low-income, first-generation college students, or be from an underrepresented group in graduate education to qualify for this program (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). According to Gallardo (2009), the MCN program is vitally important to increase the intellectual capital of the United States and to increase individuals' human capital and their socioeconomic status across their lifetimes.

Upward Bound Math and Science. The Upward Bound Math and Science (UBMS) program was born out of necessity in the late 1980s, because minority students in higher education were not attaining as many credits in the areas of advanced math and science when compared to their white counterparts (Chaney, 2010). To alleviate the discrepancy in math and science credits between white students and minorities, the UBMS program was intended to fortify the math and science skills of individual participants, to help them recognize their aptitude in these fields, and to inspire them to pursue a college education (Chaney, 2010). The UBMS program offers intensive summer training programs, counseling, computer training, and the opportunity to conduct scientific research under the watchful eye of a mentor (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The eligibility requirements of being a low-income student, a potential first-generation college student, and/or a student with a disability are also applicable for students who want to participate in UBMS (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Current status of TRIO programs. President Obama proposed an increase in college access and affordability of college tuition (Gardner & Field, 2014). Improvement

in the quality of postsecondary education learning opportunities for low-income American citizens was also stressed by President Obama (Gardner & Field, 2014). The United States once led the world in the field of college education, which helped the nation compete in the global marketplace (Miller & Slocombe, 2012). According to Jean (2011), the current administration and Congress want to continue to pave the way for students to attend higher education institutions, with the goal of the United States reclaiming the top spot for higher education degree attainment by the year 2020.

Bergerson (2009) posited even though higher education enrollment is up in recent years, the stratification of minorities and poor students continues to afflict postsecondary education. Due to the low turnout of these marginalized groups, policymakers are continuing their efforts to provide federal programs to assist students with their quest to earn college degrees (Bergerson, 2009). According to Field (2013), funding for the federal TRIO programs increased from \$150 million dollars to \$900 million range in recent years. This indicates a strong investment in the program by policymakers. Colleges and universities in the United States will need to improve their efforts to graduate more students with degrees, or the United States faces the real possibility of falling even farther behind for college degree completion when compared to other countries.

Student Retention

The issue of student retention, or reducing student attrition, is a complex and growing issue faced by colleges and universities across the country. According to the NCES (2014b), the retention rate is based upon a student's continuous reenrollment from one fall semester to the subsequent fall semester. Retaining students is critical to colleges

and universities as they look to increase, or at least maintain revenue and increase graduation rates.

Researchers have found students of all types are at the greatest risk for dropping out of college during their first year (Tinto, 2012b; Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011). The United States attrition rate of part-time, first-generation college students was found to be a staggering 50% of all students who began the school year (Schneider, 2010), so the risk of dropping out during the first year is especially true for first-generation college students (Swecker et al., 2013; Tinto, 2012b). Indeed, federal and state governments disseminated almost \$2 billion in grants to students who did not continue their education past their first year of college attendance (Schneider, 2010).

In a report completed by Snyder and Dillow (2013) regarding 2011 degree conferral rates from four-year higher education institutions, the conferral rates for all students varied greatly by gender and nationality. Snyder and Dillow (2013) reported in the 2011 academic year, women accounted for about 56% of the population receiving degrees, while men accounted for a lesser 43% of the degrees. In a report released by the NCES (2012) concerning the 2010 graduation rates for students earning a bachelor's degree, white students accounted for 72% of college graduates, while African Americans represented about 10% of college graduates; Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans followed with lower graduation rates.

The reasons behind student departures have been linked to personal factors, poor academic preparation, problems with the social and academic structure of colleges, poor integration with the college environment, and an overall lack of commitment that stemmed from any one of those reasons (Tinto, 2012b; Willcoxson et al., 2011). In

addition, others have found departure from a postsecondary institution before attaining a degree can be triggered by issues related to the family, by the problems associated with a low-SES background, or emotional problems or mental illness that interfere with all aspects of adjusting to college (Museus & Ravello, 2010; Schneider, 2010).

When looking into early student departure or attrition, it is important to consider admissions policies and procedures, attributes, and statistics for both public and private institutions (Tinto, 2012b). Public and private admissions requirements vary dramatically from institution to institution—from highly selective to open admission. This can have an impact on the quality and type of student each institution attracts and will therefore impact the number of students they enroll who actually have the ability to obtain a degree. Furthermore, Tinto (2012b) posited the fact high-admissions-selectivity institutions had varying rates of retention implied the institutions' actions and interactions with students had a greater influence on students persisting to graduation than the admissions process itself.

Wright (2014) identified one factor in the recruiting process may be contributing to this problem. Wright (2014) posited in an effort to increase enrollment and revenue, postsecondary institutions might be recruiting a diverse group of students less likely to be successful in college and students who would be at-risk for leaving the institutions before earning a degree. Furthermore, the diverse group of college students entering institutions today may not have the necessary academic or social preparation to be successful in a postsecondary institution (Stephens et al., 2012). Because of this, a portion of the current population of college students are taking longer to graduate from college, on average, with some students taking six years, or even longer, to complete a bachelor's degree

(IHEP, 2012). Taking a longer amount of time to graduate with a degree is especially true for first-generation college students, who are less likely to earn a college degree after six years than non-first-generation college students (Lundy-Wagner, 2012).

Thomas (2013) identified proactive strategies that can be put into place before a student enters a postsecondary institution to help alleviate the problem of attrition. These strategies included procedures such as providing information to students about college requirements and institutional expectations so students have the knowledge and skills needed to make better college decisions (Thomas, 2013). Students can be helped to receive the appropriate academic preparation before they begin college courses (Thomas, 2013). If these problems are not addressed, students' ill-informed choices about which colleges to attend or which courses to take could have a negative impact on them developing relationships with and committing to the institutions and their programs of study (Thomas, 2013; Tinto, 2012b).

For many first-generation college students, it is a constant struggle to balance work and earning a living while attending college (Stephens et al., 2012). Many first-generation college students have noted they cannot financially afford the cost of full-time enrollment in college without working to support themselves (Stephens et al., 2012). The combination of attending college and holding down a job has been found to lead to lower levels of engagement for students; this can lead to a lowered perception of the value of a college education. With that lowered perception, students may decide to depart from the institution earlier than planned (Tinto, 2012b). Financial issues are seen as a part of the larger issues for first-generation college students, but are not the only reason students leave an institution early (Fitzpatrick, Henninger, & Taylor, 2014).

Another growing issue concerns students suffering from mental health issues; they are making up a larger number of the student population attending colleges today, and they are at an increased risk for leaving college early (Daddona, 2011). In a national survey of college counseling center professionals by done by Gallagher (2012), counselors reported a significant increase in the number of students they see in their offices who are considered to have severe psychological problems. In addition, 78% of the students were considered to have crisis issues requiring an immediate response (Gallagher, 2012, p. 177).

Wiggins (2011) proposed mental illness was leading to a great number of students' departures from college. O'Keefe (2013) attributed the departures to the fact institutions may not be well-equipped to handle the emotional and mental health needs of these students, at least not being able to provide enough support to help them remain in college. All students who suffer from mental illness are at greater risk for departing school before they graduate; this issue can be addressed by having staff members on campus who are trained in handling mental health issues and in providing the necessary support structure to accommodate this student population (O'Keefe, 2013).

According to Tinto (2012b), students' decisions to remain in college are based on the internal and external social forces they experience in a college setting. Students must know and understand the rules of an institution in order to be successful, all the while trying to protect their personal identities (Tinto, 2012b). Yet, Tinto (2012b) also believed students must keep their distance from their families of origin while assuming the values and behaviors of the college culture; students who are unable or ineffective at making this transition will leave college early. O'Keefe (2013) discovered this sense of belonging

was especially critical to the retention of first-generation college students (O'Keefe, 2013). Distancing oneself from the family and community to fit into the college culture constituted crossing a major hurdle to college success for first-generation college students (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

Tinto (2012b) also discovered just developing a relationship with a student is not enough; the student needs to feel fully linked to faculty, so he or she will feel welcome in the institution. Students who build close relationships with faculty, staff, or a mentor at the postsecondary institution are more likely to be satisfied with their college experiences and complete their degrees (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010). Students who achieve a sense of belonging are more likely to perform well and persist to graduation (Oseguera & Byung, 2009; Pearson, 2012). The advantage of good relationships developing between students and faculty is important; conversely, a negative relationship with another student or faculty member can have a devastating impact on a student's motivation to remain in school (Komarraju et al., 2010; Pearson, 2012). First-generation college students seeking needed support and relationships with college personnel is a crucial factor in their success in college (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

Some students, particularly those from a different socioeconomic background, may have difficulty in sharing with faculty and staff about personal problems, which could act as a barrier to building a trusting relationship and may also lead to a decrease in motivation of the student (O'Keefe, 2013). According to O'Keefe (2013), students fear their admission of personal problems may have a negative impact on their career as a student within the institution. With a diverse student body attending colleges and universities, professors need to make a conscious effort to reach out to minorities who

may feel less confident in their abilities to communicate with faculty and staff (Komarraju et al., 2010). Even when students successfully complete their freshmen year, there are those who withdraw during their sophomore year or beyond because of issues with the interactions they have with staff, teacher feedback, quality of instruction, and institutional policies and practices which lead to them being dissatisfied with their higher education experience in general (Willcoxson et al., 2011).

The cost of attrition, for whatever reason, can be significant for both students and higher education institutions due to financial aid reimbursement forfeiture and the loss of future tax revenue (Museus & Ravello, 2010; Schneider, 2010). According to Johnson (2012), the majority of people who do not finish college are considered educationally disadvantaged and also financially poor. Students who do not finish college may continue to live at an economic disadvantage when compared to their college-educated counterparts with degrees (Stephens et al., 2012).

In addition, Wright (2014) posited higher education institutions need to stem the tide of students leaving because it can improve an institution's rating among external rating agencies. With improved ratings, an institution may be viewed in a more positive manner by those who may be interested in attending, which would in turn lead to increased revenue for the institution through increased enrollment (Wright, 2014). O'Keefe (2013) also found high attrition rates in postsecondary schools led to misappropriated resources, which in turn could make the college look unfavorable to those reviewing such findings. Higher education institutions are charged with the responsibility of not only enrolling a diverse student population but also with helping students attain their educational goals (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011). A campus culture

that embraces a diverse student population rather than being rigid will experience less student attrition (O'Keefe, 2013).

