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The Impact of TRIO Student Support Services at a Midwestern Institution

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by

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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.

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Abstract

First-generation, low-income, and disabled college students are an increasing population (Tinto, 2012). TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) is an academic support program funded by the U.S. Department of Education that seeks to support this demographic to overcome challenges and thrive while in college (Coffman, 2011). Utilizing a mixed methods approach, the goal of this study was to examine the student success outcomes of retention and grade point average of TRIO SSS students compared to students who are similarly qualified but not being served by TRIO SSS at a Midwestern, large, public, four-year institution. In addition, TRIO SSS seniors were interviewed during focus groups. During focus groups, students reflected on their overall programmatic experiences in TRIO. A total of 1,913 students were involved in the quantitative analysis, and 16 TRIO seniors participated in the focus groups. Data analysis resulted in the emergence of four major themes: (a) relationships, (b) loyalty, (c) trust, and (d) transformation. These findings were consistent with other studies conducted within the scope of Tinto's (2012) theory of student retention. All of the interview participants identified a profound and personal emotional connection to their time in TRIO SSS. This study was significant due to the lack of previous research that couples the experiences of students with quantitative data. Implications for practice included, but were not limited to, stronger support for first-generation students through a range of campus partnerships and initiatives. Recommendations for future research included expanding this study by examining TRIO programs at other institutions and gathering perceptions of first-generation students through multiple focus groups.

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Chapter One: Introduction

First-generation college students embody about 33% of all students at public four-year institutions and 50% of students at community colleges (Engle, 2009). First-generation college students face many challenges and often lack knowledge of institutional processes, all while trying to be successful in post-secondary education (Tinto, 2012). As the number of students from non-college educated families continues to increase, so do concerns about effective programing to aid these students in their educational pursuits (Choy, 2011).

When compared to their counterparts, first-generation undergraduates are more likely to drop out of college at the end of their first year (Jean, 2011). These departures are often the result of a lack of connection to the institution coupled with family and financial dynamics (Tinto, 2012). In order for colleges and universities to provide a successful experience for first-generation students, methods to improve engagement must be implemented in order to ensure post-secondary success (Jean, 2011).

Background of the Study

In 1964, with hopes of boosting the stagnant and depressed economy, Congress established a number of programs to assist first-generation students, people stricken by poverty, and disabled Americans not only be able to enter college, but to persist and matriculate (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Collectively, these programs are known as Federal TRIO Programs. Today, eight total Federal TRIO programs exist. These federally funded services are designed to work with underrepresented populations in order to ensure post-secondary success and completion.

It is important to note TRIO is not an acronym. Federal TRIO Programs began with only three programs: Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Student Support Services (U.S. Department of Education, 2014e). Thus, the label of TRIO was born and has been retained to acknowledge the historical significance. A variety of TRIO programs serve students at different levels of their educational journeys. Specifically, for the purposes of this study, TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) was studied. In Chapter Two, all eight TRIO Programs are defined, and their significance to targeted groups in the United States is discussed. TRIO SSS assists undergraduates who are first in their families to attend college, students who meet the low-income standards as specified by the federal government, and students with both physical and learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

The goal of TRIO SSS is to increase the persistence, retention, and matriculation of program participants (Jean, 2011). The present study focused on one specific TRIO SSS program at a large, four-year, public, Midwestern institution. TRIO SSS provides grant-approved services that include, but are not limited to the following: tutoring, academic advising, study-skills assistance, financial assistance, mentoring, cultural enrichment events, personal counseling, workshops, and equipment lending (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Currently, services at this targeted university in the Midwest are available to 190 eligible students yearly until graduation. Students can enter the program at any time during their undergraduate careers, but generally enter as first-year freshmen to ensure success. Two-thirds of all admitted students must be both first-generation and low-income (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

With the use of a comprehensive recruitment, selection, and retention plan, students are encouraged to apply for TRIO by completing a two-page application which gives consideration to standardized eligibility criteria; GPA, ACT, or SAT scores; and placement test scores (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). It is important to note TRIO SSS seeks to serve students who are motivated and demonstrate potential to be successful in post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014e). All qualified students are interviewed, and if selected, begin TRIO SSS immediately (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). All freshmen are required to meet with their TRIO SSS advisors weekly; and sophomores, juniors, and seniors are required to meet a minimum of three times each semester (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). All students are required to complete a financial aid and financial literacy workshop each academic year to remain in good standing with the program (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Each year, the TRIO SSS program director is required to submit an annual performance report to the Department of Education that identifies the attainment of each standardized objective as determined in the original grant application (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). This report is reviewed by the Department of Education for grant compliance and decisions about funding continuation (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Programs that do not meet goals often have their funding reduced or eliminated from year to year (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Theoretical Framework

The framework most frequently referenced in higher education student retention literature is Tinto's theory of retention. Tinto originally published his beliefs about

retention in 1975, and his work was broadly consistent with a significant range of other research and had a theoretical origin, by correlation, to Durkheim's model of suicide (Tinto, 2012). Tinto's theory of student retention likely gained most of its backing because it was in line with people's reasonable beliefs about integration (Tinto, 1993). Because of the founding principles of the TRIO program, the theory of student retention as well as the theory of student departure (Tinto, 1993) served as the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

Tinto's model of student departure has also been widely used to understand reasons why students leave higher education. Tinto (1975) developed three sets of factors he believed were instrumental in student retention. The first set of factors included student-entry, or pre-college, characteristics (Tinto, 1975). These factors consist of family background, socio-economic status, and parental level of education and expectations (Tinto, 1975). Other individual attributes, including academic ability, race, gender, and goals are also considered (Tinto, 1975). In addition, commitments, such as reaching goals and institutional experiences, both academic performance and social experiences included for consideration (Tinto, 1975). This first set of factors are longitudinal in nature and describe students' attributes as they move from pre-college life to the on-campus experience.

Tinto (1975) suggested the second and third sets of factors consist of academic and social integration at students' respective institutions of higher education. Individual entry characteristics, Tinto (1975) noted, directly influence departure decisions. In addition, students' original commitments to an institution and the goal of college graduation influences integration into the academic and social structures of post-

secondary education (Tinto, 2012). Tinto (2012) suggested academic integration could be measured by the degree to which students meet academic performance standards. Tinto (2012) believed students' departure decisions were further influenced by their levels of social integration, such as peer group association, involvement in extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty members.

Statement of the Problem

According to the U.S. Department of Education's *National Study of Student Support Services Programs,* first-generation college students who are served by TRIO SSS programs achieve greater results than their counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Despite this success, most TRIO SSS programs are only funded to work with a fraction of students on their respective campuses (Coffman, 2011). For most colleges and universities, to model the programing that TRIO SSS provides for all students is cost prohibitive (Jean, 2011). Quite frankly, despite the long-standing history of TRIO programs, minimal current research exists which establishes the successes of the programs. With this said, a significant gap in research was apparent. The goal of this study was to fill the gap in research using both quantitative and qualitative data. Using quantitative research, retention rates and academic standing of TRIO SSS students were compared to students who are low-income and first-generation but are not being served by the TRIO SSS project. The purpose of the qualitative portion was to determine TRIO SSS participants' overall opinions and feelings about their programmatic experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the TRIO SSS program on the persistence, retention, and matriculation of its participants at a large, public, four-

year, Midwestern institution by collecting quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data, including retention rates and student success as measured by a 2.0 grade point average, were examined. Using qualitative data, the overall programmatic experiences of last-semester TRIO SSS seniors were studied.

Research questions and hypotheses. The following research questions and hypotheses guided this study:

1. What statistically significant difference exists, if any, in the retention rates of TRIO SSS students as compared to other first-generation, low-income, disabled students who are not served by the program?

$H1_0$. There is no statistically significant difference in the retention rates of TRIO SSS students and non-TRIO SSS students.

$H1_a$. A statistically significant difference exists in retention rates in students who participate in the TRIO Student Support Services program as compared to first-generation, low-income, disabled, students who are not served by the program.

2. What statistically significant difference exists, if any, in regards to student success as measured by a 2.0 grade point average for students in TRIO as compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the program?

$H2_0$. There is no statistically significant difference in student success, as measured by a 2.0 grade point average, for students in TRIO SSS as compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the program.

$H2_a$. A statistically significant difference exists in good academic standing, as measured by a 2.0 grade point average, for students in TRIO SSS as compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the program.

3. How do seniors who have participated in TRIO SSS perceive their overall Student Support Services (SSS) programmatic experience?

Definitions of Key Terms

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

Academic achievement. The U.S. Department of Education (2014a) defined academic achievement as the relative grade point average on a four-point scale at the end of an academic term.

Academic advising. The U.S. Department of Education (2014a) defined academic advising as the process of assisting students in making education plans, selecting and registering for courses, monitoring academic requirements, and assessing academic progress. In addition, academic advising provides students assistance in the areas of financial aid, career counseling, and graduate school guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Academic need. The U.S. Department of Education (2014a) defined academic need as the variety of instructional methods, educational services, or school resources provided to students in the effort to help them accelerate their learning progress, catch up with their peers, meet learning standards, or generally succeed in school.

Environment. Environment refers to the TRIO SSS program and the educationally purposeful services available to program-eligible students. For the purpose of this study, this includes four specific services of advising, peer tutoring, math assistance, and writing assistance (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

First-generation students. The U.S. Department of Education, through the Higher Education Act, has defined a first-generation student as an individual whose

parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, and in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Large, four-year, public, Midwestern institution. The large, four-year, public, Midwestern institution in this study is a Division I, state-funded institution that also grants/awards graduate degrees (Course Catalog).

Low-income. A low-income participant is one whose family's taxable income is less than 150% of the poverty level. The United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, sets guidelines for determining the poverty level for each cohort year (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Persistence. Persistence describes the process of both pursuing and achieving educational goals, inclusive of continuing students who are pursuing a bachelor's degree at the host institution as well as those students who have graduated (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Race and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity refers to the race and/or ethnic origin of the student as indicated on the Student Support Service application (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Retention. Retention refers to the extent to which students remain enrolled at the institution as they work toward achieving their academic goals (Tinto, 2012). For the purposes of this study, retention was examined from the fall semester to the spring semester.

TRIO. TRIO refers to programs created in response to the Educational Opportunity Act of 1964 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). This act served as the original War on Poverty statute (Coffman, 2011). These federally funded programs were designed to help first-generation, low-income, and disabled students overcome barriers related to class, academic success, and cultural barriers to higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

TRIO SSS. TRIO SSS is a federally funded program designed to (a) increase the college retention and graduation rates of first-generation, low-income students, and/or students with disabilities and to (b) facilitate their transition from one level of postsecondary education to the next (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). For the purposes of this study, TRIO SSS services include academic advising, tutoring, and math and writing assistance (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Tutoring. Tutoring is a form of academic support designed to supplement classroom instruction and help students gain a better understanding of subject material and course expectations for improved academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). For the purposes of this study, undergraduate or graduate students provide tutoring.

Limitations and Assumptions

The following limitations were identified in this study:

Sample demographics. Only students participating in TRIO SSS at a large, public, four-year, Midwestern institution were examined as part of this study. Students who participate in TRIO SSS were not limited to utilizing only those services provided by the TRIO SSS program. As at any institution, students may utilize other services

provided to all students. For example, the university tutoring center and career center provide academic assistance to all students. The fact participants in this study could have received services from other university programs could have influenced the results of the study. The focus group questions were self-written and are therefore accepted as a limitation (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2014).

Instrument. The focus group interview questions were self-written. Even though steps were taken to increase reliability and validity, the questions are therefore accepted as a limitation.

The following assumptions were accepted:

1. The responses of the participants were offered honestly and without bias.

Summary

As detailed, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students face multiple challenges in the pursuit of higher education. As this population continues to increase, so does the level of support necessary to ensure their success. Not many programs exist to support first-generation, low-income, and disabled students specifically. One such program was the subject of this study.

TRIO SSS, a federal TRIO retention program that provides practical resources to first-generation, low-income, and disabled students. These services include academic advising, mentoring, equipment lending, cultural exposure, and tutoring (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). The program is completely free to enrolled participants (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Tinto's (1993) theory of student retention, as well as the theory of student departure (Tinto, 1993), served as the theoretical framework of this study. Vincent Tinto

(2012) stated students leave higher education for three primary reasons: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and a student's failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution. In order to appropriately serve students from disadvantaged backgrounds, these challenges must be addressed and overcome.

While many campuses have TRIO SSS programs, the overall reach is relatively small. Generally, TRIO SSS grants are funded to serve 150-190 students each academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Furthermore, limited research has been conducted that specifically examines student perceptions coupled with retention and persistence data. An obvious gap in research related to the experiences of TRIO SSS students led to this study.

Key terms were defined in order to provide clarity. Of key importance, for the purposes of this study, retention rates were examined from fall enrollment status to spring enrollment status. Grade point averages were discussed based on fall 2014 and spring 2015 semester data. In addition, 11 other key terms were defined.

Research questions were self-developed using a mixed methods approach. Specifically for the purposes of this study, the TRIO SSS program at a large, public, four-year, Midwestern institution was examined to determine factors that contribute to the retention and academic success of its participants. Specifically, retention rates and grade point averages of TRIO SSS students were examined and compared to similarly qualified, non-TRIO SSS students. In addition, using focus group interviews, experiences of TRIO seniors were examined though the use of open-ended reflective questions. Lastly, suggestions for improvement for TRIO were offered.

The remainder of this dissertation is comprised of several chapters. Chapter Two consists of a review and summary of the research literature focused on (a) persistence of first-generation and low-income college students; (b) TRIO SSS and other TRIO programs; and (c) first-generation, low-income, disabled students. Chapter Three includes descriptions of the research design, the methods of data collection, and the methods of data analysis. Chapter Four includes a presentation of the results of the study. Chapter Five consists of (a) a discussion of the results within the context of prior research and theory related to programmatic factors that predict persistence, (b) recommendations for practice, and (c) recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

While it has been established TRIO programs are a tremendous resource to underrepresented populations, little work has been done to publicize and publish the success of the programs (Coffman, 2011). The purpose of this study was to examine and compare the outcomes of students being served by a TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program at a large, four-year, public, Midwestern institution to students meeting the same criteria attending the same institution, but who were not being served by the project. In this chapter, research on Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure is addressed as the organizational framework. In addition, relevant literature related to TRIO programs, student retention, and first-generation and low-income students is examined. The topics addressed in this chapter set the stage for a foundation, understanding, and motivation of the present study.

Theoretical Framework

Vincent Tinto offered the best-known student retention model in 1975. Tinto's work has a very significant tie to Durkheim's model of suicide (McCubbin, 2013). This connection is important, because essentially, Durkheim argued that if an individual has proper social support, the chances he or she will commit suicide are reduced (Tinto, 2012). McCubbin (2013) asserted the following:

> The act of committing suicide was essentially the willful withdrawal of an individual from existence and was therefore analogous to dropout from higher education, which was the willful withdrawal of an individual from one aspect of society. While in Durkheim's model of suicide, the individual is committing suicide because they are insufficiently integrated into society; Tinto asserts that

> dropout occurs because the individual is insufficiently integrated into different aspects of college or university life. (p. 2)

Tinto's (2012) model is well-supported because of its humanistic approach. Essentially, students must be involved and engaged (Tinto, 2012). The responsibility for this involvement and engagement belongs to both the student and the institution (Tinto, 2012). Tinto (2012) found the following:

> There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence. (p. 71)

The model of student departure, purported by Tinto (1975), has been widely used to understand the reasons higher education students leave colleges and universities. Tinto (1975) developed three sets of factors believed to be instrumental in student departure decisions: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and a student's failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution.

In 2012, Tinto identified four conditions within colleges and universities that promote retention: expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. These conditions are vital to student success. When all conditions are met, student success rates, including retention and GPA, are higher (Tinto, 2012). Each condition is detailed hereafter.

Expectations. Tinto (2012) referred to expectations as the first condition and what students believe of their individual abilities. Simply stated, "No one rises to low expectations" (Tinto, 2012, p. 7). Regularly, first-generation students lack the necessary confidence in their abilities to be successful in post-secondary education (Tinto, 2012). As a result, first-generation students have a lower outlook than their peers as it relates to personal and academic post-secondary education success (Jean, 2011).

Unfortunately, institutions often have low expectations for students during the first year. Pike and Kuh (2005a) indicated freshman students do not spend adequate time studying outside of the classroom. Some institutions have differing expectations of students based on pre-entry characteristics. Differing expectations are often expressed in the labels universities utilize to refer to groups of students, such as the term remedial (Tinto, 2012). Differing expectations are also highlighted based on the treatment and experiences of varying ethnic groups (Coffman, 2011).

Regardless of how it is conveyed, students quickly pick up on those expectations and are influenced by the extent those expectations corroborate their time at the institution. Such expectations are just what Coffman (2011) referred to in his research on support and achievement of nontraditional, first-generation, low-income students and what Jean (2011) referred to in a study of micro-aggressions students of color often experience at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Expectations are also conveyed tangibly through academic advising (Tinto, 2012).

Understanding the procedures and protocols and the networks that make up university life are critical to student success. Unfortunately, academic advising remains a hit-or-miss matter; some undergraduates are fortunate and locate the information they

desire, while some students never feel connected (Jean, 2011). The same can be said of informal advising, the sharing of collected understanding that goes on within an undergraduate institution and among faculty, staff, and students (Jean, 2011). Again, some students are able to make appropriate advising connections while others are not as lucky (Tinto, 2012).

Support. Tinto's (2012) second identified condition, support, comes in many different forms that include academic, social, and financial (Tinto, 2012). Support is most critical in the first year of college, because student success is still in question and responsive to intervention from the institution (Tinto, 2012). Many first-generation students lack the necessary backing in order to be successful in post-secondary education (Tinto, 2012). This lack of support stems from lack of high school preparation and college-educated peers and role models (Mahan, Wilson, Petrosko, & Luthy, 2014).

Regarding academic support, it is regrettably the circumstance that many students enter post-secondary education ill-prepared for the rigor and demands of undergraduate work (Tinto, 2012). For first-generation students, as well as for others, the convenience of educational support in the forms of tutoring, mentoring, and academic advising are vital components of retention (Tinto, 2012). The accessibility of collective support in the form of equipment lending, networking, financial assistance, and multicultural resource centers is also valuable to first-generation students (Tinto, 2012). Academic support centers provide support for students as well as a common space for groups of undergraduates who otherwise do not belong as the result of being minorities at a predominately white institution (Tinto, 2012). For disadvantaged students, academic

support offices serve as safe, identifiable systems that assist students to confidently circumnavigate the unacquainted environment of the university (Tinto, 2012).

According to research, social support is most effective when it is linked to the atmosphere in which students are required to engage in learning (Drake, 2011). For example, supplemental instruction affords direct academic support for a specific course to ensure student and academic persistence. As a support strategy, supplemental instruction is often utilized during key first-year entry courses (Drake, 2011). Such courses provide the foundation for future coursework (Drake, 2011).

Financial support is critical to the student success of first-generation students (Tinto, 2012). Without monetary means, obtaining a college degree would be difficult, and in many cases impossible, for first-generation students (Martin, 2009). Scholarships, federal grants such as PELL and work-study, and institutional aid allow opportunities for students who otherwise would not have them (Martin, 2009). Financial aid and financial literacy education are often not taught to first-generation students (Martin, 2009). Ensuring first-generation students have a good understanding of how financial aid works and how important it is to make wise choices with money promote first-generation student success (Tinto, 2012).

Assessment and feedback. In order to promote student success, assessment and feedback must be frequent and supportive. Again, Tinto (2012) argued this type of evaluation is most critical during the first year of college. First-generation students are often lost in the shuffle as they attempt to navigate college. As a result, advice and guidance are not provided as frequently as to students who come from college-educated families (Tinto, 2012). First-generation students are more likely not to request the

necessary guidance to be successful (Drake, 2011). When assessment and feedback are provided, if negative, they can be detrimental to the retention and persistence of a first-generation student (Coffman, 2011). Regular grade reports, especially at midterm, are invaluable (Drake, 2011). Professors who take a sincere interest in their students and guide them through the collegiate experience are vitally important (Drake, 2011). Students who are involved and engaged within their campus environments are more likely to remain in college and be successful (Tinto, 2012).

Involvement. Tinto (2012) purported involvement is the most important condition for students. Students who are involved and engaged within their campus environments are more likely to remain in college and be successful (Tinto, 2012). Students have the opportunity to join student organizations, work on campus, and attend events in order to become integrated into the campus community. Involvement for first-generation students can make or break the collegiate experience (Tinto, 2012). Lower performance rates of first-generation students can be attributed to a lack of engagement (Tinto, 2012). Involvement also includes utilizing support services, engaging with faculty and staff, studying with others, and taking on leadership roles (Tinto, 2012). When students are not involved on campus, it often leads to withdrawal (Drake, 2011).

Early integration experiences of first-generation students are critical. According to Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, and Duron (2013), one of the major reasons why first-generation students are often less involved is because they feel they do not fit in or belong. While the academic component of college is to prepare for the workforce, the social engagement piece is just as important (Petty, 2014).

Tinto (2012) proclaimed students who voluntarily or involuntarily withdraw from

institutions are unable to successfully disconnect from their families and transition to their new communities. Voluntary and involuntary withdrawals are very important to distinguish. Institutions can do their part to help in each type of withdrawal.

Involuntary withdrawals are mostly academic dismissals and involve the student not meeting academic standards leading to subsequent dismissal (Tinto, 2012). Academic success is generally measured by a 2.0 grade point average (Tinto, 2012). Students who fall below a 2.0 grade point average are generally placed on academic probation (Drake, 2011).

Students who fail to raise their grade point averages above a 2.0 for a second semester are often then removed from school, or in other words, placed on academic suspension (Drake, 2011). Students can appeal; however, the likelihood they will be able to successfully raise their GPAs in a timely fashion is slim (Martin, 2009). Early intervention on the part of institutions is the key in order to prevent this from happening (Tinto, 2012). For each student that an institution loses, the institution also loses revenue (Drake, 2011). Institutions must be more proactive in their approach to retain disadvantaged students (Drake, 2011).

Voluntary withdrawal can be caused by a number of factors. Tinto (2012) suggested multiple variables that impede college persistence exist within the context of academic and social interaction. John Bean's theoretical framework advanced Tinto's work and included external environmental factors, such as finances and outside encouragement of family and peers, as predictors in student adjustment and persistence (Tinto, 2012). These factors were not in Tinto's original student persistence model but were ultimately included in Tinto's updated theory.

Especially true for first-generation students, college is not something participated in instead of something else, but something that is in addition to a host of other things (Tinto, 2012). Tinto (2012) updated his theory and presented a longitudinal model of persistence that considers extra- and intra-campus variables and their influence on student retention. Tinto's (2012) revised model of student departure covers five areas: pre-entry attributes, goals commitment, institutional experiences, adjustment goals, and commitment and outcomes. The areas of Tinto's (2012) revised model most relevant for this study are pre-entry attributes, institutional experiences, and adjustment. The pre-entry attributes pertain to the student's parental level of college education and the impact on the student's formal and informal institutional experiences within the academic/social system.

TRIO Programs

Opportunities exist to support students who have the desire to continue their learning into higher education. Students who are low-income, first-generation, or disabled qualify for TRIO services (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). While this study focused specifically on one of the eight federal TRIO programs, Student Support Services, it is beneficial to understand and have an overview of all the programs under the auspices of TRIO.

TRIO programs are one of the many outcomes of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). In 1964, TRIO programs were established as one of the direct results of the Economic Opportunity Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). TRIO programs were funded under Title IV, Section 402D, of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). The

underlying purpose of TRIO programs is to provide educational opportunities to people who, in many cases, would not otherwise have access to such opportunities (Groutt, 2013).

The rationale behind the Higher Education Act of 1965 stemmed from the idea financial aid alone was not enough to support disadvantaged students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Since 1965, TRIO programs have increased from three total programs to eight (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). The TRIO programs currently serving students include the following: Upward Bound, Veterans Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math and Science, Talent Search, Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers, the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, and the Training Program for TRIO Staff (McElroy & Armesto, 2009).

Each TRIO program represents a unique contract between the U.S. Department of Education and a university, college, or community organization, and for this reason it can sometimes be difficult to explain the success of specific programs (Mahoney, 2010). All eight TRIO programs help disadvantaged students prepare for, enter, and achieve success at the post-secondary level (Carey, Callahan, Cunningham, & Agufa, 2014). Over 1,000 colleges and universities are funded to provide TRIO services to low-income, first-generation, and disabled students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

TRIO funds are distributed through a rigorous competitive grant writing process (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Over 2,800 TRIO grants allow institutions to work with more than 790,000 low-income, first-generation, and disabled Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Each TRIO Program serves a specific purpose,

group of students, and has a unique set of program objectives (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Upward Bound focuses at high schools where participants are from low-income, first-generation families (U.S. Department of Education, 2014d). The aim of the Upward Bound program is to prepare students for college (U.S. Department of Education, 2014d). The overall goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate of first-generation and low-income students who enter and complete post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014d). Upward Bound projects are required to provide tutoring and courses in core subject areas including composition and mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2014d). Other components of Upward Bound include academic advising, free tutoring, personal and academic counseling, cultural exposure, work-study internship opportunities, and services designed to teach participants about financial aid and financial literacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2014d). Currently, 964 programs are serving more than 65,000 students across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2014d).