Summary

Within this chapter, Tinto's (2012b) theory of student departure was presented, which looks at the many factors that lead to a student either deciding to stay in college or departing early before completing his or her degree. This chapter also focused on the unique attributes and challenges first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities face before and after entering college. The challenges these diverse groups of students face vary from poor academic preparation, to a lack of knowledge about college life, to difficulty adjusting socially and culturally to the college environment; all of this can lead to their early departure from an institution, or at the very least, cause them to take longer to graduate (Dumais et al., 2013; Housel & Harvey, 2011; Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

The history of the Federal TRIO program was also reviewed in this chapter, and the many programs offered under its umbrella were outlined in detail. The Federal TRIO program was established as a way of assisting these student populations with their educational goals through the use of counseling, tutoring, financial aid, and general support services. A special emphasis was placed on first-generation college students who participate in the programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The chapter concluded with information explaining the various reasons why students leave colleges before attaining their degrees and also suggested some ideas of what can be done to stem the flow of student attrition.

In the next chapter, the purpose of the study is revisited in more detail.

Information is provided regarding the methodology and design of the research project that took place, along with a restatement of the research questions of interest. Chapter Three also includes descriptions of the participants, the instrument used, and method of data collection. A plan for data analysis concludes the chapter, along with a discussion of ethical considerations addressed during the research study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Prior research on TRIO SSS participants brought forward quantitative data that can be statistically analyzed, such as participant grade point averages and the overall graduation rates for this group of individuals (Chaney, 2010; Pell Institute, 2009). Nevertheless, without taking into account the perceptions of TRIO SSS participants and which services these students found beneficial and/or recognized as barriers in their pursuit of college degrees, this research seems incomplete. In an effort to more effectively investigate the perceptions of TRIO SSS participants with regards to the services they use and to review their opinions of the benefits or barriers these services offer, a qualitative study was proposed. According to Tinto (2012b) in his work on student attrition and retention, a student's experiences and perceptions will help the student make a determination as to whether or not he or she will persist to graduation or depart early from college.

In this chapter, a review of the problem studied, as well as the purpose of this study, is outlined. Information regarding the type of research project and the methods for collecting research data is explained. A description of the participants in the study is also shared. The questions used to guide this study are restated, and the type of data sought, as well as information about the instrument used for this study, is discussed and expanded upon for the reader's understanding. Lastly, the procedures used to examine the data and how the information was interpreted to determine the results are also discussed.

Problem and Purpose Overview

According to Petty (2014), many first-generation, low-income, and disabled college students who enter college each year have a unique set of challenges that may act as barriers to persisting in college. As such, many higher education institutions have

implemented programs such as TRIO SSS to provide support structures and programs for students who qualify in order to assist them in attaining their educational goals (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). The purpose of this research study was to explore which services provided by the federal TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university were perceived to be beneficial and which were perceived to be barriers to the participants in their endeavors to earn college degrees.

A review of the literature found a lack of studies that took into account TRIO SSS participants' thoughts and perceptions. Because of this, a qualitative research study approach was chosen that would allow a more in-depth exploration of the subject matter to discover what themes surfaced (Emmel, 2013; Merriam, 2009). This type of study allowed for the development of a more detailed description of the program, as well as providing an extensive analysis of students who participated (Compton-Lilly, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Because this study focused on only the participants in the TRIO SSS program at a specific Midwest university, the system studied was considered bounded (Merriam, 2009), making this research approach appropriate. Furthermore, Berg and Lune (2011) asserted the use of a qualitative study was favored when examining participants who reside within the same social setting, as was the case with the participants in this study.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What aspects of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university are reported by first-year participants as supportive in regard to successful academic achievement?

2. What aspects of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university are reported by first-year participants as prohibitive (as barriers) in regard to successful academic achievement?

3. What supportive aspects do first-year participants of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university report as areas they would like considered for implementation?

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Creswell (2013) proposed a qualitative approach is appropriate when the element being studied cannot be easily evaluated using a quantitative method. When individual voices need to be heard, a qualitative approach provides for a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Creswell, 2013). Due to the relatively scant qualitative research on this subject, this qualitative approach was chosen, which allowed for exploration of the subject of TRIO SSS participants' perceptions to see what important themes surfaced and to discover the human interactions within the TRIO SSS program (Lichtman, 2014).

Research Design

A qualitative study was conducted using open-ended interview questions as a means to gather data from the participants about the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Creswell (2013), qualitative research is an appropriate method to use when the data being collected, such as field notes, interviews, and conversations, occur in a natural setting. A qualitative research design allowed for new information to be revealed and provided a mechanism by which to interpret the findings, rather than using the standard hypothesis-testing method of quantitative research (Merriam, 2009).

Data gathered were used to determine which components of the federal TRIO SSS program the participants perceived to be helpful and/or as barriers in completing their college degrees. In addition, the data gathered were used as a means to understand how these services make sense in their lives, while revealing a more holistic view of the subject matter being studied (Creswell 2013; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2014). Creswell (2013) suggests that qualitative research falls into the arena of social constructivism, as the researcher and participants try to understand the world in which they live and make connections to their shared experiences. Creswell (2013) postulated a qualitative approach is needed when the element being studied cannot be easily evaluated using a quantitative method.

According to Fraenkel et al. (2014), to ensure validity in a study, the instrument used to collect data must measure what it is intended to measure to allow the researcher to make accurate inferences from the data being collected. In a qualitative research study, the areas of both internal and external validity need to be addressed (Olson, 2012). With internal validity, measuring the specified meanings the researcher correlated with specific words was important (Olson, 2012).

With external validity, the researcher determined if the data collected had a consistent and reliable meaning for both the participants and the researcher collecting the data (Olson, 2012). To ensure reliability, interview responses were transcribed, and transcripts were provided to each participant to review for accuracy (Merriam, 2009). Necessary changes were made to transcripts based upon information received, which led to improved reliability and validity of the study (Creswell, 2013; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Importance should also be placed on the reliability of the instrument being used, to ensure the instrument measures results in a consistent manner (Fraenkel et al., 2014). In order to improve the reliability of this study, the interviews were conducted by asking participants interview questions in a specific order with prescribed wording (Olson, 2012).

Population and Sample

The study was conducted at a large public university in the Midwest region of the United States. The population being studied attended a Midwest university's with an undergraduate enrollment at the time of this study of approximately 18,000 students (NCES, 2014a). The sample included approximately 30 first-year college students who qualified for and were currently participating in the TRIO SSS program at this Midwest university. The sample was considered to be purposive, since this group of participants was chosen deliberately for this study to obtain rich information about the issues central to this study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). Of the applicants who qualified for the TRIO SSS program, at least two-thirds of the participants had to identify as either a student with a disability or a first-generation college student who was also low-income (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). One-third of the TRIO SSS participants with disabilities also met the qualification to be considered low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Instrumentation

The instrument used to gather data consisted of open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A), which were general in nature and were developed using the three research questions of the study as a guide. The responses gathered from the interviews

were in the form of verbal answers. The interview was designed as an informal, yet semi-structured meeting, which was considered appropriate under qualitative interviewing procedures (Creswell, 2013). The interviews were recorded digitally, and field notes were also taken. The interview questions were field tested with students similar to those in the sample. The feedback gathered from the field testing was analyzed, and adjustments were made as necessary to the interview questions used in the study based upon the feedback.

Data Collection

The research study began once approved by Lindenwood University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B), and a letter of no engagement (see Appendix C) from the director of research from the Midwest university was received. First-year participants in the TRIO SSS program received a recruitment letter given to them by staff in the TRIO SSS office at the Midwest university (see Appendix D). Within the letter, a description of this research study was provided along with a call for participation. Students who were willing to participate replied to the call by sending their contact information via electronic mail (email) to the address provided in the letter. Each student was contacted via email, and individual, face-to-face interviews were scheduled. Each interview took place at the Midwest university site.

Upon meeting for each interview, participants were asked to complete an informed consent form (see Appendix D) prior to the start of the interview process. All interviews were digitally recorded, and field notes were also taken. Each of the participants was asked the same set of interview questions with prompts used to either clarify or elaborate on answers, as was suggested by Compton-Lilly (2013). The

participants' responses to the research questions were transcribed and locked in a secure location. The transcripts will be destroyed three years after the conclusion of the study.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data in this study was conducted using a specific type of coding described by Saldana (2013). The responses gathered in the interviews were coded by the researcher, as suggested for a qualitative study, by assigning attributes or meanings to the phrases or words given in the responses (Saldana, 2013). The initial round of coding, or open coding phase, sought to codify or arrange similar data into categories and assigns those items the same code for further analysis (Saldana, 2013; Yin, 2011). This was accomplished via line-by-line reading of the transcripts (Saldana, 2013; Yin, 2011). Coding was used to set the stage for the inquiry and began the analysis process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

According to Saldana (2013), not all data may be revealed in the initial stages, so this study implemented a second round of coding, which allowed for additional categories or concepts to be realized and the consolidation of meaning to take place (Saldana, 2013). According to Bernard (2011), multiple rounds of analysis are often needed to explain why the concepts, or categories, found in the gathered data are present. Furthermore, Creswell (2013) recommended beginning the analysis of data with five to six codes and then expanding into additional codes as the analysis continues.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for this research study were addressed by assigning each participant an alias to ensure participant identities remained confidential. The participants were asked to complete an informed consent form, which provided details

about the type of information to be collected, the amount of time the proposed study required, and the presence or absence of any risks that might be associated with this study (Fraenkel et al., 2014). Care was given to ensure no physical or psychological harm came to the participants of this study (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

Summary

This qualitative study was designed to determine the perceptions of first-year participants in a TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university. Specifically, the researcher investigated which services the students perceived as being supportive of their college goals and which services the students perceived as being barriers to pursuing their college goals. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were employed to gather the data necessary to complete this study. An interview protocol was utilized during the process to allow for standardization of the process and to help ensure reliability and validity during the study.