Educational Talent Search works with middle school and high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to be successful in post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Staff from Educational Talent Search programs work with larger populations of students than Upward Bound, making services more general without as much one-to-one support (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Educational Talent Search programs provide tutoring, career exploration, aptitude assessments, counseling, mentoring, workshops, financial aid, and financial literacy education, as well as guidance on assistance on secondary school

reentry, alternative education programs, and post-secondary entry (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Students are eligible to participate in Educational Talent Search beginning in fifth grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). The objective of Educational Talent Search is to increase the rate at which participants complete high school and enroll in a college (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Currently, more than 360,000 students are enrolled in 466 programs across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

Educational Opportunity Centers assist qualified adults with the college admissions process in order for them to enter or continue post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014e). Other services offered by Educational Opportunity Centers include tutoring, mentoring, financial assistance, and testing for qualifying adults (U.S. Department of Education, 2014e). The objective of Educational Opportunity Centers is to help raise the number of adult participants who enroll in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2014e). One of the key objectives is to improve the financial literacy of program participants (U.S. Department of Education, 2014e).

The Staff and Leadership Training Authority, better known simply as the Training Program for Federal TRIO programs, is a grant awarded to institutions in order to provide training to increase the skills and expertise of TRIO staff nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2014c). Funding is used for conferences, seminars, internships, workshops, or publication of manuals, and trainings include information about federal legislation and regulations, student retention strategies, educational technology, and recruitment (U.S. Department of Education, 2014c). Training topics are developed as the direct result of

priorities created by the Secretary of Education and detailed in the Federal Register (U.S. Department of Education, 2014c).

The Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program prepares undergraduate and graduate students for doctoral studies through participation in research and other scholarly activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). The program objective is to increase the completion of doctoral degrees by students who are low-income and first-generation (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). These projects provide tutoring, academic counseling, summer internships, and seminars (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). McNair projects generally work with 25-50 participants annually and are highly selective programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b).

Upward Bound Math and Science serves high school students in order to fortify their math and science skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2014g). The goal of the program is to increase post-secondary science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2014g). Upward Bound Math and Science provides summer programs, counseling and advisement, exposure to faculty members who conduct math and science research, computer training, participant-conducted research, and financial and economic education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014g). Currently 115 programs serve 6,250 students throughout the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2014g).

Veterans Upward Bound works with veterans and their dependents in order to prepare them for acceptance and success in post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014f). The goal of Veterans Upward Bound is to increase the rate of

veterans and their dependents who enroll in post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014f). Veterans Upward Bound provides practical support in the form of mentoring, counseling, tutoring, and academic instruction in key areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2014f).

TRIO Student Support Services. The last program discussed and the focus of this study, TRIO SSS, is a retention program designed to work with undergraduate students who are first-generation, low-income, and/or disabled. The objective of TRIO SSS is to increase the persistence, retention, and matriculation of participants and to assist students with graduate school entry (Balz & Esten, 1998). According to Coffman (2011), TRIO programs are successful; however, little research has been done to highlight why these programs are successful.

The TRIO SSS was created in 1968 with the authorization of the Higher Education Amendment Act of 1968 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). TRIO SSS offers many diverse examples of successful retention programming for first-generation and low-income populations such as free tutoring, mentoring, financial aid, and financial literacy counseling, as well as personal counseling (U.S. Department of Education, 2014e). Currently, more than 945 programs exist that serve more than 200,000 students nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2014e).

Students are selected for the program after the TRIO staff reviews completed applications to verify eligibility, and the students complete individual interviews with TRIO staff to determine interest level (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). Upon acceptance into the program, students can immediately take advantage of all program resources (U.S. Department of Education, 2014c). TRIO participants are a diverse group

with the national break-down as follows: 42% of students are White, 35% are African-American, 15% are Hispanic, 4% are Native American, and 4% are Asian (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

In 1997, Westat, Inc. completed an assessment report regarding the impact of TRIO SSS nationally (Chaney, 2010). The study was quasi-experimental and utilized regression analyses (Chaney, 2010). A total of 5,800 students at 47 colleges and universities were tracked over a three-year period (Chaney, 2010). The TRIO SSS participants were compared to 2,900 low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities not being served by TRIO SSS (Chaney, 2010). The students were enrolled during the 1991-1992 academic year (Chaney, 2010). The results of the study demonstrated the TRIO SSS participants were more likely to remain enrolled in college, earn more credits, and earn higher grade point averages (Chaney, 2010). Students were 12% more likely to be retained the second year and 23% more likely to be retained the third year (Chaney, 2010). Compared to similarly qualified undergraduates, the TRIO SSS students' GPAs were 7% higher in the first year, 5% higher the second year, and 4% higher over three years than the GPAs of their counterparts (Chaney, 2010).

Evidence exists that TRIO SSS programs improve retention rates among participants (Chaney, 2010). According to one 2010 study, TRIO SSS students were four times more likely to earn a four-year degree and two times more likely to earn a graduate degree than students from similar backgrounds who were not participants (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). In the same study, TRIO SSS students were determined to be twice as likely to remain in college as non-participants (U.S. Department of Education, 2014c). Regarding minority and disadvantaged students

served, TRIO SSS has been identified as a model program that produces the greatest outcomes (Chaney, 2010).

A 2010 National Evaluation of Student Support Services found TRIO SSS students were eight to 10 percentage points more likely to have received a bachelor's degree or higher or associate's degree or higher than their counterparts (Chaney, 2010). The TRIO SSS students were 12% to 18% more likely to either still be in college or to have received a baccalaureate degree than would be estimated if they had not received services (Chaney, 2010). It is important to note that rates vary, as campus programs are examined individually.

As a national average, 60% of SSS students enter college at the age of 18 or 19, compared with 90% of all freshman nationwide (Chaney, 2010). Two-thirds, or 67%, of TRIO SSS participants are female, compared to the national average of 53% (Chaney, 2010). Roughly 6% of TRIO SSS students have some kind of disability, with learning disabilities being the leading type, compared to 2% among freshmen nationwide (Chaney, 2010). Sixty-four percent of TRIO SSS participants choose a college within 50 miles of home, compared to the national average of 46% (Chaney, 2010). Eighty-two percent of TRIO SSS participants nationwide receive financial aid versus 42% of undergraduates nationwide (Chaney, 2010).

A few services appear to stand out that promote student success: tutoring, peer mentoring, labs, workshops, and services for students with disabilities (Chaney, 2010). TRIO staff spent an average of 32 hours per week providing services to students (Chaney, 2010). In line with Tinto, TRIO SSS participants tend to be more successful

because of the academic, social, and financial support they receive as a benefit of program participation (Chaney, 2010).

In the remainder of this chapter, several topics are covered. First, literature regarding retaining disadvantaged students, specifically first-generation and low-income students, is addressed. Next, pre-entry characteristics, access issues/navigating/academic factors, social and cultural factors, and work and family obligations are presented. These topics provide the necessary historical and descriptive context for the topic at hand.

Retaining Disadvantaged Students

The retention of first-generation college students remains an important goal for all postsecondary institutions. Many institutions struggle to retain a significant amount of these students (Museus & Quaye, 2009). According to Museus and Quaye (2009), more than 50% of all students who enter higher education depart prematurely from their institutions. Tinto (2012) argued students depart prematurely because of a lack of adequate connection to and support from the institutions. The reasons for retention failure are widely unknown and not easily credited to a specific set of explanatory factors (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2014).

Again and again, students who attend college fail to persist until graduation (Roberts & Styron, 2010). More than ever, student retention is a hot topic in higher education (Drake, 2011). The national six-year graduation rate for undergraduate students ranges between 50-56% (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2009; Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2010). Low retention rates not only hurt students economically, but hurt colleges and universities as well (Drake, 2011). Higher education administrators must be well informed of the full picture of why students leave institutions of higher learning

prior to completing degrees and what can be done to overcome these barriers (Tinto, 2012).

One of the most important factors related to student retention is the interaction and engagement between a student and his or her academic advisor (Roberts & Styron, 2010). According to a 2005 study, academic advising plays a role in students' decisions to persist and also affects their graduation outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Furthermore, students who leave institutions without graduating often cite poor advising as one of the major components of their decision (Tuttle, 2009).

Most students take great pride in their relationships with their advisors (Roberts & Styron, 2010). This relationship is often built on the advisor's understanding of the student's background and needs (Drake, 2011). Academic advising contains vital aspects of mentoring and counseling and centers around relationship building (Roberts & Styron, 2010). Quality academic advising allows students to develop a consistent relationship with someone at the institution who is sincerely vested in their success (Drake, 2011). Advisors teach students how to navigate the maze of higher education; to become more self-aware of their talents, values, and priorities; to find balance; and to cultivate academic skills and knowledge needed to succeed (Drake, 2011).

First-generation students have unique needs and expectations for their advising relationships. For first-generation students, attending college is an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and make it out of what they may perceive to be tough living conditions (Tinto, 2012). Advisors must be aware of the financial constraints first-generation students face and care enough about them to give the necessary push to be retained and have an on-time, four-year graduation (Tinto, 2012).

Along with academic advising, personal counseling is very important for first-generation students who bring their own set of challenges to college with them. While first-generation students are often reluctant to work with a counselor, when they do, counselors are often able to help them navigate issues of homesickness, family, changing relationships, and campus life (Tinto, 2012). Quality counseling services are imperative for student success (Tinto, 2012).

Other successful retention strategies include specific programming for at-risk student populations, proactive intervention, early warning, enhancement programming of basic skills, student and learning skills education, the development of appropriate learning settings, counseling, inclusiveness, and diversity education (Tinto, 2012). Simply stated, institutions that implement similar programming do not leave academic success to chance. Instead, institutions encourage and often require students who are at-risk to participate in similar programming. Regardless of the structure, successful institutions do not wait for problems to develop; they are actively involved beforehand or as soon as possible (Sedlacek, 2011).

First-generation students often do not possess the appropriate study and learning skills to be successful in post-secondary education (Tinto, 2012). When these skills are taught, in part, it helps level the playing field to ensure equal opportunity is given to first-generation students (Drake, 2011). Study and learning skills tend to be most effective when given meaning in the context of a course (Tinto, 2012). Study and learning skills, in addition to helping students increase their grades, are successful in boosting first-generation students' self-esteem and self-concept (Drake, 2011).

First-generation and low-income college students. During the past decade, 4.5 million first-generation students enrolled in college (Engle & Tinto, 2009). First-generation college students account for nearly 50% of today's college campuses (Choy, 2011). According to Coffman (2011), American universities are increasingly admitting first-generation college students whose parents have not completed a four-year degree, and often these students struggle academically, socially, and financially. Post-secondary education is a vital component to being successful in this global society (Kirshner, Saldivar, & Tracy, 2011). To date, minimal research has been introduced on first-generation college students that expands beyond general descriptive characteristics, including factors like race and income levels (Gibbons & Borders, 2010).

First-generation students tend to be from low-income families (Tinto, 2012). Disadvantaged students are also more likely to belong to ethnic minority groups and are more likely to be female than male (Chen & Carroll, 2010). In addition, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students have lower college entrance examination scores, are less prepared academically for college, and perceive they are lacking support from those at home (Sedlacek, 2011). In most cases, their perception is reality as their families are ill-equipped to support them given a lack of knowledge regarding the experiences of the students (Sedlacek, 2011).

According to research conducted by Sedlacek (2011), first-generation, low-income, and disabled students also have lower grade point averages. As a result, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students are more likely to drop out of college and are more likely to be part-time students (Sedlacek, 2011). During their collegiate experience, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students experience cultural

difficulties and often feel marginalized, encounter lower faculty expectations, have lower self-esteem, and are more likely to enroll at a two-year institution and to leave college without a degree (Tinto, 2012).

Following a longitudinal study, Chen and Carroll (2010) found among high school seniors enrolled in post-secondary education, 46% obtained a four-year degree within eight years, but only 24% of first-generation students completed a four-year degree during the same respective timeframe. Similarly, Riehl (1994) discovered first-generation students have significantly higher attrition rates than other students. Ishitani (2003) determined when sex, income, and race were examined, first-generation students' departure rates were 71% higher.

Unfortunately, first-generation students are twice as likely to leave college without completing a degree compared to non-first-generation students (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2009). Departure from higher education is oftentimes the result of an overall lack of family support, high school support, educational goals, and the financial considerations necessary that lead to the decision to attend college (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). In order to motivate first-generation students, one must begin with an understanding of first-generation, low-income students' environment, background, and the comprehension that not all students are motivated by the same things (Martin, 2009). The journey to help first-generation students does not end once they enroll in college; it is only the beginning (Hsiao, 1992). Colleges and universities must take the time to understand the unique needs of first-generation students in order to assist them appropriately.

Pre-entry characteristics. Tinto (2012) discussed the significance of pre-entry traits, including academic preparation, prior to enrolling in post-secondary education. The quality of a student's prior teaching and his or her readiness for undergraduate academic workload significantly impacts student success in college (Drake, 2011). The majority of incoming students are underprepared for university-level reading, writing, and math, requiring them to begin their postsecondary studies by enrolling in remedial synthesizing (Sedlacek, 2011). Completion of a strong high school curriculum is an important predictor of undergraduate success and retention (Sedlacek, 2011). Additionally, high school academic achievement indicators including grade point averages and class rank are positively related to undergraduate retention (Sedlacek, 2011).