The data collected were transcribed, and transcripts were sent to the participants to review for accuracy. This process ensured validity in this study. Analysis occurred by coding the data collected into broad categories, which was followed by further analysis. The data analysis process and subsequent findings are presented in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of first-year TRIO SSS program participants at a Midwest university. The TRIO program was available to students who met two of three requirements. These included being either a first-generation college student, a low-income student, or a student with a disability. These three groups of students, when entering universities, have a distinctive set of challenges that may act as barriers to achieving their goals of earning degrees (Petty, 2014). To address these barriers, some higher education institutions employ student retention programs, such as TRIO SSS, to provide assistance and support for students who qualify for the programs in order to aid them in attaining their educational goals (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011).

Because there was little scholarly research on the subject of the perceptions of TRIO SSS participants, this study was conducted to explore what these participants thought was beneficial about the TRIO SSS program and what acted as barriers to them pursuing their college educations. The participants were also asked to share their thoughts on programming ideas to enhance the experience for future students in the program. The results of this study might prove helpful for the TRIO SSS program administrators when making modifications or when developing new activities and training components for their program.

A historical review of supportive programs such as TRIO SSS showed students who quit college without finishing their degrees has been a problem with definite consequences of lower salaries and career opportunities for the students who depart college early (IHEP, 2012). Tinto (2012b) investigated the issue and developed a model

of student departure. Specifically, he proposed the positive and negative interactions among students, faculty, and staff can have a cumulative effect on students, and when negative interactions outweigh positive interactions, a student may decide to leave a university before earning a degree (Tinto, 2012b). The themes that emerged from the review of the literature and Tinto's perspective on student departures provided the justification for the following three research questions that guided this study:

1. What aspects of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university were reported by first-year participants as supportive in regard to successful academic achievement?
2. What aspects of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university were reported by first-year participants as prohibitive in regard to successful academic achievement?
3. What supportive aspects of the program did first-year participants of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university report as areas they would like considered for implementation?

This study was conducted at a large public university in the Midwest. The instrument used for data collection was composed of open-ended questions that were presented during individual interview sessions with first-year TRIO SSS participants. The interview questions were developed using the three research questions as a guide, keeping in mind Tinto's (2012b) model of student departure. The questions addressed what barriers of any kind made college more difficult, what parts of the TRIO SSS program were helpful and which were not, and what changes or additions should be made to the program. Due to the nature of the information being collected, that is, responses made during individual interviews with students, a qualitative approach was used to analyze the data (Creswell, 2013).

Demographic Analysis

All participants were volunteers for this research study. Although 33 first-year TRIO SSS students were invited to participate in the interviews, only a total of 13 agreed to join the study. Of the 13 participants, five were male and eight were female. To maintain confidentiality of the participants, each was assigned an alias for the purpose of this study.

Analysis of Interview Questions

Transcripts of each of the 13 interviews were generated so the responses could be carefully analyzed and compared via a coding system suggested by other researchers (Saldana, 2013; Yin, 2011). This content analysis of the interview questions was accomplished through a line-by-line reading of the transcripts (Saldana, 2013; Yin, 2011). Essentially, words or phrases from the participants' responses were assigned an attribute or meaning by the researcher as the responses were evaluated for relevance to the research questions (Saldana, 2013). The purpose of this initial round of coding, also known as the open-coding phase, was to arrange similar data into categories and assign those items the same categorical codes for further analysis (Saldana, 2013; Yin, 2011). The open-ended responses sometimes included additional information that was extraneous to the question, but it was necessary to code all comments as to the comments relevance to the research questions.

According to Bernard (2011), multiple rounds of analysis are needed to explain why the concepts, or categories, found in the data are present. Thus, once the responses were evaluated in the open-coding phase, a second round of coding took place (Saldana, 2013). This allowed for additional concepts to be realized and the consolidation of

meaning to take place (Saldana, 2013). Three categories clearly emerged and were designated with specific acronyms as related to the research questions. The interview questions were then assigned to the appropriate category:

- Benefit (BN)
- Barrier (BR)
- Suggestion (SG)

Interview question #1 (BR). What barriers have you experienced as a college student? (Follow up: What factor or factors shaped those ideas?)

Participants' responses reflected four main ideas when responding to this question about what they have experienced as barriers to being a college student. First, participants identified how they adjusted to being on their own and how the freedom this brings can be stressful at times. Rose responded, "It is definitely all on me, it is all independent, I don't have anyone to fall back on besides myself." Rose went on to share the adjustment from being a "high school dependent student to a college independent student would have to be my biggest barrier." Ashley stated in her university experience, "You are held accountable for going to class and doing what you are supposed to without having teachers nagging at you or your parents." The participants' related the difficulty having to adjust to the responsibilities of university life without having someone to give them reminders about what they were expected to do each step of the way.

The idea of having to be more independent in college was echoed by Michelle in her response, "No one is there to actually tell you that you need to do this, or you need to do this, so it is a bit overwhelming." Some participants shared this adjustment was particularly hard for them as first-generation college students, because as Ashley stated,

“My parents aren’t much help since they don’t know anything about college.” She went on to say, “I’m on my own.” Evan shared, “balancing hanging out and then doing your homework or studying” is difficult with this new-found freedom in college. The ideas of being on one’s own and independent resonated with the participants in this study.

The second barrier identified by some of the participants was the academic rigor of the course work and tests they were asked to complete. Jennifer reported being unprepared for her course work due to coming “from a low-income neighborhood and basically the academics because of the resources my neighborhood school lacked.” Not only was the course work more rigorous, but according to Rose, “professors have things that they already expect you to know, so sometimes, it can feel uncomfortable to ask questions and to form those relationships with those professors because you don’t know them.” Rose went on to share, “You feel so small in a place that’s so big, it takes a lot of courage for me, as a student, to put forth the effort to adjust.”

The third barrier identified by some of the participants was their lack of study skills. The participants reported experiencing difficulty in trying to understand the requirements of the assignments they were given. Participants shared they struggled with trying to discern what the professor considers important information they should know from the textbook reading assignments. Peyson shared, “I do not know how to study, so I am currently learning how to do that.” Avery also expressed concerns about his study skills by stating, “Some of the material in some of the courses I’ve been taking...is a little vague, and I don’t really understand what I should be studying.” According to their statements, the study skills the participants used in their high school academic preparation did not appear to be adequate for the demands of university course work.

The fourth barrier identified by a few of the participants was related to the social aspects of university life. A few participants reported they had a difficult time trying to fit in socially at the university, and establishing friendships was a barrier to them in their first year. Phil reported during his first year he “didn’t really know what to expect...[he was] shy.... [and was] being nervous around people,” which he reported as being “common stuff.” Jeff was another participant who reported “finding friends” to be one of the barriers he experienced during his first year in the TRIO SSS program.

Evan reported not all of the barriers he faced were related to school, and stated the most difficult part of his first semester at the university was related to his social life. He described it as follows:

I think that was the hardest part of my first semester. I kind of came and didn’t talk to nobody, and I really didn’t have a lot of friends, and I really just kind of stayed in my grades. My grades paid off, but at the same time, I really didn’t feel like I liked it here because I felt like I was really just going to school, and I wasn’t meeting people.

The participants’ reports of finding friends and fitting into university life indicated social factors can act as barriers for students in their efforts to earn university degrees. In summary, the first interview question addressed possible barriers to success in college. The four themes reported to be issues included new-found freedom and independence leading to stress, increased academic rigor for which they were unprepared, decreased knowledge of appropriate study skills, and difficulty fitting into the social life of a university.

Interview question #2 (BN). What are your thoughts on your experiences with advisory meetings in this program? (Follow-up: Have your thoughts changed about this experience as the year has progressed?)

The participants' responses revealed two main ideas regarding the mandatory advisory meetings between the participants and the advisors. All participants reported positive experiences with the mandatory advisory meetings in the TRIO SSS program. No negative comments were reported about this aspect of the program.

Even though the TRIO SSS students received advising from their college or faculty advisors during the first semester, they were also required to meet weekly with a TRIO SSS advisor. The TRIO SSS advising provided to the participants included course selection and registration for classes and was comprehensive, developmental, proactive, and designed to help the students integrate into university life. Each session followed a prescribed list of topics to be covered during advisory meetings over the course of the first semester, including topics such as time management, study skills, or scholarship opportunities. During the participants' second semester in the TRIO SSS program, the participants were required to meet with their advisors only three times during the semester. The participants could contact their advisors or request additional meetings if the participants needed assistance in between the required advisory meetings. Jill described her TRIO SSS program advisory meetings as being "a lot more helpful than [meetings with] my actual [university] advisor."

The two major ideas reported by the participants related to the advisors being supportive and helpful in the advisory meetings as well as at other times throughout the semester. Peyson reported the advisory meetings "help me plan out what my goals are

and what I should be accomplishing throughout the semester.” According to Jeff, his advisors “check up on my grades and made sure I am doing well.” Similarly, another student reported her positive thoughts on the advisory meetings as follows:

I feel like they [the advisory meetings] are very helpful, because I believe without them I would be in a worse [place academically] than I am in now. Because, I mean, if I didn't come for advisory meetings, my advisor wouldn't know that I needed a tutor. I'd still be lost.

These students reported similar experiences with advisory meetings and reported the meetings as a beneficial aspect of the TRIO SSS program.

The mandatory weekly advisory meetings during the participants' first semester in the TRIO SSS program allowed them to build relationships with members of the university staff. Participants reported the advisors not only asked about academic issues, but also asked how the participants were doing and what the advisors could do to help. Michelle said, “They will ask me how my weekend [was] and will help me keep up with the things I need to do, as well as help me find ways to better myself.” Ashley reported her advisor was the person on campus she could go to with “any questions...she[advisor] will do anything to research it [questions] and get back with me....she's more than happy to help me.” The mandatory advisory meetings were also supplying social interaction for the participants in the TRIO SSS program.

Participants reported they became comfortable with their advisors, and the meetings were a safe place to express their thoughts. Phil stated his advisor “helps out with a lot of stuff, and I feel comfortable with her.” Peyson stated that in advisor meetings they “help me plan out what my goals are and what I should be accomplishing

throughout the semesters.” Evan stated while the advisors want you to succeed, “They are called your advisor, not your helper.” The effort to complete course work is the responsibility of the student, and if you take advantages of your advisory meetings, according to Evan, “You really should be able to stay on top [of course work].” The advisory meetings helped students with information and questions they were often unaware of as relevant due to their first-generation college student status.