First-generation students often lack academic preparation as the direct result of attending lower-performing schools (Hsiao, 1992). First-generation students generally have a tougher transition from high school into college than their counterparts (Tinto, 2012). Often, first-generation students may not get the help they need to prepare for and enroll in college as a result of many under-resourced high schools (Coffman, 2011).

Engle et al. (2009) revealed first-generation students feel their high school curriculums are not rigorous, and they are not appropriately prepared for college. In a 2006 study, Coffman (2011) concluded most students did not acquire the necessary study skills in high school for collegiate success. According to Coffman (2011), "This factor often accompanies lower family incomes and lower high school engagement" (p. 85).

Naumann, Bandalos, and Gutkin (2010) illustrated a link between lower grade expectations of first-generation students with a lack of self-confidence regarding their

own academic skills. First-generation students are less likely to have meaningful conversations with counselors and peers regarding what it takes to pursue post-secondary education with counselors and peers. Consequently, first-generation students tend to be at a disadvantage with respect to post-secondary education competence (Coffman, 2011). In many instances, first-generation students may not have anyone in their social circles who can help them navigate the process (Naumann et al., 2010). Often, school counselors in low-performing districts find their time is consumed with behavior issues, giving the counselors little to no time to focus on college preparation (Coffman, 2011). Students who believe in themselves are more likely to engage in learning strategies that lead to successful academic performance (Naumann et al., 2010).

First-generation students tend to have lower SAT and ACT scores than their counterparts (Riehl, 1994). First-generation students often receive less money in scholarships and graduate from college with more debt (Riehl, 1994). Roughly 55% of first-generation students are required to take remedial courses during their college years (Tinto, 2012). As a result, first-generation students tend to take longer to graduate and incur more debt (Tinto, 2012). Taking longer to graduate and incurring more debt can be particularly discouraging to students, leading to attrition (Tinto, 2012).

Sedlacek (2011) studied high school tenth graders whose educational experiences were tracked for 13 years and revealed only 25% of first-generation youth were scholastically equipped for college. Only 50% of students included in the study (or about 13% of all first-generation youth) were admitted into college (Sedlacek, 2011). In comparison, almost 60% of non-first-generation students were academically prepared for

the rigor of college, and over 75% were admitted into post-secondary education (Sedlacek, 2011).

Access issues/navigating/academic factors. First-generation students often perceive the college experience differently (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2011). Students whose parents did not complete a four-year degree often lack knowledge when it comes to maneuvering through a college campus (Tinto, 2012). First-generation students are often hesitant to utilize student loans and lack adequate information to access financial aid (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). First-generation students often do not know what questions to ask or whom to ask as it relates to navigating college (Coffman, 2011).

First-generation students, often out of fear, do their best to remain anonymous so they do not bring any additional attention to themselves (Coffman, 2011). As a result, first-generation students continue to be left behind in terms of retention and success rates. For example, first-generation college students are less involved in on-campus activities (Dennis, Phinney, & Cuateco, 2010). Dowd, Cheslock and Melguizo (2011) asserted the following:

> As a result of pervasive educational inequalities in the K-12 system, low-income and first-generation college students who attend community colleges are most often not competitive for admission to traditional four-year institutions as freshman. Upon entering the community college, they are placed into developmental and remedial work. (p. 12)

Consequently, transfer rates of first-generation students are much higher than non-first-generation students (Tinto, 2012). First-generation students seek educational experiences and environments where they feel like they belong (Tinto, 2012). A high proportion of

first-generation students first attend community colleges in order to save money (Coffman, 2011).

First-generation students often have lower grade and educational goals and have doubts about their educational ability (Duggan, 2001). First-generation students are less likely to reside in on-campus housing, understand and utilize campus resources, have access to appropriate mentors, be engaged with staff and faculty members, and are overall less content with the campus atmosphere (Pike & Kuh, 2005a). Pike and Kuh (2005b) found first-generation students make less progress in their learning and intellectual development. When students are not engaged in college, their overall experiences can be isolating and disconnecting (Tinto, 2012). These challenges can be magnified at larger institutions (Coffman, 2011).

Institutional leadership is pivotal in the development of a campus inclusive of first-generation students and student success. In order to effectively engage first-generation students, retention and outcomes must be critical pieces of academic and student affairs. Retention and transfer committees, research on student success, and student success programming are a few ways that institutions can support first-generation, low-income, and disabled students (Drake, 2011).

Institutions can also support students by implementing first-generation student-specific orientation, first-year transition coursework, and intrusive advising (Tinto, 2012). In an intrusive advising environment, students are required to meet with their advisors on a regular basis (Drake, 2011). Most institutions have some form of orientation, but often that orientation can still be confusing to many first-generation students and their families (Coffman, 2011).

Creating a first-year experience that goes beyond the typical orientation is critical (Tinto, 2012). A course where instructors are actively engaged with and concerned about the success of students is vital (Coffman, 2011). Strong relationships with faculty, staff, and peers help students overcome issues related to access and navigating college (Tinto, 2012).

Transfer and mobility. First-generation, low-income, and disabled students transfer for many reasons. These reasons include, but are not limited to academic difficulty, financial hardship, and a lack of connection to campus (Contomichalos, 2014). In most cases, some combination of the three exists (Contomichalos, 2014). In addition, due to family dynamics, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students are often required to move residences more often than families where at least one parent has earned a four-year degree (Contomichalos, 2014).

First-generation students often opt to attend community college before going on to a four-year institution because of the costs (Contomichalos, 2014). One of the major challenges faced by transfer students is connecting to their respective campuses. First-generation, low-income, and disabled students are often lost when trying to navigate their new campuses (Tinto, 2012). From the moment of interest, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students often receive less support because of transfer processes that are not clearly defined (Contomichalos, 2014). Students who start at a college during their freshman year are more likely to be highly engaged than a first-generation, low-income, or disabled transfer student. (Contomichalos, 2014).

In addition, students in this population also face the reality that some of their previously earned credits might not transfer (Drake, 2011). Working hard and not having

credits recognized can be especially discouraging for first-generation, low-income, or disabled students (Fain, 2012). One study showed only 30% of first-generation students who transfer graduate within the additional two years (Fain, 2012). That leaves 70% of first-generation transfer students who never experience an on-time graduation (Fain, 2012). With such an alarming number of first-generation students who take longer to graduate, one must fully understand the additional challenges students face as disadvantaged transfer students.

Other challenges faced by first-generation, low-income, and disabled transfer students are financial aid problems, academic problems, and integration of the curriculum (Contomichalos, 2014). Many colleges have very limited scholarships and other financial aid options outside of PELL grants and loans for transfer students (Contomichalos, 2014). Coupling financial hardship with lack of academic and social integration can sometimes be almost debilitating for students.

Supportive relationships and access to resources are the keys to unlock doors of success for disadvantaged populations (Fain, 2012). Programs specifically designed to identify clear academic pathways to success for students through academic advising are critical. Such programs promote student adjustment, success, integration, community knowledge, retention, and persistence (Fain, 2012).

Social and cultural factors. College requires individuals to adjust socially (Tinto, 2012). Students who only attend class and return home without engaging in campus life are less likely to remain enrolled at the institutions (Coffman, 2011). For more than 30 years, scholars and experts have been stressing the significance of fruitful social incorporation for student outcomes (Coffman, 2011; Tinto, 2012).

The creation of friendships with peers and the development of mentors and relationships with faculty have been acknowledged as essential elements for student integration (Tinto, 2012). For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is also important to eliminate cultural barriers so students can develop a sense of belonging to the university community (Tinto, 2012). Connecting socially with a university community has been shown to be a process that takes time (Coffman, 2011), so it is essential for students to connect to the campus culture early on in their academic experience. Participating in extracurricular activities and getting involved in campus traditions can also positively affect institutional promise and student success (Drake, 2011).

A majority of first-generation students are also ethnic minorities (Sedlacek, 2011). Being an ethnic minority comes with its own set of challenges, as most institutions of higher education employ very few ethnic minorities to whom first-generation students can look for support (Ishitani, 2006). In addition, often first-generation students bring minimal levels of cultural and social capital to college with them (Tinto, 2012). Cultural capital is defined as a greater awareness of the university system, its cultural values, as well as the intellectual prowess and financial ability necessary to function independently as a university student (Ishitani, 2006).

Simply stated, first-generation students often do not understand the rules as it pertains to higher education. This lack of cultural capital is often highlighted freshman year and continues throughout the overall collegiate experience (Coffman, 2011). Even as students' progress to graduate education, cultural capital must be relearned and enhanced in order to be successful.

The collegiate experience provides a vehicle for acquiring additional cultural/social capital and support, therefore accounting for this deficit. Students who are first-generation are faced with different trials than college students from families where parents have completed post-secondary education (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). Research has shown first-generation college students have lower levels of academic and social integration in the university environment, which are critical factors that lead to students' departures (Tinto, 2012).

In addition to the typical anxiety and frustration of college, first-generation students face stressors associated with social and cultural transitions (Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995). Because first-generation students do not possess the same level of social capital as their counterparts, first-generation students are sometimes faced with many struggles that include racism, classism, financial difficulty, poor college preparation, and family issues (Cushman, 2009). Once first-generation students arrive on a college campus they are quickly forced to make adjustments in order to be successful both academically and socially (Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

Intermittently, first-generation students view themselves as outsiders and their peers as a club of insiders with different expectations about ways of speaking, dressing, leisure, and interacting with faculty (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). First-generation students often struggle to find a network of friends who allow them to stay true to their own sense of self (Cushman, 2009). A study by Saenz and Barrera (2010) produced results that illustrated first-generation students are more likely to live off-campus, therefore hindering them from becoming fully integrated into the university system.

An additional area where first-generation college students lack the necessary social capital is in the ways they approach and cope with stress while at college (Metha, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). Quite often, when under stress, first-generation students make poor choices that include not attending class, spending money on unnecessary things, not utilizing resources, not talking to anyone about their problems, and dropping out of college altogether (Coleman-Tucker, 2014). Luckily, first-generation college students often find help from an unlikely source—one another (Coleman-Tucker, 2014).

Supportive relationships are often more difficult to establish for first-generation students due to cultural and social differences; however, relationships allow students to manage stress, struggles, changes, and instability (Coffman, 2011). Mentoring programs are vital to ensuring the success of first-generation students (Tinto, 2012). Increasing numbers of institutions offer programing to improve first-generation student academic success; however, many programs further isolate students, preventing them from appropriate campus integration (Coleman-Tucker, 2014).

Out-of-class communication and out-of-class support are critical to first-generation student success, because they give first-generation students an outlet, support system, and connection to the institution (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2009). Supportive peer relationships can alter adjustment to college (Swenson et al., 2009). For first-generation college students, one might argue relationships are more valuable for stress reduction than are certain academic behaviors (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Work, family obligations, and socioeconomic status. Perna (2010) reported parents of first-generation students did not have the knowledge or experience to appropriately advise their children about college entrance. Many first-generation

students get inaccurate and vague family support (Jenkins et al., 2013). Oftentimes, parents of first-generation students support students though the admissions process but can often become disconnected as the process continues (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). This disconnect leads to dissonance. In some cases, family relationships for first-generation students can even become antagonistic (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). First-generation students often need advice on how to navigate this dynamic (Tinto, 2012)

First-generation students also often carry the title of low-income due to their families' low earning potential as the result of not being college educated (Engle & Tinto, 2009). Low-income families have a harder time understanding the benefits of pursuing post-secondary education, but many first-generation students' socioeconomic class serves as the inspiration to attend college (Jenkins et al., 2013). Socioeconomic class is a significant barrier to college access (Jenkins et al., 2013).

First-generation students seek to have meaningful careers with incomes that exceed what they are a product of historically (Jenkins et al., 2013). One 1992 study found first-generation students want and expect to do better than their parents (Jenkins et al., 2013). Many first-generation students believe "the baccalaureate degree is a means toward upward mobility and represents the single most important run in the educational-attainment ladder in terms of economic benefit" (Coffman, 2011, p. 87). In order to successfully retain first-generation, low-income, and disabled students, institutions must have a commitment to need-based along with merit-based aid (Tinto, 2012). Along the same lines, institutions should consider limiting tuition increases to allow student dependence on federal and private loans to decrease (Hsiao, 1992).

Many first-generation and low-income students are faced with the challenge of balancing work with attending college (Tinto, 2009). Dividing time between work and college is a significant struggle (Jenkins et al., 2013). As result, first-generation students often spend less time studying and more time working, unlike non-first-generation students (Jenkins et al., 2013). As a result of minimal support at home, first-generation students deal with countless obstacles, often alone, to be successful in their attempts to complete their degrees (Hsiao, 1992).