The majority of participants stated their thoughts remained positive throughout their time in the TRIO SSS program. Evan reported, “You get more comfortable [with your advisor]...I feel like by the time you get to your...fourth meeting, you know each other...and you’re comfortable talking [with your advisor].” The idea of being comfortable with the advisors was reported to be important by some of the participants. In summary, the second interview question addressed participants’ view of the mandatory advisory meetings. The general feedback was positive for the advisory meetings, and the participants added that the advisors helped them throughout their time in the program.

Interview question #3 (BN). Of the other TRIO SSS programs you have participated in, which ones were beneficial and why?

The TRIO SSS program staff provided services such as financial aid resources, financial literacy, tutoring, and a cultural events exposure program stipend (offered to participants who complete certain requirements during the course of a semester). The TRIO SSS program also offered participants free use of the computers in the TRIO SSS office, free printing of documents, and the ability to check out equipment such as laptop computers and digital recorders.

The first service several participants reported as being especially beneficial was the tutoring provided by the TRIO SSS program staff. The tutoring services were scheduled by the TRIO SSS staff members and took place in the TRIO SSS offices. The participants reported the ease of having the tutoring sessions set for them as an especially convenient benefit of the TRIO SSS program. Carol reported, “Tutoring is probably the only reason I passed math last semester.” Ashley stated in her interview that the free tutoring resource was “especially [helpful] with hard science classes [she took].”

Evan stated in his experience of trying to attend the campus-wide tutoring sessions available in the university library as being “a little awkward.” Evan went on to report, “There is like hundreds of kids in the library at the time.” Evan stated the benefits of attending tutoring in the TRIO SSS office, for him, included being “secluded, and [you] get your homework, and get it done quicker.” Carol echoed Evan’s sentiments about the campus-wide tutoring sessions having a multitude of students attending the sessions; she felt tutors did not have time to answer all of her questions during a session.

The cultural events exposure program provided by the TRIO SSS program was also mentioned as being beneficial to a few participants. The culture event exposure program provided a stipend of up to \$50 a semester for a TRIO SSS participant to acquire tickets to attend a cultural event. This was useful when participants were required to attend certain events, such as a play or art exhibit, as a course requirement. The TRIO SSS participant would complete a cultural events request form and provide it to a TRIO SSS program staff member. Once the request was authorized by the director, a TRIO SSS program staff member purchased the ticket with TRIO SSS program funds and then provided the ticket to the participant. According to Rose, “If you have classes where

...you...go to outside events for the class, like the theater class...you fill out a form, and they will get you the tickets.”

Mike reported having used the cultural event exposure program during his first semester in the program. Mike added, “I am going to another concert in April,” using funds from the cultural events exposure program. Ashley stated the use of the cultural event exposure program “really just opens your eyes to new things, especially if you are new to the city, just to go out there...on an adventure.” The program was not limited to purchasing just concert or theater tickets but could be used for any type of event related to cultural experiences. In summary, the third interview question asked what services besides the advisor meetings were found to be beneficial. The participant’s responses identified two services. These were the tutoring component of the program and the stipends offered to students to attend community and campus events in an effort to increase cultural exposure.

Interview question #4 (BR). Which of the TRIO programs, if any, were of no use to you and why?

The majority of participants reported the services they had used in the TRIO SSS program were useful to them. According to Avery, “I haven’t actually been to too many programs...but I feel most of them are beneficial.” A few other participants reiterated Avery’s response about not having used many of the services available to them in the TRIO SSS program, but of the services they were aware of, the participants thought they would be beneficial.

A student who had previously participated in a TRIO Upward Bound program throughout high school found the financial aid workshops held by the TRIO SSS program

were of no benefit to her. Jennifer stated, “Because I was in Upward Bound in high school, and I’ve done thousands of them [financial aid workshops].” The Upward Bound program, available in secondary schools, is used to prepare students of low-income to attend college (Bergerson, 2009). According to Bergerson (2009), the Upward Bound program was also the first piloted TRIO program in the United States.

The participants also shared their knowledge of financial literacy has grown, and now the participants understand how to interact with their own money. Participants have become more financially responsible over the course of the school year. Michelle shared, “I know how to manage my money... so I don’t waste it on unneeded things....I know how to budget at least.”

In summary, the fourth interview question asked which of the TRIO SSS programs were of no benefit. The only negative response reported was from a student who stated the financial aid workshop was not helpful because she had already acquired that knowledge in a TRIO program which she previously attended. Several also said there were some aspects of the program they had not used, so they could not comment on the benefits or lack thereof.

Interview question #5 (BN). Please explain about your experiences with members of the TRIO SSS staff.

The staff in the TRIO SSS program office at this Midwest university consist of a director, an assistant director, an advisor, a graduate assistant, and several student workers. Nearly every participant described the TRIO SSS staff as being friendly and helpful. Jill reported the staff was what made the TRIO SSS program great, “because you feel comfortable in here...you can ask questions when you don’t know something.”

The participants went on to report the staff members were available to give guidance as necessary, were flexible, and were punctual with appointments. According to Ashley, her experiences with the TRIO staff were as follows:

Sometimes you feel like you are in a small family, where you can come in and talk about anything without being judged, especially since they [the staff] are older, they are able to help you and guide you more in the campus.

Several participants echoed Ashley's sentiment of being able to talk easily to staff members and, according to Phil's assessment, the TRIO SSS program staff was "the best group of people I have ever met."

Evan shared his experiences with the TRIO SSS program staff and singled out the director as being influential in his life. According to Evan:

He's [program director] probably the closest thing I have to like a role model that's in college...like a guy that's went to college or going to college... he's the only guy I know that's actually doing it...not to mention...he's an African-American male and really is successful, and it's kind of for me personally really inspiring how he can tell me that he didn't have a lot, and he started with a family just like me, and now he's kind of making it in life.

In providing his thoughts about the TRIO SSS program staff, Evan stated, "They really do want the best for you, and they really will help you out a lot." In summary, the fifth interview question asked for feedback on the TRIO SSS staff. All reports were positive, with several participants describing extremely positive experiences.

Interview question #6 (BN). Which of the TRIO SSS programs have you found to be most beneficial and why?

Participants in the TRIO SSS program revealed three services as being particularly beneficial to them; these included attending advisory meetings, getting tutoring services in the TRIO SSS program office, and attending financial aid workshops offered by the TRIO SSS staff members.

Several participants described how advantageous the advisory meetings were to their success at the university during their first year. The participants reported being given resources during advisory meetings to help them address needs they had. For example, participants were given information about upcoming workshops they could attend as well as information about the cultural experience program offered by the TRIO SSS program. During the advisory meetings, the participants met with their advisors individually to discuss how the participants were doing both academically and personally. According to Rose,

[having]time to just sit and just express how things are going...because you are moving so fast....that half an hour [advisory meeting] is a good little time for me to sit and reflect.

Peyson summed up the advisory experience by stating:

Actually sitting down and talking about what my weaknesses and strengths [are] and what I need to improve on actually helps me, because I can have a list and a map...you know, just steps on how to improve, so that actually helps me.

Phil reported the advisory meetings as being most beneficial, because “they take time to tell you about your grades and give you advice.”

Next, a few participants reported the tutoring services offered in the TRIO SSS program office were of the most benefit to them. TRIO SSS participants were able to

schedule specific times to work with the TRIO SSS program tutors. Thus, Ashley reported the tutors were able to work with her schedule, which she found to be helpful. According to Ashley, the demands of her schoolwork can “get tough and overwhelming,” and her experiences with the campus-wide tutoring services offered were not as helpful.

Finally, some participants reported they found the financial aid workshops put on by the TRIO SSS program staff to be beneficial. The participants were required to attend workshops related to applying for financial aid assistance, completing applications for scholarships, and understanding financial literacy. The financial literacy workshops taught students how to budget their money and how to apply for and use credit cards responsibly. According to Michelle, the financial literacy workshop helped her to learn how to budget her money, and she learned, “There is a difference between a savings and checking [account].” The financial aid workshops mentioned by students were also reported as helping them to fill out financial aid paperwork. According to Avery, in the “FAFSA workshop...they help you step-by-step process how to fill it [FAFSA application] out.” Sonya echoed Avery’s statement about attending a financial aid workshop by stating, “It just kind of helped you point in the right direction.”

This sixth question was very similar to the third question, but the participants were to choose the services that had the greatest benefit. When simply asked what services were beneficial (in interview question 3), the responses included the tutoring program and having access to cultural events through the stipend, although the advisory meetings had already been addressed in the prior question and would have undoubtedly been included in the responses. When asked what services were the most beneficial, the

participants reiterated the advisory meetings and the tutoring were most beneficial, but then added the financial workshops to the list.

Interview question #7 (SG). Please tell about a service that you think would be beneficial to future TRIO SSS participants which may be implemented in the future. Please be specific with your answer.

The majority of participants reported the TRIO SSS program as already having provided assistance, services, and workshops which meet the needs of the TRIO SSS program participants. A few students made suggestions about new workshop topics and activities they thought would be beneficial for future TRIO SSS program participants.

Ashley suggested the TRIO SSS program staff develop their own student orientation meeting specifically for TRIO SSS program participants. According to Ashley, the student orientation sessions are required meetings students new to the university have to attend to acquaint them with campus life, dorms, and to help students prepare their fall schedules. Ashley stated her experience with the college orientation program “wasn’t good, because I felt very rushed...she [university advisor] was not able to accurately tell me how the course was...an online course...I ended up having to withdraw from the class.” Ashley stated a session held by the TRIO SSS program staff to address the same issues would help students of the program “better understand what is going on, and you don’t feel rushed, or you can’t ask questions or stuff like that.”

Avery reported wanting to learn more about how to do income taxes. Avery stated, “Students at the university...many times they have jobs...and they need to fill out their taxes come like April.”

Carol suggested the TRIO SSS program develop a workshop related to studying abroad, for students who are unfamiliar with this type of program. Carol stated:

In a workshop, they have annually...about studying abroad, because with me being a freshman, first-generation college student, I barely knew enough about what to expect when I go to college, much less what to expect when I am applying to study abroad, which program, student exchange programs, a week-long versus a semester [program], faculty led [program].

Note that Carol's statement reflected upon the lack of background knowledge first-generation college students have when it comes to understanding what programs are available to them and how to best utilize the programs offered.

Sonya believed participants in the program would benefit from doing volunteer work in the community. Sonya stated, "I'm really big on volunteer work, so I feel if they had days when you should have to volunteer...it is a really good growing experience when you can volunteer and help out in your community." The TRIO SSS program might develop a volunteer activity to provide the participants with the opportunity to become more involved in the community and to help them develop as a person. Note that the current TRIO SSS program participants were not required to participate in volunteering.

A couple of the participants shared their interest in having the students attend more events and educational trips. According to Rose, she would like to see more "group gathering events just so we can all get together and know each other." Rose reported these gathering events, which might resemble field trips, with other TRIO SSS participants, would be beneficial for her or other new TRIO SSS participants to "make

some new friends.” Similarly, Mike reported educational trips, such as to a leadership conference, would be advantageous to future TRIO SSS participants.

To summarize, the seventh interview question asked the participants what additional services should be considered for expanding the program for future TRIO SSS students. This question solicited several ideas, including having program-specific orientation workshops, workshops on preparing income taxes and how to study abroad. Participants also suggested promoting volunteer work, more group events, and educational trips.

Interview question #8 (SG). What would you change about the current TRIO SSS program you participate in?

The majority of the participants gave no suggestions for changing the current TRIO SSS program they participated in at this Midwest university. The major theme which emerged from this question was the TRIO SSS participants interviewed for this study were happy with the TRIO SSS program and what the participants were offered in the form of activities, services, workshops, and staff interactions.

A few of the TRIO SSS participants made suggestions concerning changes they would like to see made to specific program components. Jill made a suggestion regarding the frequency of the TRIO SSS program mandatory advisory meetings. According to Jill, during the first semester of your freshman year in the TRIO SSS program, you were required to meet with your advisor on a weekly basis. During the second semester of your freshman year, the required advisory meetings were cut down

significantly to only three meetings during the entire semester. Jill stated:

Adding a couple more academic advising meeting(s) for second semester freshmen because first semester freshman they have, like, 14 meetingsas soon as you hit second semester, you are down to three [advisory meetings].... which is like it is for every other college student....I think if they did five or six [advisory meetings] instead of three that would be helpful.

Going from weekly meetings to monthly meetings was a substantial decrease in the amount of time TRIO SSS students spent with their advisors.

A second participant mentioned wanting the TRIO SSS program to host more activities. Ashley stated, "I'm Hispanic, and so I haven't met any Hispanic people at all....my advisor...says there [are] several [Hispanic] people in TRIO, but I haven't met them." The purpose of the activities would be for the participants to get to know each other better and possibly develop new relationships. In addition, participants who enter the TRIO SSS program at mid-semester rather than at the beginning of the semester might especially benefit from these get-acquainted activities.

In summary, the participants in this study were very satisfied with the current TRIO SSS program, so when asked the eighth interview question that addressed suggested changes to the current program, only two responses were given. These were to increase the number of advisory meetings during the second semester of college and to host more social activities.

Interview question #9 (SG). What advice would you give perspective TRIO SSS participants?

Three major themes emerged from the responses to this interview question on advice being given to perspective TRIO SSS participants. The students wanted future participants to be open to the TRIO SSS program experience, to take advantage of the services the program had to offer, and to recognize the TRIO SSS program staff were willing to assist the participants in any way they could.

Addressing the first theme, a majority of the students would advise perspective TRIO SSS program participants to be open to the TRIO SSS program and to determine if they like the services and staff for themselves. The reports given by the TRIO SSS students were of a positive nature and endorsed the use of the TRIO SSS program for future generations of students who meet the eligibility criteria.

Secondly, the students encouraged future participants to take advantage of the many services offered by the program. The participants suggested prospective participants use the advisory meetings to ask questions, register for the free tutoring services, and attend the financial aid and financial literacy workshops held by the TRIO SSS program staff members.

Finally, the participants reported the TRIO SSS program staff were helpful and open to asking any type of question. As Michelle stated, the TRIO SSS program staff will “help you to the best of their capabilities.” Mike’s advice for perspective participants was to “always do your best, always try your hardest, always have faith in the TRIO staff, because they’re always there to help you.” Jill encouraged perspective TRIO SSS participants to not be afraid to ask questions, “because they are here to help you.”

Finally, Sonya stated during her interview she mentioned the positive aspects of the program the incoming students could look forward to using:

I would say do it, and really join TRIO...it's a really good program, and it's really helpful....they help you through everything that is difficult....I was struggling at the beginning...if I wanted to stay here and I think TRIO is one reason why I actually did [stay].

Evan suggested perspective participants use TRIO services, because

they're all first-generation college students that are all low incomes families....a place for friends for people who don't have a lot of friends....people really help you....the free printing is pretty cool.”

Evan went on to report the social events, bonfires, movie nights, and the meet and greets were all helpful as well.

In summary, in giving advice to prospective students as asked for in the ninth interview question, the students reported on the positive experiences they encountered with the program services and the positive interactions they had with the TRIO SSS staff. They reportedly benefited both academically and personally from utilizing the TRIO SSS services and meeting with TRIO SSS program staff members. Their advice was to be open to the potential of the program.

Interview question #10. Is there any question that I should have asked you?

None of the participants reported having any additional questions they should have been asked during the interview.

Interview question #11. Do you have any questions for me?

The majority of participants did not have any questions for the researcher; however, Jill asked the researcher if she was “a TRIO participant.” The researcher answered “no” to this question posed by the participant.

Emerging Themes

In the final stage of the analysis, three emerging themes (Saldana, 2013) were identified. These included adjusting to a college environment; interacting with students, faculty, and staff; and experiencing personal growth. Each of these are summarized in more detail.

Adjustments. The participants interviewed in this study spoke about the adjustments they had to make, both personally and academically, in attending this Midwest university. Several participants reported the transition from high school expectations to university expectations as being difficult. Some went on to say they felt the expectations placed on them by the university staff were at times vague and not easy to understand. The participants reported feeling as though they were on their own and all alone without someone to turn to for assistance.

Several participants commented on experiencing stress from having new-found personal freedom and increased responsibilities during their first year in college. Not knowing when they needed to study, or even what they should study, led some participants to the realization they were unprepared for the course work or responsibilities of attending college. Participants reflected upon not being academically prepared or having the necessary study skills to be successful in their course work, which also caused them distress.

Interactions. Some of the participants commented about having difficulty in finding friends during their first year. The participants reported wanting to earn good grades, so they isolated themselves from others by spending most of their time studying. Some participants were also concerned with how to appropriately interact with professors and other university personnel, which also led to isolation.

Participants did report, however, that the interactions with the TRIO SSS staff members were positive. The majority of participants reported developing relationships with the TRIO SSS staff and other TRIO SSS participants during the course of their time in the program. The TRIO SSS program also arranged for group social gatherings for the participants, to meet each other and have positive interactions with the TRIO SSS staff members at the same time. In addition, the participants reported feeling more comfortable with their TRIO SSS advisors over the course of several advisory meetings. Participants shared becoming comfortable with the TRIO SSS advisors led to the participants feeling as though they could share about their personal lives, their family situations, and how they were doing in general. The participants did not report having the same positive feeling of comfort with the regular academic advisors provided by the university.

Last, the participants were able to interact in the community through the cultural experiences stipend program. Several participants shared that the cultural experience stipend program allowed them to attend events, such as plays and music concerts, which broadened their experiences both on and off campus.

Personal growth. The participants identified the TRIO SSS program as being a positive experience in their pursuit of a university education. The participants used the

information gained from interactions with their advisors to appraise their decisions about moving forward with their university careers. The materials provided in workshops on financial aid, financial literacy, and scholarships were used by the participants as a means to persist at this Midwest university.

Several participants shared they had developed new friendships during the course of their first year in the TRIO SSS program. The advice they gave to future perspective TRIO SSS participants was to try the program with an open mind. Participants reported through the use of tools such as advisory meetings and tutoring services, they were able to continue to attend college.

Summary

A total of 13 first-year TRIO SSS participants agreed to join the research study. Of the 13 participants, five were male, and eight were female. The major themes to emerge from the interview responses were feelings of adjustment, interaction, and integration. Overall, the participants reported having a certain amount of stress as they adjusted to attending college. The participants had feelings of being all alone and having a great amount of freedom and responsibility to assume during their first year at this university. The participants had many required interactions with the TRIO SSS program staff, especially during their first semester in the program, and participated in services offered by the TRIO SSS program, which in turn led to the participants' integration into this Midwest university.

The findings from this research study, along with the conclusions drawn from the findings, are presented in the final chapter of this dissertation. Suggestions are made regarding any implications these findings have on the current practices of the TRIO SSS

program addressed in this study. In addition, recommendations for future research are also presented. A final summary provides a complete overview of the major elements of this research study.

Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

This qualitative study was designed to provide insight into participants' perceptions of services in a TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university. Specifically, the goal of this study was to provide further understanding of what services first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities perceive as being beneficial aspects or barriers in their efforts to pursue and complete a college education. Data for this qualitative study were collected via semi-structured interviews with participants, whose responses were then analyzed to identify overriding themes.

Much of the previous research conducted on TRIO SSS programs has been quantitative in nature; past research on TRIO SSS participants has looked at grade point averages, persistence to graduation, graduation rates, and use of TRIO SSS services to determine efficacy of the programs. There was little research on the perceptions of first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities, who represent the target population in this federal student retention program. Furthermore, there has been little to no examination of how TRIO SSS participants perceive themselves while navigating the requirements of school and developing as individuals during their first year attending a university.

The intent of this study was three-pronged. First, the researcher explored what first-year TRIO SSS participants perceived as beneficial to the goal of attaining a university degree. The second prong of the study was to determine which, if any, of the services or personnel provided by the TRIO SSS program acted as barriers to the participants earning their university degrees. The third prong sought to gain insight from the participants about what services they thought should be implemented in the TRIO

SSS program for future participants. The findings of this study are discussed in light of Tinto's (2012b) theory on student departure, which was reviewed in Chapter Two.

This chapter includes a consolidation of the findings of the research in light of the three research questions that were posed at the onset of the study. Conclusions that can be drawn from those findings are discussed in terms of overriding themes found in the participants' responses. Implications for the future practice of the TRIO SSS program are addressed. Recommendations are made for further research in this area in light of the findings and the limitations of this study. Finally, the chapter concludes with a review of the most significant elements of the study.