Chen and Carroll (2010) found students who are first-generation are more likely to have a job working 20 or more hours a week, are less likely to interact with faculty and staff, and have more limited involvement on campus than their counterparts. First-generation students often have lower family incomes, more dependents, and more overall responsibility than their counterparts (Bui, 2012). Also, the parents and family members of first-generation students do not fully understand the amount of work, time, effort, and energy necessary to be a successful college student (Bui, 2012).

Low-income students have considerable unmet need. Unmet need is defined as the outstanding financial obligation after financial aid and all other payments towards the cost of education are taken into account (Coffman, 2011). Faced with unmet need, first-generation, low-income students often attend community colleges initially, reduce their attendance from full-time to part-time, live off campus rather than on campus, and work longer hours (Coffman, 2011). These factors considerably reduce the likelihood first-generation students will persevere to earning a bachelor's degree (Tinto, 2012).

Quite often, the parents of first-generation students expect their children to assist in maintaining the household by paying bills, caring for siblings, or moving out to start

their own lives upon completing high school with little to no real support (Metha et al., 2011). This extra burden of responsibility leads to significant stress (Coffman, 2011). Because first-generation students have few outlets to discuss stressful life events, long- and short-term health problems and academic difficulty can result (Metha et al., 2011).

Alternatively, being able to disclose the details of work and family obligations reduces stress (Metha et al., 2011). Oftentimes, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students feel they do not belong on a campus that is an unfamiliar atmosphere for them. As a result, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students are rarely decisively committed to the institution nor incorporated into post-secondary education (Drake, 2011). The result is weakened academic advancement (Drake, 2011).

In one 2006 study, low parental expectations regarding degree completion were linked to higher departure rates (Ishitani, 2006). Limited access to college-educated role models and limited experience with college processes and procedures are also characteristic of first-generation college students (Coffman, 2011). Academic factors also contribute to first-generation students' lack of success in post-secondary education. For example, preparation, motivation, and self-efficacy have a significant impact on post-secondary success (Metha et al., 2011).

First-generation students also have to deal with separation from communities of the past (Tinto, 2012). Many times, in order for first-generation students to be successful in higher education, they are required to disassociate themselves from people they have known for years, most notably family (Tinto, 2012). In many cases, their former communities do not share the same values, behaviors, and norms as their new collegiate environments (Tinto, 2012). This phenomenon can be especially difficult for first-

generation students. First-generation students often struggle with guilt and negative feedback as a result of their decisions (Tinto, 2012). First-generation students have the anxiety of stressing over their families (Coffman, 2011). Even when enrolled in college, many students are still left to support their families (Coffman, 2011). In many cases, first-generation students use financial aid funds to pay parents' bills while also balancing the demands of higher education (Coffman, 2011).

One thing remains true: "Adequate finances, supportive parents, sufficient academic preparedness, on-campus/student acquaintance involvement, and the ability to actively cope with stress have all been proven to be widely accepted academic-success promoting factors" (Metha et al., 2011, p. 2). Because first-generation students often lack these critical pieces, they are less prepared for success at college (Metha et al., 2011). As a result, first-generation students often drop out at a much higher rate than non-first-generation students (Metha et al., 2011). Universities serious about this population must provide specific programming designated to ensure the success of first-generation, low-income, and disabled students.

Summary

In this chapter, Tinto's (2012) theory of student departure as well as his theory of student retention were reviewed as the foundation for this study. A detailed review of literature included the following sections: Tinto's theory of student departure and theory of student retention, TRIO programs, and retaining disadvantaged students. Tinto's (2012) theory of student departure states students leave the university as a result of academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and a student's failure to become or remain incorporated in the

intellectual and social life of the institution. Through adequate backing in the areas of academic life, social support, and financial support, students have increased retention and matriculation (Tinto, 2012).

TRIO programs provide hope and opportunity to students from disadvantaged backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). TRIO SSS, one of the eight federal TRIO programs, specifically provides support to low-income, first-generation, disabled undergraduate students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). While TRIO SSS has been around since the mid-1960s, it was determined the majority of the research previously conducted is only descriptive in nature.

Retaining disadvantaged students is critical to an institution's success (Tinto, 2012). In order to retain students, institutions must examine, understand, and effectively address first-generation student-entry characteristics, access issues/navigating/academic factors, social and cultural factors, and work and family obligations (Coffman, 2011). First-generation students require specific programming that provides them with equal opportunity to post-secondary success (Tinto, 2012). By developing a campus-wide student focus awareness that hones in on the special needs of first-generation, low-income, and disabled students, universities will be able to create compassionate environments that holistically support students. As a result, campus retention rates will increase, as well as overall revenue.

The comprehensive review of literature indicates little research has been done on the specific outcomes of TRIO SSS programs as they relate to the retention and persistence of participants, nor have qualitative data regarding the students' thoughts and feelings about their overall programmatic experience been collected. The next chapter

details the methodology used for this study. An analysis of the study's findings is reported in Chapter Four, and discussion and recommendations for further research are given in Chapter Five.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Retaining first-generation, low-income, and disabled students is vitally important to the success of an institution (Petty, 2014). Though retention of first-generation students is not a widely-studied topic, the research which exists demonstrates an emergent theme: first-generation students feel a sense of frustration about the level of support they receive while attending institutions of higher learning (Jenkins et al., 2011). To effectively explore how one TRIO Program, specifically Student Support Services (SSS), aids students in their journeys to be successful in post-secondary education, a mixed methods study was conducted. In the following sections, a review of the problem and the purpose of the research is provided. The questions guiding the research are restated, and a discussion of the research design is included. Participants of the study are identified, along with information about the process of conducting focus groups and analyzing retention and grade point average data. Finally, the procedures used to analyze the data and interpret the results are discussed.

Problem and Purpose Overview

According to the U.S. Department of Education's *National Study of Student Support Services Programs*, first-generation college students who are served by TRIO SSS programs achieve greater results than their counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Despite findings that TRIO SSS students achieve greater postsecondary success, most TRIO SSS programs are only funded to work with a very small portion of the campus body on their respective campuses (Jenkins et al., 2011). For most colleges and universities, TRIO SSS is the only such program of its kind serving disadvantaged students (Jenkins et al., 2011). Limited research has been conducted to

publish the outcomes of the programs. As a result, a significant gap in research exists. The goal of this work was to fill the gap in research of TRIO SSS student outcomes in a meaningful way.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the TRIO SSS program on the persistence, retention, and matriculation of its participants at a large, public, four-year, Midwestern institution from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective. Retention rates and academic standing statistics were examined with the use of quantitative research. Furthermore, best practices were the topic of qualitative-based focus groups.

Research questions and hypotheses. During the course of this study, the following research questions and hypotheses were addressed:

1. What statistically significant difference exists, if any, in the retention rates of TRIO SSS students, as compared to other first-generation, low-income, disabled students who are not served by the program?

$H1_0$. There is no statistically significant difference in the retention rates of TRIO SSS students and non-TRIO SSS students.

$H1_a$. A statistically significant difference exists in retention rates in students who participate in the TRIO Student Support Services program as compared to first-generation, low-income, and disabled students who are not served by the program or similar programs.

2. What statistically significant difference exists, if any, in regards to student success as measured by a 2.0 grade point average for students in TRIO as compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the program?

$H2_{0.}$ There is no statistically significant difference in student success, as measured by a 2.0 grade point average for students in TRIO SSS as compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the program.

$H2_{a.}$ A statistically significant difference exists in good academic standing, as measured by a 2.0 grade point average, for students in TRIO SSS as compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the program.

3. How do seniors who have participated in TRIO SSS perceive their overall Student Support Services (SSS) programmatic experience?

Research Design

A mixed methods approach was chosen to study the outcomes of TRIO SSS students at a large, four-year, public, Midwestern institution. Mixed methods research was chosen because of a desire to examine both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). Many different terms have been used to describe a mixed methods approach. Such words include "integrating, synthesis, quantitative and qualitative methods, multi method, and mixed methodology" (Creswell, 2014, p. 217).

The majority of recent writings tend to use the term mixed methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Mixed methods, viewed by many as a relatively new methodology, originated in the late 1980s and early 1990s and has experienced several developmental periods including the formative stage, philosophical debates, procedural developments, and reflective positions (Creswell, 2014). The first mixed methods-focused journal began publication in 2005 (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

Creswell (2014) stated through the "combination of statistical trends with stories and personal experience," (p. 2) a better understanding of the research problem is

discovered. This study utilized an explanatory sequential design (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell (2015), "The intent [of explanatory sequential design] is to first use quantitative methods and then qualitative methods to help explain the quantitative results in greater depth" (p. 6). In general, mixed methods is utilized as a form of research because of its strength in "minimizing the limitations of both quantitative and qualitative research" (Creswell, 2014, p. 18). In the following sections, the quantitative and qualitative research portions of this study are discussed.

Quantitative. Quantitative research allows one to test objective theories by determining if a relationship exists between variables (Creswell, 2014). The variables in question can be measured by instruments in order for data to be analyzed through the use of statistics (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative research is usually based on the premise "facts and feelings can be separated" (Fraenkel et al., 2014, p. 7). Quantitative research designs are generally pre-established with recognized general processes of guiding steps for work (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

When using quantitative methodology, the data collected are numerical and can be ordered or ranked (Bluman, 2014). In order to examine the independent variables for this study, student grade point averages, academic standing data of TRIO SSS students, was examined and compared to non-TRIO similarly qualified student data. Dependent variables included the type of institution and types of services received through the TRIO SSS program. Quantitative data were collected because these data provide a "numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population" (Creswell, 2014, p. 155).

The typical role of a researcher in quantitative research is one of a detached observer (Fraenkel et al., 2014). The end goal of this type of research is to establish "generalizations that transcend the immediate situation or particular setting" (Fraenkel et al., 2014, p. 11). Quantitative researchers tend to work with pre-established designs (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

Qualitative. Qualitative research was also chosen because it allows "meaningful patterns" to be discovered in order to describe a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2015, p. 3). This type of research involves "studies that investigate the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials" (Fraenkel et al., 2014, p. 426). Through the use of qualitative research, a "complex, detailed understanding of the issue" can be uncovered (Creswell, 2014, p. 40). Research data are "collected in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers" (Fraenkel et al., 2014, p. 427). In most cases, the researcher is the critical instrument in this type of research (Fraenkel et al., 2014). Specifically in this study, focus groups were conducted as a data collection tool to determine student perspectives regarding their time in the TRIO SSS program. Seniors in the program were the targeted participants.

Qualitative research allows one to explore and understand a social or human problem in a flexible structure (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell (2014), those who engage in qualitative research "support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation" (p. 4). Qualitative methods "rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis, and draw on diverse designs" (Creswell, 2014, p. 25).

Two key characteristics of qualitative research designs are the following: first, researchers strive to understand the meaning that "people have constructed about their world and their experiences," and second, the researcher is the "primary instrument for data collection" (Merriam, 2011, p. 12). Often, researchers choose qualitative research methods because of a lack of theory to explain a phenomenon (Merriam, 2011). The product of qualitative research is "richly descriptive" (Merriam, 2011, p. 8).

Combining quantitative and qualitative research into a mixed methods study allows the value of both approaches to be integrated into a meaningful way that one form of data collection could not do on its own (Creswell, 2015). In order to determine if differences in retention and GPA in TRIO SSS students as compared to students not served by the project exists, secondary data from the institutional research department were collected.

Validity. Validity is summarized as the ability for one to "draw meaningful and useful inferences from scores on instruments" (Creswell, 2014, p. 160). Three types of validity are common: content validity, predictive or concurrent validity, and construct validity (Creswell, 2014). The validity and reliability of a study are strengthened by examining both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). Not only does validity help the researcher gain understanding of hard facts, but it also helps the researcher examine student opinions about their experiences through the use of targeted focus groups (Creswell, 2014). The concern for this study was content validity, or the estimate of how much a measure represents every single element of a construct (Creswell, 2014).

In order to ensure the highest levels of validity, several measures were taken. In regards to the quantitative data, all data were provided by the Office of Institutional

Research for both TRIO and non-TRIO participants in the study. This is especially important because multiple offices at the institution, including the TRIO office, have access to data. This ensured content validity.

Regarding qualitative data, prior to holding the focus groups, field testing of the interview protocol was conducted in order to increase the validity of the instrument (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In addition, after focus groups were completed, the data were transcribed and reviewed by participants to ensure accuracy (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The focus group answered questions that gauged the TRIO SSS students' overall programmatic experience, and the groups were administered, video recorded, audio recorded, and transcribed by a third party to ensure non-biased results (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Reliability. Reliability is defined as the ability for one to replicate the work completed by another researcher (Olson, 2012). Reliable instruments provide consistent results which afford assurance the results for one group are representative of the entire group, despite the sample (Fraenkel et al., 2014). The instruments used were secondary data provided by the Office of Institutional Research and field-tested focus group questions and procedures.