Findings

Interview questions and the subsequent responses were categorized based on their association with the research questions that guided this study (Yin, 2011). These categories were as follows:

- Benefit (BN)
- Barrier (BR)
- Suggestion (SG)

For ease in understanding the results of the interviews, the responses to the questions are discussed in the order of the categories listed above: benefits, barriers, and suggestions, with the one exception of the first question. The responses to interview question #1 addressed the barriers the participants experienced when trying to negotiate college life and did not specifically address the TRIO SSS program. The responses to this question provided a clear introduction to the issues addressed by this study. The research questions and the responses paralleled prior literature about the experiences of students

who were considered to be either first-generation college students, low-income students, or students with disabilities (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; O’Keefe, 2013; Tinto, 2012b; Ulriksen et al., 2010).

Although interview questions #2 and #5 were not specifically about benefits of the program, all respondents reported positive experiences about the services in question. As such, the findings from those two interview questions are merged with the results of interview questions #3 and #6, which both asked specifically for perceived benefits of the TRIO SSS program. Next, interview question # 4 addressed any program barriers reported by the participants. Interview questions #7, #8, and #9 addressed any suggestions TRIO SSS participants made regarding modifications to the current program or implementation of new program ideas. Finally, responses to interview questions #10 and #11, which did not provide any additional program information, are discussed briefly.

Interview question #1.

Each participant was first asked what barriers had been experienced as a college student and then what factor or factors had shaped those ideas. The four main issues revealed by the participants included the following: (a) adjusting to the responsibilities of being independent university students was stressful and somewhat overwhelming at times; (b) adjusting to the academic rigor of the university course work and tests led participants to believe they were unprepared for the challenges of university course work; (c) believing they did not possess adequate study skills to understand how or what they were supposed to study to complete assignments or adequately prepare to take exams;

and (d) adjusting to social life on a university campus, especially having trouble trying to fit in and trying to establish new friendships.

The results presented in response to this question were consistent with previous findings by ACT (2013) and Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011). According to Bernhardt (2013), first-generation college students and students from low-income homes were not taking enough courses requiring rigorous academic preparation in high school, which left them unprepared for college course work.

Research question #1.

What aspects of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university were reported by first-year participants as supportive in regard to successful academic achievement?

Responses to interview questions #2, #3, #5, and #6 addressed the query posed in research question #1. Several TRIO SSS program components were deemed beneficial by the students who were interviewed for this research study. These included mandatory advisory meetings, the staff, tutoring services; the cultural events experience program, and the workshops. Each of these will now be discussed in more detail.

Advisory meetings. When asked about the advisory meetings that were mandatory to the program, the majority of the participants' responses revealed two main emerging themes. Overall, they felt the mandatory advisory meetings were helpful, and they stated the advisors themselves were helpful and supportive of the participants. Some participants revealed the advisory meetings were important in helping plan out their future goals while developing relationships with their advisors. Furthermore, the participants reported increasing benefits as the year progressed. Recent study findings suggest student interactions with staff members and the students' perceptions of

successfully integrating into an institution are important factors in student retention (Oseguera & Byung, 2009; Swecker et al., 2013). According to DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) and Tinto (2012b), these positive collaborations between students and staff members of the university lead to improvements in students' commitment to their goals of attaining degrees.

Staff. The majority of participants expressed their experiences with members of the staff as being positive in nature. The participants reported the TRIO SSS staffs were concerned with the participants' best interests, and the staff members were available and flexible in giving guidance as needed. The participants noticed their comfort levels deepened with each interaction they had with the staff members. The interactions with staff members helped the participants feel a sense of belonging to a group. Maslow (1954) proposed individuals need to be included and belong to a group, which was also suggested by Petty (2014), who found individuals' needs for acceptance can aid in their success in college.

Tutoring. The majority of the participants reported academic tutoring services provided especially for TRIO SSS participants as being the most beneficial service offered. All student participants in the TRIO SSS program were allowed up to two hours of individual tutoring per week, with this tutoring being conducted in the TRIO SSS program office. These responses were not surprising given the reports by Housel (2012) and also Jehangir (2010), suggested first-generation college students tend to have poorer reading, writing, and communication skills when compared to non-first-generation college students. Poor academic skills were proposed to be a result of the first-generation

college students attending poor quality high schools that did not adequately prepare the participants for the academic rigors of college (Stephens et al., 2012).

The use of tutoring services offered by the TRIO SSS program was also beneficial in helping students understand the educational concepts presented to them in courses. The use of the campus-wide tutoring services available to all students was reported as not as beneficial to the TRIO SSS participants. Reportedly, one of the problems with the campus-wide tutoring services was that were held in a large library setting and were attended by many students at one time, which made it much more difficult to get the individualized help needed by the students in the TRIO SSS program.

Cultural events experience program. Several participants viewed the cultural events experience program, which provided funds to purchase tickets to attend cultural events, as especially helpful. First-generation college students and students from low-income backgrounds oftentimes do not have the financial means to attend cultural events, yet attendance at certain events was required in their courses. At other times, students just wanted to attend for their personal pleasure (Karimshah et al., 2013).

Workshops. The information provided to students regarding financial aid, financial literacy, and how to complete scholarship applications was also seen as helpful by the participants. The financial services and training provided to students helped them navigate the procedural paperwork process of attending college. The financial aid and scholarship assistance helped participants find resources to pay for their education.

Research Question #2.

What aspects of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university were reported by first-year participants as prohibitive in regard to successful academic achievement?

Responses to Interview question #4 addressed the query posed in research question #2. The majority of participants reported the services they used while participating in the TRIO SSS program were of benefit to them.

Only one student found the financial aid workshops to be of no benefit to her personally, but she explained that she found the repeated financial aid workshops not to be useful because she had participated in the TRIO Upward Bound program in high school and was required to attend financial aid workshops while participating in that program. The need of first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities for information regarding the completion of financial aid applications and access to financial aid monetary resources was identified as essential for low-income and low-income first-generation college students to persist to graduation and to alleviate their financial stress (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Roderick et al., 2009).

Research question #3.

What supportive aspects of the program did first-year participants of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university report as areas they would like considered for implementation? The responses to interview questions #7, #8, and #9 addressed the query posed in research question #3. The majority of participants reported the TRIO SSS program offered assistance, services, and workshops which met their needs. The major feeling expressed by the participants was they were happy with the services and personnel they interacted with while attending the TRIO SSS program. Since the current study was designed to seek information that would guide future programs, the participants were also asked what advice they would give to future program participants and what suggestions they might make regarding future programing. Their responses fell

into three categories: (a) modifications to the current program, (b) additional services for the program, and (c) general advice on the attitude to take when participating in the program. Each of these responses is addressed in more detail.

Modifications to the current program. One student expressed the suggestion of increasing the frequency of advisory meetings during the second semester of a participant's first year in the TRIO SSS program. The frequency of advisory meetings dropped from once a week during the first semester in the program to three in the second semester of the program. Another student expressed the desire for the TRIO SSS program staff to host more activities that were group events for the participants to get to know each other better and to develop new friendships.

Educational outings and trips were mentioned as desired by participants. This modification would be particularly helpful given previous research findings that providing academic and social support through extracurricular activities to improved integration by students into a college setting (Barnett, 2011; Tinto, 2012b). Both of these modifications would be significant given that interactions students have with other students and also with staff members of a college have been found to influence students when deciding to stay or leave the college prematurely (O'Keefe, 2013; Tinto, 2012b).

A third modification suggested represented somewhat of an addition to the program. At the time of this study, the TRIO SSS participants were required to attend a college-wide orientation. It was suggested in the interview responses that the orientation meeting be modified to suit the special needs of the TRIO SSS participants, perhaps so much so that the TRIO program would provide their own college orientation. It was suggested the purpose of the orientation would be to introduce participants to the

university, but it would be modified to allow them more time to schedule their classes and ask questions about instructional delivery methods (such as online courses), so they did not feel rushed in the process. According to previous research findings, students with backgrounds similar to the TRIO SSS participants struggled with the procedural knowledge of understanding how universities operated (Dumais et al., 2013; IHEP, 2012; Roderick et al., 2009). Independent TRIO-specific orientations would also be able to address the students' concern about a lack of university procedural knowledge.

Additional services to be implemented. Some additions to the services which were suggested for TRIO included adding more topics to the workshops already conducted for the students. One suggestion was that the program offer workshops on federal and state income tax preparation. Another suggestion was that students be given information related to studying abroad, including how to determine which program would be best for the participant and then how to apply for such a program.

Findings from previous research suggested students like those served in the TRIO SSS program often do not have the opportunity to participate in activities, such as study abroad programs that would enhance their learning (Jehangir, 2010; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Previous researchers also found integrating socially into a higher education system was vital to students' persistence in earning degrees (Petty, 2014; Tinto, 2012b). Whether this would be just information provided to students or the implementation of a sponsored program was not addressed.

The final addition suggested was to implement a volunteer work program as part of the TRIO SSS experience. This type of program would provide multiple opportunities for integration into the local community. As suggested by Tinto (2012b), positive student

interactions would likely increase student commitment to the program and decrease student attrition.

Advice on attitude. The final suggestions made by the participants in this study entailed giving advice to future TRIO students. First and foremost, they advised the future participants to be open to the TRIO SSS program and services, emphasizing the staff in the program had their best interests in mind. They also said to take advantage of the workshops held by the TRIO SSS program staff and to use the free tutoring services offered by the program. Participants taking advantage of this multifaceted approach employed by the TRIO SSS program should benefit in ways that will help alleviate some of the barriers they face (Bergerson, 2009).

Final interview questions. The last two interview questions simply asked if the participants had any other questions they wanted to address during the interview. None of the participants asked any additional questions about the research topics. One participant inquired as to whether or not the researcher had ever participated in a TRIO SSS program. Neither of these interview questions provided significant relevant information regarding the TRIO SSS program, so no further discussion of these two questions is warranted.

Summary on themes from interview questions. The information gathered from participants' responses to the interview questions related to the perceived barriers and benefits TRIO SSS participants experienced during their first year in the program. The TRIO SSS participants also shared their suggestions for improving the TRIO SSS program and opportunities for future participants. These findings from the interviews are

mirrored in the research on first-generation college students, students of low socioeconomic status, and students with disabilities, all of whom have been found to struggle with academic preparation and skill levels, with understanding the college financial aid process; and with wanting to fit into their institutions both socially and academically (Johnson, 2012; Roderick et al., 2011). As such, the results of this study contributed to a greater understanding of the perceptions of first-year participants in the TRIO SSS program.