A goal of this study was to include enough participants in the sample to reach saturation, defined as the point at which "research participants fail to provide new data that expand and refine your theory" (Creswell, 2015, p. 21). In order to obtain the widest range of data and perspectives, all last-semester seniors were included in the sample with the hopes that all students would participate in the focus groups. Secondary data to examine quantitate factors for grade point average and academic standing were collected

on TRIO SSS participants. This study can also be considered reliable because of the consistency of procedures that were utilized during the focus groups (Olson, 2012).

Population and Sample

The population and sample for this study are discussed from a quantitative and qualitative viewpoint. This discussion is necessary to gain a well-rounded perspective of the TRIO SSS program in question.

Quantitative. Secondary data for 72 students currently participating in the TRIO SSS program at a large, four-year, public, Midwestern institution were used. The TRIO SSS student data were compared to 1,913 students who met the same criteria who were not served by the TRIO SSS program.

Qualitative. Last-semester seniors who participated in the TRIO SSS program were invited to take part in the focus groups in order to determine overall programmatic experiences in TRIO SSS (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This sample was appropriate, because last-semester seniors have experienced the full range of services provided to TRIO SSS students and are able to reflect holistically. While all students were asked to participate, only a sample of students were willing to attend. Two focus groups were established, containing a total of 16 TRIO SSS seniors. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when seeking understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2015).

Instrumentation

For the purpose of this research study, two different types of data were collected. The Office of Institutional Research extracted data for the statistical analysis in an anonymous format regarding grade point averages and academic standing of TRIO and

non-TRIO SSS students. For the qualitative portion of the study, focus groups were also conducted with last-semester seniors. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were developed and critiqued, revised, and finalized after pilot testing to ensure a broad range of qualitative data were gathered to demonstrate the overall impressions of the TRIO SSS program. The focus group for this study was designed as an informal event, consistent with most qualitative protocols (Krueger & Casey, 2015). All participants were asked the same questions during the focus groups. These questions were designed to allow for examination of each participant's overall experiences in TRIO SSS. Participants were also asked to offer advice to program staff, current underclassmen, and future TRIO SSS participants that would enhance the TRIO SSS experience.

Data Collection

Research began once approval was garnered from Lindenwood University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B) and from the large, public, four-year, Midwestern institution (see Appendix C). Quantitative data were obtained from the Office of Institutional Research for the purposes of examining the retention rates and academic standing of TRIO SSS participants. These data were then compared to data from first-generation, low-income, and disabled students who were not being served by the project. The information was received in an anonymous format and provided to the researcher.

Qualitative data were obtained via focus groups. According to Krueger and Casey (2015), the "purpose of conducting a focus group is to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, idea, product, or service" (p. 2). Essentially, the purpose of a focus group is to gather opinions through the use of focused questions and

discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Krueger and Casey (2015) stated, “Focus groups work particularly well to explore perceptions, feelings, and thinking about issues, ideas, products, services, or opportunities” (p. 7).

Most TRIO SSS participants are active with the program for three to four years. Often, their overall programmatic experience is not discussed holistically. As a result, seasoned, veteran students were interviewed within focus groups to determine their overall thoughts about the TRIO SSS experience. Last-semester seniors were asked to participate in the focus groups and were contacted by electronic mail to explain the study and its intent.

Students willing to take part in the focus groups were asked to sign adult consent forms (see Appendix D) and to send contact information that was used to schedule focus groups at an agreed upon location on campus. As a first-generation student, as well as a member of the office that houses diversity, the researcher did not conduct the focus groups personally. To ensure confidentiality, colleagues not associated with the TRIO SSS program conducted the focus group meetings, and the researcher was not present.

All participants were asked a consistent series of questions and were given the opportunity to respond during the focus groups. Participants were not asked to identify themselves by name, and levels of assurance were in place to protect and keep the information of participants safe. The importance of this phase of the study was to gather opinions, thoughts, and perceptions as a group (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Two proctors were trained to facilitate the focus groups. Training consisted of meeting with the researcher and reviewing and practicing procedures prior to the actual focus groups occurring (see Appendix E). Focus groups were audio and video recorded,

and anecdotal field notes were also taken in the event of an equipment malfunction (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

At the conclusion of the focus groups, the data collected were ready to be transcribed. The facilitator collected and then delivered the audiotapes of the focus group responses to an individual not involved in the student focus groups, and the tapes were then transcribed and locked in a secure location (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This process occurred to further secure the participants' identities and thereby assure confidentiality (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Data Analysis

Quantitative. Quantitative data gathered from the Office of Institutional Research were combined for both TRIO SSS students and non-TRIO SSS students. Retention data were examined using a *t*-test (Bluman, 2014). In this case, retention rates could be similar for both groups despite all circumstances because of pre-college characteristic similarity. Retention was measured from the fall semester to the spring semester for all participants in this study.

The GPA data were analyzed using a *t*-test in order to compare the means of each group. *T*-tests are used to test the difference between the means of two independent samples (Bluman, 2014). Grade point averages were measured based on fall semester attainment. In this case, it was assumed both the TRIO population and the non-TRIO population were normally distributed (Bluman, 2014).

Qualitative. Transcripts and audio from the focus groups were reviewed and summarized using major trends that resulted from the group discussions (Creswell, 2014). The discussion was summarized immediately after the focus groups were

completed (Creswell, 2014). Many careful transcript readings were completed in order to code the responses (Creswell, 2014).

The coding process included grouping participant responses together based on the identifying number assigned to participants at the beginning of the process. After responses were grouped, an analytic approach was taken (Creswell, 2014). The first step was identifying major themes (Krueger & Casey, 2015). After discovering the major themes, the second step was the creation of units in order to define categories (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Units are the smallest amounts of information that are informative as stand-alone items (Creswell, 2014). Units were then labeled into relevant categories in step three. Step four was negotiating categories (Krueger & Casey, 2015). During this process, category titles, criteria, and rules were determined (Creswell, 2014). Finally, step five consisted of identifying themes and supporting theories (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured during the study. University identification, student names, and other identifying information were omitted from this study to ensure privacy. Students who participated in the focus groups were asked not to discuss their experiences with other students outside of the group and not to disclose the name of the researcher. As a former TRIO participant and a member of the student affairs team, the researcher chose not to personally facilitate the focus groups. Instead, colleagues not associated with the TRIO SSS program led the focus groups, and the researcher was not present. Because the researcher was not present, bias was eliminated in the interview process.

Summary

TRIO SSS is a nearly 50-year-old retention program funded by the Department of Education to work with first-generation, low-income, and disabled students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The overall goal of TRIO is to increase the rate at which first-generation, low-income, and disabled students graduate with a four-year degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Despite the long-standing history of the program, little research has been published on programmatic outcomes.

The purpose of this research study was to examine if differences existed among the retention rates and academic standing of TRIO SSS students at a large, four-year, public, Midwestern institution and other first-generation, low-income students not being served by the project. A mixed methods approach was utilized through data collection from TRIO and other university databases. In addition, focus groups that included TRIO SSS seniors were conducted in order to identify overall programmatic experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Three research questions guided this study, two of which were analyzed through inferential statistics, and the last question through qualitative measures. Through the combination of quantitative and qualitative data, the experiences of TRIO SSS students at the large, Midwestern, four-year, public institution can be better understood. The quantitative data collected were statistically analyzed in Excel using *t*-tests (Bluman, 2014).

The qualitative data were collected from focus groups of last-semester students in the TRIO program using a five-step coding process (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The hope was important trends and themes would surface from discussions within the focus groups

(Creswell, 2014). These trends allowed conclusions to be drawn about students' overall experiences in TRIO SSS and gave administration important feedback for review and consideration.

In the next chapter, the quantitative and qualitative data collected in the study pertaining to each of the three research questions are presented. The results of the statistical analysis of the quantitative data are described, along with explanations of each of the statistical tests used in the study. Lastly, the themes which emerged from focus groups and data collected are presented and described.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to examine whether differences exist between retention and grade point averages of students participating in TRIO SSS and students who meet the TRIO SSS criteria but are not being served by the project. In addition, focus groups were conducted with TRIO SSS seniors to examine their overall experiences in TRIO. The study was conducted at a large, four-year, Midwestern institution. Due to the nature of the research questions analyzed, the study combined both quantitative and qualitative research perspectives (Creswell, 2014). Despite the long-standing history of TRIO programs, minimal research exists, especially current literature which highlights the success of Student Support Services. With this said, a substantial gap in research was apparent. The goal of this study was to fill the gap in research concerning outcomes of TRIO SSS.

The research in this study was framed by three questions, which were tested using both quantitative and qualitative data. The first research question addressed whether there was a difference in the retention rates of TRIO SSS students compared to other first-generation, low-income, disabled students who were not served by the TRIO program. The second research question addressed whether there was a difference in student success, as measured by a 2.0 grade point average, of TRIO SSS students compared to other first-generation, low-income, disabled students who were not served by the program. In order to analyze the first two questions, secondary data provided by the large, four-year, public, Midwestern institution, were gathered.

The third research question centered on perceptions students had about their overall programmatic TRIO experiences, which included the collection of qualitative

data. Focus groups were conducted in order to garner multiple student perceptions at one setting. A total of 16 TRIO seniors participated in one of two focus groups. The focus groups were structured to allow students to feel respected, comfortable to give their honest opinions, and to reflect on how they feel (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Self-disclosure was promoted through the use of focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Demographics

The population for this study included data garnered from 1,913 adult students enrolled at the large, four-year, public, Midwestern institution during the fall semester of 2014. The students included represent all students who were first-generation and low-income, per the information gathered from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and provided by the institutional research office at the Midwestern institution. TRIO SSS participants were extracted from the larger group provided by Institutional Research. In addition, 16 students from the sample participated in focus groups to gain perceptions of the program at the Midwestern institution. In the next sections, the three research questions that guided this study are discussed and results are provided.

Research question one. What statistically significant difference exists, if any, in the retention rates of TRIO SSS students compared to other first-generation, low-income, disabled students who are not served by the program?

Multiple pieces of data were collected and analyzed during this study. Retention statistics of TRIO SSS students and non-TRIO, similarly qualified students were collected from the fall 2014 semester. In the data set gathered by the university's institutional research department, it was determined there were 1,913 first-generation, low-income, and disabled students attending the institution during the fall semester of

2014. Of those students, 72 were identified as TRIO SSS students, leaving 1,841 non-TRIO SSS students. A *t*-test using paired data was conducted on the average retention rates of each group (Bluman, 2014). The *t*-test was selected, because data being analyzed represented the average retention rate of TRIO SSS students compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the project (Fraenkel et al., 2014). The mean retention rate for TRIO SSS students was determined to be 0.97, and the mean for non-TRIO SSS students was 0.82. At $\alpha = 0.05$, there was no statistical difference between the retention rates of each group (Bluman, 2014; Fraenkel et al., 2014). The null hypothesis was not rejected.

It is important to note while the data provided by Institutional Research included only 72 TRIO SSS students, 190 students are served by TRIO SSS at any given time. This evidence, which emerged after requesting the data, demonstrated a recordkeeping error by the institution. Given that approximately 118 TRIO SSS students are missing from the databases, the chance non-TRIO SSS students who are first-generation, low-income, or disabled being missing is incredibly high. Complete data would likely change the overall results associated with research question one.

Research question two. What statistically significant difference exists, if any, in regards to student success, as measured by a 2.0 grade point average, for students in TRIO as compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the program?

The second research question guiding this study was quantitative in nature, and the data were analyzed statistically. Grade point average statistics of TRIO SSS students and non-TRIO, similarly qualified students were collected from the fall 2014 semester.

Data gathered by Institutional Research included 1,913 first-generation, low-income, and disabled students attending the institution during the fall semester of 2014. Of those students, 72 were identified as TRIO SSS students, leaving 1,841 non-TRIO SSS students. A *t*-test using paired data was conducted on the average retention rates of each group (Bluman, 2014). The *t*-test was selected because data being analyzed represented the average retention rate of TRIO SSS students compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the project (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

In addition to the *t*-test, descriptive statistics including the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation were calculated. The results of the comparison between the grade point averages of TRIO SSS students and similarly qualified students not being served by the project are presented in Table 1. The data indicated a determination the means of each group were very close, and at $\alpha = 0.05$, there was no statistical difference between the grade point averages of each group, thus the null hypothesis was not rejected (Bluman, 2014; Fraenkel et al., 2014).

It is important to note again that while the data provided by Institutional Research included only 72 TRIO SSS students, 190 students are served by TRIO SSS at any given time. This evidence, which emerged after requesting the data, demonstrated a recordkeeping error by the institution. Given that approximately 118 TRIO SSS students are missing from the databases, the chance non-TRIO SSS students who are first-generation, low-income, or disabled being missing is incredibly high. Complete data would likely change the overall results of data associated with research question two.

Table 1

Measures of Central Tendency for TRIO and Non-TRIO Grade Point Averages

	M	*Median*	Mode	*SD*
TRIO	2.95	3.03	3.40	0.56
Non-TRIO	2.97	3.00	4.00	0.73

Note. N = 1,841 (number of non-TRIO SSS students included) and 72 (number of TRIO student included).