Conclusions

The initial purpose of this study was to identify which aspects of the TRIO SSS program at a Midwest university were deemed to be beneficial and which were deemed to act as barriers to completing a college degree. Students were quite satisfied with the TRIO SSS program. The participants particularly liked the mandatory advisory meetings, individualized tutoring sessions, the cultural events experience program, and the financial workshops.

The students reported the positive atmosphere provided by the TRIO SSS staff. No program barriers were reported; however, some modifications and additions were suggested by the participants to make the program even better. All of these ideas were summarized in the previous section of this chapter.

A final round of data analysis of the interview questions elicited a more thorough understanding of the benefits that were realized from those programs. Three major themes emerged that characterized the knowledge, understanding, and changes that occurred in the students who participated. These three themes were briefly identified in Chapter Four as adjustment, integration, and personal growth. In this section, the themes

are discussed in the light of each of the three research questions and are tied to any relevant review of literature that was presented in Chapter Two of this study.

The results of the study clearly showed many of the participants struggled as they adjusted to changes in their environments and the TRIO SSS program provided supports for the participants. First and foremost, they had difficulty adjusting to their new-found freedom while trying to find their niche in the university culture. Many of the participants reported the increase in personal freedom, with a lack of support and structure from a parent telling them what to do with regard to school work, was a particularly difficult adjustment.

Some participants reported they were not prepared for this adjustment process due to their first-generation college student status. Since their parents had not attended college, the parents were not able to give the participants advice or suggestions. This lack of family support for first-generation college students has been shown to create barriers for students in their attempts to complete their college degrees (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Furthermore, this lack of encouragement and support from their families left them with poor coping mechanisms that put them further at risk for not accomplishing their goals.

In addition to finding their way in the college culture, the participants reported struggling with and having to adjust to the increased academic expectations. Several participants commented on their deficient academic preparation, having come from low-income neighborhoods and having attended secondary schools with limited resources that did not prepare them for the rigors of university classes. As such, they shared concerns about being academically unprepared for the course work at the university level.

Other participants commented on having poor study skills, difficulty comprehending what they read, and not knowing what to focus on when reading a textbook. Avery found knowing how to study and what to study to be a barrier to him being successful at the university. Because of these struggles with academic requirements at the university, the participants found the tutoring services to be one of the most beneficial services offered by the TRIO SSS program.

The TRIO SSS program provided academic support in the form of academic advising, tutoring, and remedial instruction services to help with the adjustments and demands of attending a university (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Jill reported the TRIO SSS advisor gave her study tips, helped her register for classes, and helped her understand the structure and pace of classes to determine what courses would be a good fit for her learning style and ability level. The tutoring services offered to the participants helped to learn study skills, retaught course content when necessary, and helped them to focus their attention on what to look for when reading a textbook. Students arrived on university campuses with a variety of educational experiences from excellent high school education preparation to a poor high school education preparation (Wright, 2014), but many benefitted from this TRIO SSS program.

Last, with some of these participants coming from low-income families, many had to work while attending school. Not surprisingly, students reported they had to learn how to manage their time, trying to maintain their work schedules and school schedules so they had enough time to study and/or complete homework assignments. This adjustment was not always easy as they juggled all of the demands placed upon them.

The TRIO SSS program's mandatory advisory meetings provided much-needed structure for these first-year participants who had recently been given so much freedom in their lives. According to Evan, the advisors shared with him upcoming deadlines, monitored his grades, and helped him work on a plan for improvement, as needed. The participants, through the guidance of the advisory staff, learned to manage their time and study schedules to maintain a good academic status. As such, the program functioned much like a safety net for the participants.

Prior research showed first-generation college students experienced common issues related to academic, cultural, emotional, and financial challenges while in college (Housel & Harvey, 2011; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). This TRIO SSS program helped to alleviate some of the barriers related to social maladjustment, academic difficulties, and low income that Schwebel et al. (2012) found this student population faced. The TRIO SSS program helped to increase participant persistence and improved academic achievement, according to the participants.

Integration. Tinto (2012b) proposed integration into the college environment, both academically and socially, was critical to reducing student attrition. Similarly, O'Keefe (2013) found positive interactions with staff members led to lower student attrition. This current study confirmed those findings when integration issues emerged as one of the key themes for evaluating the TRIO SSS program. The participants thought the advisory meetings, in particular, helped improve their academic achievement. Rose reported the advisory meetings were "healthy for me...she [academic advisor] is really supportive and always gives me great feedback [and] suggestions."

According to Jill, the TRIO SSS advisor she met with was more helpful than her university academic advisor.

The participants found the mandatory meetings with the advisors led them to build a relationship with the advisors, and they reported feeling more at ease with advisors and staff members with each subsequent meeting. Overall, the participants reported feeling like the TRIO SSS staff members cared about them as people and also as students. In addition, the participants viewed the staff members as role models to emulate in regard to finishing their university degrees.

The image portrayed by the participant responses was the staff and other participants were viewed as part of a large family unit working together to succeed at the university. Once the participants built a relationship with the advisors and staff members, they did not want to let the staff members down, so the participants worked hard to maintain their grades and take responsibility for their academic careers. Opportunities to interact with other TRIO students were deemed so important that one of the suggestions given to implement in future TRIO SSS programming was to increase the number of group activities and gatherings so students could get to know the other participants better and develop more friendships.

Personal growth. The participants reflected upon the experiences they had traversed during this first year in the TRIO SSS program at this Midwest university. While the students clearly experienced personal growth as they adjusted to and integrated into the university environment, there was a clear indication personal growth occurred in other ways. The participants reported becoming more self-sufficient as the year progressed. Some reported a greater understanding of their personal selves. Peyson said

she had learned to look at both her strengths and weaknesses and to make a plan of action for improvement; this came primarily from her experiences in the advisory meetings over the course of the school year.

The findings of this current study also revealed the use of the cultural experience program led to a cultural awakening for several of the participants. The participants attended events, such as plays and concerts, which broadened their views of the world around them. Ashley reported her positive experiences with the cultural experience program when she said it “really just opens your eyes to new things.” The new experiences led one participant to inquire about traveling to foreign countries and about study abroad programs. Before the TRIO SSS program, the participant was unaware a study abroad program even existed.

The TRIO SSS staff gave participants experiences to which they might never have been exposed. Dumais et al. (2013) described this growth as building cultural capital through experiences and interactions with staff members. The cultural experience program provided by the TRIO SSS program acted to build cultural capital for the participants. The interactions with these key gatekeepers afforded the participants access to information they might not have realized were available (Dumais et al., 2013). Some participants also shared their knowledge of financial literacy had grown even on a personal level, and now they understood how to interact with their own money. Participants had become more financially responsible over the course of the school year. Michelle shared, “I know how to manage my money... so I don’t waste it on unneeded things...I know how to budget, at least.”

In general, participants reported finding ways to better themselves through interactions with the staff members and adjusting to the expectations of college. The importance of the TRIO SSS program in contributing to this personal growth was evidenced by the advice given for future students. That advice was for students to keep an open mind about the TRIO program and its staff and to be willing to ask questions. This indicated a belief the program and staff had the students' best interests in mind. Confirming these benefits, Petty (2014) found self-development of students in the areas of academic, social, and cultural development was paramount to student success in college.

Implications for Practice

It was clear, from reviewing these research findings, the vast majority of TRIO SSS participants thought the TRIO SSS program and staff at this Midwest university were supportive of their efforts to earn university degrees. The services offered by the TRIO SSS program also assisted participants in pursuing their educational goals. The ultimate answer to the research questions was that the TRIO SSS program and staff were doing a good job of meeting the participants' needs and should continue the practices currently in place.

The TRIO SSS program is a federal program which has to adhere to strict federal guidelines, so there may significant parameters imposed by the federal government regulations that will limit any modifications or additions that can be implemented into the existing program. If, however, changes can be implemented, the most popular suggestion was to provide more group activities. Implementing additional social gatherings for the participants would provide an opportunity for them to meet new people, experience

positive social interactions with other participants and the TRIO staff, and contribute to the develop of a sense of belonging to a group.

Other modifications to consider would be to increase the number of advising meetings during the second semester, provide a TRIO SSS program-specific orientation meeting, and provide workshops on other topics. The two topics which were suggested included how to go about studying abroad and understanding income taxes. Many of the participants expressed concerns with being adequately prepared to succeed in a higher education setting due to their limits of academic knowledge, procedural knowledge, understanding how to interact socially on campus, and being able to afford to pay for their education. Increases in the meetings and workshops would afford the students more opportunities to gain the information needed to make the best of their university experiences.

Finally, the one suggestion that might require more extensive planning and involvement for the TRIO SSS staff would be to sponsor volunteer work so that students can reap the benefits of experiences in the community. Although such a service might be very valuable to the students, it might also require more manpower and money than the TRIO SSS program can supply. Also, if these students are already struggling to manage their time, adding this additional commitment makes the suggestion one that should be evaluated carefully and implemented with great caution.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study contributed to the knowledge of how first-year TRIO SSS program participants perceived the benefits and barriers of their program, it was by no means exhaustive. Several changes in the structure of this study should be considered to

gain a more comprehensive view of the key issues first-generation college students, low-income students, and students with disabilities experience when attending a university and participating in a TRIO SSS program.

The first issue to address was that this study was conducted at a large Midwest university in the United States, which placed limitations on the generalizability of the findings. Additional research should be conducted on TRIO SSS programs at colleges or universities located in different geographic areas, possibly with greater cultural diversity. Colleges and universities of varying sizes should also be considered to see if the perceptions vary according to the size of the institutions.

The second issue that warrants modification in future studies was the choice of the sample population. This study had a very small sample size and included only first-year TRIO SSS participants. A larger sample of respondents might uncover additional issues not found in the current study. It would also be helpful to see if the benefits identified in the current study carry over into later university attendance years; thus, studying TRIO SSS participants who are in their second, third, or fourth years of participation in the program would likely lead to additional useful findings.

Additional research could also be conducted on students who have already participated in other TRIO programs at the secondary education level, to see if they have different needs than students who are new to the TRIO program altogether. Studying how the TRIO SSS program is supportive of families may also be of benefit to program leaders in the future.

A third recommendation is to consider addressing more detailed components of Tinto's (2012b) theory of early student departure when questioning the participants.

Such research could lead to improvements in the services and workshops offered by the TRIO SSS program. Closely related to this idea would be to consider asking questions focused on the three themes that were discovered in the responses given by the participants in this study. It might prove interesting to identify what specific skills developed and personal growth characteristics aided them the most in adjusting to and integrating into the higher education system.

Clearly, more qualitative research needs to occur to address the aforementioned research suggestions. Also, future researchers might consider merging qualitative and quantitative data to obtain the best information both methods can provide.

Summary

This qualitative study was designed to evaluate a government-funded student retention program using Tinto's (2012b) model of early student departure as a framework to interpret the findings. The study was conducted on first-year TRIO SSS participants through semi-structured interviews at a public Midwest university. The study was guided by two research questions intended to determine what acted as barriers or benefits to the participants while attending college and participating in the TRIO SSS program. A third research question was developed to investigate what suggestions the TRIO SSS participants had for improving program services for future participants. Tinto's (2012b) model of early student departure was used to determine if the findings of this study substantiated Tinto's earlier work and to determine if other findings would emerge to generate new theoretical perspectives on student attrition.

Many of the findings echoed the information shared in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. It was determined first-generation college students, low-income students,

and students with disabilities came to the university setting with pre-entry attributes; initial intentions, goals, and commitments; institutional experiences; a need to integrate into the higher education community, both academically and socially; and later goals and commitments, as proposed in Tinto's (2012b) theory. Any problems experienced at any of these stages had the potential to cause a student to depart from school. As the students in this study discussed their college experiences, three themes emerged as issues with which they had to deal: adjustment, integration, and being open to personal growth.

The participants shared in their interviews that one significant barrier they faced was the difficulty they experienced adjusting to this new way of life. Many struggled with the responsibilities that came with their new-found freedom and with the pressures of having to make many important decisions for themselves. With a lack of knowledge about university procedures and expectations, some of the participants suffered with poor grades, limited study skills, and the perception they were not prepared for the demands of university course work. The participants had to make adjustments, and in some cases, play catch-up, both academically and socially. The adjustments the participants made were viewed as stressful and left them with a sense of being all alone until they began participating in the TRIO SSS program.

Often the barriers the participants endured came from a lack of proper educational preparation, attendance at secondary education institutions in low-income areas that did not have adequate resources, and failure to take rigorous course work to prepare them for the academic rigor of university classes. Another barrier mentioned by the participants was having family members who were unable to provide the necessary procedural

knowledge about university demands, since the family members have not attended a university themselves.

This study also involved examination of the benefits experienced by the participants in the TRIO SSS program. Through interactions with the TRIO SSS program staff, the participants were able to gain valuable university procedural knowledge. The advisory meetings were proactive in nature and provided information to the participants without them having to request information during the semester. The interactions with the TRIO SSS staff members provided both a safe place for the participants to share their feelings and also a sense of being a part of a group which the participants deemed as important to them (O'Keefe, 2013).

According to Maslow (1954), in his hierarchy of needs theory, people need to experience friendship, a sense of family, increased self-esteem, and respect to feel like they belong to a group. High achievement and self-esteem development were found to be vital to first-generation college students in the areas of academics, social, and cultural development (Petty, 2014). The findings of this study suggested the multiple positive interactions with the TRIO SSS staff assisted the participants in dealing with the adjustments to university life, while also meeting the participants' personal needs (Swecker et al., 2013). The positive interactions experienced under the guidance of the TRIO SSS program led the participants to continue to attend this Midwest university.

The final area discovered to be critical to student success and student retention was the participants' experience of personal growth as they moved through adjustment and integration. The interactions the participants experienced during their first year in the TRIO SSS program gave them the opportunity to explore university life and provided the

impetus for their own evolution as a person. Because of the numerous positive interactions with staff members, the opportunities to relate to new people, and effective working with professors, the participants wanted to interact with other members in the TRIO SSS program and in the community.

After attending cultural experience events, the participants began to inquire about and wanted to have more cultural experiences, and they asked to get additional information about other academic program opportunities available to all university students. The experiences the participants acquired during their first years in the TRIO SSS program opened their eyes to all of the possibilities accessible to them. University faculty and staff should strive to provide robust learning environments and interactions with students that will help to them to achieve success and develop on a personal level (Jehangir et al., 2012), as was provided by this TRIO SSS program and staff members.

It is clear from the findings the TRIO SSS program services and staff members were providing a strong and supportive learning environment tailored to meet the needs of the participants. The TRIO SSS program staff also provided participants with appropriate social interactions, important university procedural knowledge, and cultural experiences that were much needed. The final, and possibly best, outcome noted in this study was the finding the TRIO SSS staff were excellent role models for the participants. The participants viewed the staff members as successful persons who often shared some of the same characteristics and challenges they experienced as first-generation college students or low-income students.

According to this current study, the TRIO SSS program services appeared to be vital to the success of these first-generation college students, low-income students, and

students with disabilities. The ultimate answer to the research questions examined in this study was that the TRIO SSS program at this Midwest university was doing an excellent job of providing support for first-year TRIO SSS participants, and it was recommended the program continue the practices that were in place.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What barriers have you experienced as a college student?
(Follow up: What factor or factors shaped those ideas?)
2. What are your thoughts on your experiences with advisory meetings in this program?
(Follow up: Have your thoughts changed about this experience as the year has progressed?)
(Follow up: If so, what made you change your mind?)
3. Of the other TRIO SSS programs you have participated in, which ones were beneficial and why?
4. Which of the TRIO SSS programs, if any, were of no use to you and why?
5. Please explain your experiences with members of the TRIO SSS staff.
6. Which TRIO SSS program have you found to be most beneficial and why?
7. Please tell about a service that you would think would be beneficial to TRIO SSS participants which could be implemented in the future. Please be specific with your answer.
8. What would you change about the current TRIO SSS program?
9. What advice would you give a perspective TRIO SSS participant?
10. Is there any question I should have asked you?
11. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix BApproval Letter
Institutional Review Board

DATE: February 3, 2015

TO: Raquel Morrow, Ed.D
FROM: Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: [693020-1] A Study of the Perceptions of First Year TRIO Student Support Services Participants

IRB REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: February 3, 2015
EXPIRATION DATE: February 3, 2016
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research project. Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the IRB.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the completion/amendment form for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of February 3, 2016.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

Appendix C

Midwest University Letter

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

February 13, 2015

Raquel Morrow Lindenwood University
Doctoral Student, Education

[REDACTED]

Dear Ms. Morrow:

I would like to take this opportunity to respond to your inquiry regarding the need for review and approval of your research project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at [REDACTED] University [REDACTED]. I have received your Lindenwood University IRB approval letter for the research project, *A Study of the Perceptions of First Year TRIO Student Support Services Participants*.

[REDACTED] IRB policies and procedures limit its jurisdiction in research involving human subjects to activities in which our faculty, staff, or students are *engaged in research*, according to the federal definition of engagement (per guidance from the Office of Human Research Protections on Engagement of Institutions in Human Subjects Research issued 10/16/2008). [REDACTED] only role in this project would be as voluntary research participants, should individuals choose to participate. Since [REDACTED] [REDACTED] will not be engaged in this project, your research does not require approval by the [REDACTED] IRB.

Please note that your research does not require [REDACTED] IRB approval and thus this letter should not be considered an approval, nor be interpreted as an endorsement of your project by [REDACTED] University. If you have additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Director, Research Administration

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action/Minority/Female/Veterans/Disability Employer and Institution

Appendix D

Recruitment Letter

LINDENWOOD**Lindenwood University School of Education****Department of Educational Leadership****TRIO Student Support Services Participants (first-year)**

Subject: Research Request

Dear _____

I am a doctoral student at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri, majoring in Higher Education Administration.

For my dissertation, I am conducting research to identify the perceptions of first-year TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) participants at your university. The purpose of this study is to determine which of the TRIO SSS program you find to be beneficial or a barrier in the pursuit of your college education and degree.

I want to invite all first year TRIO SSS participants to take part in the interview for this research project. This will involve conducting a brief in-person interview with you before April 1, 2015.

All information provided during the interview and your identity will be kept confidential. If you have any questions about the process, please contact me via email at _____ or by phone at _____. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Rhonda Bishop, at Lindenwood University at bishop@lindenwood.edu if you have any questions about this study.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Raquel A. Morrow
Doctoral Student
Lindenwood University

Appendix E

Informed Consent

LINDENWOOD

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

A Study of the Perceptions of First-Year TRIO Student Support Service Participants

Principal Investigator: Raquel A. Morrow Telephone: XXXXXXXXXX
E-mail: rmorrow@lindenwood.edu

Participant _____ Contact information _____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Raquel Morrow under the guidance of Dr. Rhonda Bishop. The purpose of this research is to examine what you think about the services you receive from the TRIO Student Support Service program at your university.
2. a) Your participation will involve: Meeting with the researcher in person one time to be interviewed. The interview will consist of 11 questions. Your answers will be recorded using an audio recorder, and the researcher will also take notes during the interview. Once your interview is completed, a typed transcript of the interview will be sent to you for your approval as to the accuracy of the typed transcript. The interview will take place on your university campus in the TRIO SSS offices.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation: The interview will take approximately one hour of your time. The review of your typed transcript will take approximately 30 minutes of your time for a total time investment in this project of one and a half hours. There is no compensation of any kind for participating in this research study.

Approximately 30 TRIO SSS students will be involved in this research.
3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about the TRIO Student Support Services program at your university.
5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any

questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study, and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Raquel Morrow at [REDACTED] or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Rhonda Bishop at [REDACTED]. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at [REDACTED].

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

 Participant's Signature

 Date

 Participant's Printed Name

 Principal Investigator's Signature

 Date

 Principal Investigator's Printed Name

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Vita

Raquel Morrow currently serves as an academic advisor for Southwest Baptist University in Greene County, Missouri. Morrow holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology and Special Education from Missouri Southern State University and a Master of Science Degree in Guidance and Counseling from Missouri State University.

Prior to her current role, Morrow served as a special education teacher and professional school counselor in public education settings in Arizona and Missouri. Morrow also served as an adjunct faculty member at Evangel University and Lindenwood University in Greene County, Missouri.