Research question three. How do last-semester seniors who have participated in TRIO SSS perceive their overall Student Support Services (SSS) programmatic experience?

The third research question guiding this study was qualitative in nature and was analyzed through the identification, examination, and interpretation of patterns and themes in textual data to determine how these patterns and themes answer the research question at hand (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus groups with TRIO seniors were conducted over the course of the spring 2015 semester. A total of 11 questions were asked in the focus groups.

Focus group question #1. Tell me a little about yourself and how you came to be a student at the university.

Participants' responses reflected on a main idea regarding their backgrounds and transitions into the targeted institution. Of the students who participated in the focus groups, a large number had transferred from various community colleges and universities

from across the state and nation for various reasons. Some of the reasons included advice/guidance from others, academic, social, convenience, and proximity.

Regarding advice/guidance from others, student A3 responded:

> I transferred in when I was a sophomore from a university in Texas, and the reason I came to this institution was because one of my cousins told me if you were hard working and you have it together, they have a lot of help for you.

Regarding social and academic reasoning, Student A4 responded, **"**I am also a transfer a student from a university in Kansas City." Student A4 went on to add, "I decided to transfer to this university because I was very discontent socially, academically, and I felt like I wasn't being challenged, so I came here, and it definitely has been a challenge, in good and bad ways." Student A6 responded, "I'm also a transfer student from…. I heard this school was the best in the teaching program, so that's why I came here."

Regarding convenience, student B4 communicated, "I started at … [community college], and the reason I came here was because it was a natural transfer…and it's close and convenient." Student B9 voiced, "I came to this institution because it's closer to home. I was involved with TRIO at my junior college at … [community college]." Student B3 stated, "I came to find … [the university] through going to … [community college]. I got my associate's there hoping to transition into the social work program." Of the 16 students who participated in the focus groups, a majority indicated they were transfer students.

Focus group question #2. What is your major or area of study?

Because TRIO SSS works with students from all majors, a variety of responses were received. Students could be primarily broken down into four of the university

colleges: College of Natural and Applied Sciences, College of Business, College of Education, and the College of Communication Arts. Regarding the College of Natural and Applied Sciences, student majors included three psychology students, exercise movement science, dietetics and nutrition, geology and environmental science and policy, geology, geography, and health services. College of Business majors included administrative management, computer information systems, and operations management. College of Education majors included elementary education, special education, and art history. One student represented the College of Communication Arts as a broadcast journalism major.

Focus group question #3. What challenges have you encountered as a first-generation/low-income student?

Information from the focus groups emerged that centered on the following topics: financial hardship, support navigating the college campus, difficulty balancing the demands of family, and issues surrounding academic preparation for college and self-motivation. Regarding financial hardship, Student A5 stated:

> The funding is probably the hardest part [of attending college]. I've got support from at home, but as a non-traditional student, I am not relying on anyone else to pay my way through, so [I am] trying to find scholarships, grants, or other aid.

Student A6 asserted, "I get support at home, but financially it's all on me. It's really all about trying to figure out everything." Student A2 noted, "I've learned the ways [to secure funding], but as an incoming freshman it was very difficult to obtain scholarships and grants in order to pursue my education."

Student B3 divulged:

> I think for my situation, it's being able to pay for everything. I've been having to live off Social Security and try to find scholarships and Pell Grant and be able to make sure the bills are paid while I'm going to school. That has been a real challenge.

Regarding difficulty navigating the college campus, student B6 communicated, “Nobody tells you what it takes actually to make it through and accomplish college. I think that was a big issue with me, and no one could really tell me what to do.” Another concern was brought up by Student A1:

> I think my biggest thing has been the frustration with the people when you figure out where you are supposed to go, and then they don't know what they are doing. They [college personnel] give you more paperwork, or they send you to someone else, and then you go to that person, and they tell you it was the first one you talked to in the first place. That's very frustrating as a non-traditional student, and coming back at a later age, this is probably not a good way to say it but I'm going to say; having been around the block and know how things work or should work and then going up against that frustration [the runaround], but you're here to help me, this is your job, and they don't do it, or they want to pass you off to someone else. I think another frustration is the instructors, they don't want to be helpful. So if you ask, or they ask if you have any questions, and you ask the questions, then they get frustrated with you.

Student B1 stated, “The support system, definitely, not knowing what to do or how to do it or how to go about doing it or studying, for instance, or prioritizing your time.”

Regarding difficulty balancing the demands of family, Student B5 asserted, "Especially if you have a family like I have…trying to stretch your financial aid dollars and trying to keep from having to work full-time on top of having to go to school full-time and have a family." Student B9 further remarked:

> I think the biggest challenge for me, also being a non-traditional student, was I was a single mom when I started. My kids were up in age a little bit, but that was very challenging trying to keep the hours to go to their things, do the homework, and get into the good study habits that you're not used to and not having the support to show you those things.

Student B5 expressed trying to create a family utilizing financial aid is especially challenging.

Regarding self-motivation and adequate college preparation, Student B7 divulged, "Coming from an inner city school and not being used to seeing people study or do homework or anything like that. TRIO has helped a lot with finding different study habits that work for me." Student B2 added, "I also struggle with time management. I'm like the worst, the queen of procrastination. When I came from high school, everything came naturally to me, so when I go to college, it's like 10 times worse." Student B8 further commented, "I think the biggest challenge was dealing with new challenges, like before coming to college I didn't really have problems with academics, and then my freshman year I struggled a lot, because I really didn't know how to study."

Focus group question #4. What role has TRIO played in helping you overcome those challenges?

Participants expressed TRIO provided support that allowed them to be academically successful by helping them develop self-confidence through encouragement and mentorship, intrusive academic advising, appropriate degree planning, leadership skills, providing academic resources, and being a family-oriented environment (Coffman, 2011).

Self-confidence and mentorship are invaluable tools regarding on-time college completion (Tinto, 2012). Regarding self-confidence and mentorship, Student A2 stated, "I felt like I was labeled. Because I felt like I was doubted… as well, so TRIO helped me to know, and no matter what statistics may say, it's all about me and what I want to achieve." Student B6 further commented:

> I think the biggest thing I love about TRIO is, probably, the mentoring I get, and it doesn't have to be from my advisor. It can be just having a simple conversation, or you have a simple problem, and they'll [TRIO staff] do everything in their power to try to fix it. I go to the TRIO director probably every week just to talk to him about problems going on in my life. There's never judgment here. There's never criticism, so that's what I really enjoy about the program.

Student B4 added, "TRIO is a support system for non-traditional, handicapped, first-generation college students."

Appropriate degree planning and intrusive academic advising and planning are critical for first-generation, low-income students who are limited in their ability to pay for college (Coffman, 2011). Academic advising is one of the major aspects of TRIO. Advising includes making sure students have the necessary skillsets to be successful in their chosen degree paths. Student B8 further commented, "My first advisor said, 'We're

here to make sure you come here and you graduate…We're going to do everything we can do eliminate your problems.' They have." Student A3 stated, "This program has helped me a lot through assistance with like course selection." Student B7 further remarked, "It [the nursing program] was so hard, I was overwhelmed, and I didn't know what I was going to do next, and my TRIO advisor was the one who helped me identify the appropriate major." Student B7 went on to add that her/his TRIO academic advisor even helped identify food and clothing assistance. Student A5 communicated, **"**The two biggest things I've gotten out of TRIO has been help with the scheduling of my semesters and just sort of planning ahead."

Leadership skills are very important as a student. Students who possess strong leadership qualities tend to be more successful than those who lack those skills (Coffman, 2011). Student A3 affirmed, "I would say that TRIO has helped me develop into a leader. They have given me leadership opportunities, by attending a leadership conference last year with a whole group, and [I] met more people that I now call my friends."

Academic resources provided by TRIO include tutoring, graduate school preparation, and access to a computer lab with free printing. TRIO participants indicated these resources were invaluable sources of support. Regarding tutoring, Student B1 revealed:

> I love the tutoring program. I really do. Classes like being a science major; those classes are ridiculous. You go into a class, and you don't know the basics. You're like the teacher's moving so fast, and I'm at the beginning, and you are at the end. Once I sat down with that one-on-one, having that one-on-one experience with the

> tutor and they break it down, and they show you a simple way to go about doing the problems, which was the best thing for me. I have to give credit to TRIO for that. It changed my whole college experience. I'm here, about to graduate in May, because of it.

Student B4 also stated in regards to tutoring:

> They have other tutors on campus, but the best tutors are here at TRIO. Because we've all been, I don't know about ya'll, but I've been to the other tutors, I've tried some of the other tutors. I don't want to be negative about it, but this is the best tutoring…and you actually get help to get stuff done.

Student B9 added, "I think the tutoring here is better, because it's more personalized. You go in groups in other areas of campus."

One of the goals of TRIO is to promote graduate school to its participants. In fact, TRIO programs are required to report annually the number of graduates who go on to graduate school (U.S. Department of Education, 2014c). Students are regularly taken on graduate school visits in order to identify the best options that fit individual needs. Regarding graduate school, Student A4 remarked, "One of the most helpful resources for me has been assistance studying for the GRE. I didn't know what a GRE was or why graduate schools needed it. I feel like they've been resourceful in that way."

Quite often students are required to utilize very busy computer labs and are charged for printing. In TRIO, at this campus, students have access to free printing. Many students expressed their appreciation for the TRIO computer lab. Student A1 commented, "The computer lab is fantastic. It's been such a lifesaver for a lot of my classes, because we have to print off a lot for our classes, and what the university

provides is just not adequate enough." Student A3 added, "The computer lab is really handy. They cover prints for free, so where else can you get that. That really helps a lot, too."

Family-like environments are a staple of TRIO programs all over the country. Because TRIO programs work with comparatively small numbers of students, TRIO staff members know their students very well. Student B5 commented:

> A couple things really stand out to me. One is the social network. The support system of TRIO. It really is a community, like a family. Because going into college the first time as a first-generation or non-traditional student, you don't have any friends or family that are going to school, and if you don't know anybody already that's going to that school, you are kind of alone in that.

Student A6 disclosed, "TRIO is like a family to me. That is a major support. I was in the Upward Bound program, which is the same thing like in high school, life saver!" Student A1 expressed, "You feel like family, when you come in they know who you are and they say hello, they call you by name."

Focus group question #5. When you think about TRIO Student Support Services, what three words come to mind?

While participants expressed a variety of responses, commonalties could be summarized into three areas: support, family, and encouragement. Student B7 expressed, "Supportive, engaging because TRIO gets you involved, and I would also say, encouraging." Student A6 voiced, "Support, family, and friends." Student A1 added, "Tutoring, support, and encouragement." Student A2 communicated, "Genuine, unlimited, and support."

Focus group question #6. In your opinion, what were the top two services provided to you by TRIO SSS?

The majority of participants responded similarly regarding support, connections, and relationships. Specifically, academic advising, stipends and financial assistance, computer lab access, tutoring, mentoring, leadership skills, and cultural events were referenced as being pivotal to student success. Student A2 asserted, "I would have to say the stipends, because as a first-generation low-income student they motivate you to meet certain requirements in order to receive the stipend." Student A3 also referenced stipends as a top service provided by the program. First-generation, low-income, and disabled students all benefit from the financial assistance provided by TRIO.

Student A1 noted, "I would have to say the computer lab. I can't get enough on the computer lab and that help. That's been number one. Then I would say the tutoring, because that's going to save my tush." Student A4 disclosed, "I think the number one program is the academic advising meetings. I feel like you learn a lot about yourself, and then number two would be the tutoring."

Focus group question #7. What can TRIO Student Support Services do to improve service delivery, and if given the opportunity, what would you change about the program?

While TRIO programs are limited by U.S. Department of Education legislation and regulations, there are aspects that can be modified to better meet student needs. One thing students mentioned were program reminders regarding appointments, workshops, and other meetings. Student A6 communicated, "I really like the reminders, and sometimes I forget about them, because I don't come in the office very often but they

could email or text me. That would be great because I'm on my phone all the time." Student A5 communicated, "I think it would be very handy if TRIO has a mobile phone app that would have calendars and help people keep track of for TRIO and outside of TRIO." Student A4 voiced, "I think that more reminders would be super helpful."

Another thing students mentioned was increasing campus awareness of TRIO SSS and services provided by the program. The responses from focus group participants indicated TRIO SSS students are proud of the services the program gives and do not understand limitations of criteria and resources. Student B9 stated, "I think that they need a liaison to get things out on campus to make people more aware of the program itself." Student B3 added:

> I think what we need to do, I know that all syllabi have a place that says if you have a disability then you need to go by the disability office, so we need to have something like that that the teachers put on the syllabi every semester. If you qualify for certain levels say, like if you are a first-generation or are low income or have a disability, look into TRIO Student Support Services or something like that to get the word out, maybe through the syllabi or through the disability office.

TRIO SSS students want any student to have similar positive experiences. All in all, responses indicated TRIO SSS students would like to make sure everyone is knowledgeable about TRIO.

All TRIO SSS students are required to participate in one financial aid and one financial literacy workshop each year to remain in good standing. Participants voiced they would like to see workshops pushed more aggressively, and at least one participant noted he or she would like to see a greater variety of workshops. TRIO workshops

include topics of financial aid, financial literacy, study skills, and test-taking strategies. Student A6 further mentioned, “Maybe more workshops besides financial literacy, maybe just about anything, it would be more useful to us students.”

Students also referenced a desire to take part in more leadership conferences. Each fall, this particular TRIO SSS program takes students to a regional leadership conference. During the leadership conference students have the opportunity to hear from dynamic leaders, assume leadership positions all weekend, and meet other TRIO SSS students from across the Midwest. Student A3 expressed, “I would say, maybe, have more leadership conferences, things of that sort. I know that they happen once a year, but maybe, once a semester. That really helps a lot as a student.” Student A2 added:

> If I could change anything about TRIO, I definitely would have to say when I attended a leadership conference, it was in Illinois, and that was a great opportunity but I wish we had those in … [the town where the Midwestern institution is located]. It doesn't really have to mean we have to travel. I know there are a lot of places here like the business companies or things that pertain to people's major. I think that sometimes people mention they have to change their majors because they didn't know what was actually going on behind the scenes and relate it off the school books. The school books are not actually what you will be working with; you need to go into the company. I think TRIO being able to give students that hands on experience would be great.

TRIO SSS students thrive on leadership opportunities and seek every opportunity to further develop in this area.

Focus group question #8. How likely would you be to recommend TRIO Student Support Services to your peers?

Students indicated they were overwhelmingly likely to recommend TRIO SSS to their peers. Student A3 indicated, "I'm very likely to tell others about this program. I do not so often except when people ask me, 'Why are you wearing that TRIO t-shirt? What does TRIO stand for?' That's when I start talking about it." Student A2 expressed, "I highly recommend TRIO. It's been an awesome time in this program. I always talk about it on social media, so if people know me they know about TRIO." Student B5 expressed, "Without hesitation, I would recommend TRIO." Student B6 indicated, "I would definitely recommend TRIO, definitely, definitely."

Focus group question #9. Have you recommended TRIO Student Support Services to your peers?

Interestingly enough, all focus group participants indicated they have in fact recommended TRIO SSS to their peers, and they continue to do so. Student A4 affirmed, "Yes, I have, many!" Student A1 revealed, "Yes, absolutely, many, many times." Student A2 voiced, "I have, all the time." Student B6 revealed:

> I can say I've recommended it to a lot of people, over 10, as well, not even to just students to but faculty and advisors that don't know anything about TRIO, and I tell them that I work there, and I'm a part of the program and what the program does, so they can tell their advisee like, "Hey, if you need any help, you can go here."

Student B8 added, "I've probably recommended like two or three mainly, because everybody I already know is in TRIO." Student B5 stated, "I think I have recommend

TRIO to specifically four or five people, and I've also informed my advisor and a couple of other people that I thought ought to know about it."

Focus group question #10. What role did the staff play in your overall TRIO experience? Does anyone stand out to you? If so, why?

Based on student responses, TRIO staff are a significant piece of the TRIO success story. Specifically, the support staff, academic advisors, and the director were referenced most. Student B7 asserted, "My advisor, because of the consistency, because she's always been my advisor even when they were doing the advising changes." Student B1 also mentioned his or her advisor by noting, "She was very supportive even when I doubted myself, and I just felt like I couldn't do any more." Student B5 further remarked:

> The staff have been great, all of them. The student workers who work at the desk are all great. The graduate assistants and the full-time staff are all really great. I've actually had advising appointments with four different advisors in TRIO, and they've all been great especially, even though I only had a couple of meetings with her, the graduate assistant responsible for workshops, she's done so many other things for TRIO that's she just fantastic. She's gone above and beyond the call of duty. The things that she's done with the scholarship and mentoring and things. She helped me one-on-one to get all of the things I needed done to apply to graduate school, and that all went very successfully. Kudos to her.

TRIO SSS students cite academic advisors as a vital part of their collegiate success.

More than one student mentioned the influence of the director. Student B7 communicated, "The TRIO director helped me personally far, far beyond my expectations. In the military, I would have put him in for a medal." Student B8 voiced,

"I think he's a good person to look up to as an African-American man, there's not many to look up to for me." Student B8 went on to add, "He has also helped me outside of TRIO. He's our advisor for a student organization I am in, and he's been trying, even with his busy schedule, to do his best to help us do better." Student A2 asserted, "I live by his philosophy, 'Do what you love, and you never have to work a day in your life.' I feel like he's doing exactly what he loves…. I also feel like he's just an amazing person." Student A1 asserted:

> He [the director] has served as my primary academic advisor. He is so genuine. He's got such a wonderful heart. I feel like he loves this so much and the students so much that he wants this to succeed. He pushes me. He encourages me. He listens to me even if I just need to crab, he listens to me. He says, "That's fine, just get it out." I think TRIO is him, and he is TRIO.

Without a doubt, students seem to be very appreciative of the TRIO staff. Student B4 expressed:

> Like everyone else, everyone who works here is just outstanding. They all do an outstanding job. It's really a good thing that everyone that's here is here. They do a great job for everybody. Two people that stand out, if I had to pick two people and the only reason why I'd pick them is because they are the two I deal with majorly, is my advisor. She's been my advisor the whole time I've been here even when they were changing advisors, I never skipped a beat. I don't know if I was supposed to go somewhere else or what. I just kept going to her, and she just kept doing her thing that we've been doing the whole time. She's really kept me on track, and when they've messed with my schedule or something and sometimes

> when I mess up my schedule and she'd help me fix it. It's amazing that you've got people here who help, I mean, I'm one person, and I might help a few people with some of their problems, but I don't help a thousand people with their problems every day. It's hard to know how many people he helps. They all help every day. It's a great thing, you know. That's part of it.

Focus group participants seemed to have a good grasp of the sacrifices TRIO staff make both personally and professionally to assist them towards college completion. Student B3 asserted:

> The whole program, everybody who works here has just been fabulous and have helped me tremendously, getting me to places or helping me make copies of something. Even though I don't see them, being blind and all, the two people who mean the most are the director and my advisor. I have had one advisor the entire time I've been here, and she has walked me through a lot of troubles getting me into the right programs when I got here and plans that I wanted to get done when I got here. She guided me into a different program and walked me through what classes I need to take every semester to make sure I can get out of here as quickly as possible. She's given me other options other than the traditional classes, to do the intercession classes and the summer classes to make sure I can get things done quickly even though I can't go full-time. It's been great in that regard. The TRIO director, in the same way, just being able to talk to me and giving me advice in general. Making sure that I'm on track and having somebody to say to, “Hey, I did something, I got a good grade on that.” Just having someone to say, “Hey, I

never doubted you!" That really helps the morale of wanting to do a little bit more every time.

Encouragement provided by TRIO staff is incredibly impactful for student success. Relationships are the centerpiece of student retention.

Focus group question #11. Is there a question you wish I had asked but did not?

More than one student said the following, "Where do you feel like you would have been without TRIO?" Student B7 asserted, "Probably not here. I probably wouldn't have come back if there wasn't any support." Student B1 added, "I would probably be back home trying to figure out what I'm going to do with my life." Student A5 noted, "I think you could have asked, name one particular instance when TRIO went above and beyond for us?" Multiple students added there would be too many instances to count.

In addition, student B7 asked if there were ways students, faculty, and staff could donate to TRIO. Several students added that after they secure gainful employment, they would love to give back. Specifically, a number of students engaged in conversation about how they could start a TRIO alumni scholarship program for the TRIO SSS program. Student B3 added, "We'd call it the Success of TRIO Scholarship Foundation."

Emerging theme: Relationships. Participants involved in the focus groups spoke of the sense of community they feel from TRIO. All reported TRIO is a place they feel safe to be themselves. Because all TRIO participants are first-generation, low-income, or disabled, despite student differences, a common bond exists.

Student B9 voiced, "They [TRIO staff] go above and beyond just advising. They give personalized conversations if you're having a problem. It's not just about academia."

Student A6 disclosed, “I love my advisor. She's like a second mom to me down here. She's counseled me in some family stuff I've had going on since I've been down here, so she's a big help.” Student A2 shared, “He's always there for like genuine support to make sure I pursue my goal. He's always there to encourage me. I feel like it is genuine when he helps me too, which is what I really love about him.” The success of TRIO is built on strong relationships.

Emerging theme: Loyalty. Participants demonstrated a strong sense of loyalty to TRIO. As mentioned, all TRIO SSS students involved in focus groups indicated they recommend TRIO to others. Students also indicated they would like to see TRIO more widespread, and they are very satisfied with the services they receive. Student A4 referred to TRIO SSS as his or her “backbone and daily motivation.”

Emerging theme: Trust. Participants indicated a strong sense of trust in TRIO SSS. Students rely on TRIO staff not only for academic advice, but also personal guidance as well as counseling. Student A2 indicated TRIO provides unlimited, genuine support. Student B8 noted, “TRIO has broken down barriers for me.” Multiple students indicated they switched their primary academic advisors to TRIO staff, because students trust TRIO advisors will provide the best guidance. Students also indicated they prefer TRIO SSS services, such as tutoring, to similar services offered by other offices.

Emerging theme: Transformation. Focus group participants indicated significant growth and transformation during their time in TRIO SSS. As a result of having supportive relationships and access to critical resources, participants had the opportunity to become self-advocates. Student B1 said, “It [TRIO] changed my whole college experience. I’m here, about to graduate in May because of it.” Student A1

added, “I think if the university did not have TRIO a lot of students would suffer, and they probably would not succeed. I know it has been a big, big help to me.”

Summary

In this chapter, the relationship of TRIO SSS at a Midwestern institution was examined to determine the impact of program services on the retention and grade point averages of participants compared to students who were also first-generation, low-income, and disabled but not being served by the project. When inferential statistics were conducted to determine significance for research question one and research question two, it was determined no statistically significant differences were identified between the two groups.

In addition, a group of TRIO SSS students participated in focus groups to discuss their overall programmatic experiences and impressions of the program. A total of 11 questions were asked during two focus groups, and the following themes emerged: relationships, loyalty, and trust. In the final chapter, a summary and conclusions are provided that detail the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five: Findings and Conclusions

The population of students who are first-generation, low-income, or disabled is growing rapidly in institutions of higher learning (Tinto, 2012). TRIO SSS is one of the best examples of programming specifically designed to support first-generation, low-income, and disabled populations (Department of Education, 2014a). Because much of the research on this topic is condensed together to report national outcomes, there is little research on student perceptions about their overall experience in site-based programs. An understanding of outcomes specifically related to retention rates and grade point average data, coupled with student perceptions, could not be found in current literature. Furthermore, there is no focus in the literature on how first-generation, low-income, disabled students navigate and develop within TRIO.

This mixed methods study was conducted to determine if differences exist in retention rates and grade point averages of TRIO SSS students at a Midwestern institution and students who were similarly qualified but not being served by the project. In addition, focus groups were conducted in order to garner the overall perceptions and experiences of TRIO SSS seniors. This study took place at a large, Midwestern, four-year, public institution. A total of 1,913 adult students were included in the quantitative portion of the study, and 16 of those students participated in the student focus groups. The study was guided by three research questions, and both quantitative and qualitative data were collected.

The qualitative research was conducted has been compiled into emergent themes: relationships, loyalty, trust, and transformation. The themes serve as centerpieces for the TRIO SSS program studied. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings,

conclusions related to the literature, implications for practice that could be used to enhance TRIO SSS programs, and recommendations for future research. These areas provide a roadmap in the area of TRIO SSS and the experiences of first-generation, low-income, and disabled students. In conclusion, a summary is presented.

Findings

The first two quantitative research questions were developed to determine if differences exist in retention rates and grade point averages between TRIO SSS students and similarly qualified non-TRIO SSS students. The third research question was qualitative, and data were gathered through the use of focus groups. Focus group questions were formulated and categorized based on connection with the third research question, which focused on student perceptions of the TRIO experience. The qualitative research question was developed because the research reviewed indicated areas where first-generation students falter as they navigate the university environment. These findings are consistent with current descriptive literature and also provides additional understanding of the experiences of first-generation, low-income, and disabled students and the role of TRIO SSS in helping disadvantaged students reach their full potential (Coffman, 2011; Tinto, 2012).

The first research question guiding this study was: What statistically significant difference exists, if any, in the retention rates of TRIO SSS students compared to other first-generation, low-income, disabled students who are not served by the program?

The purpose of this quantitative question was to determine if a significant difference in retention rates exists between TRIO SSS students and similarly qualified students not being served by the project. Descriptive statistics were calculated including

the mean, median, and mode (Bluman, 2014). The result of a *t*-test showed at $\alpha = 0.05$, there was no statistical difference between the retention rates of each group.

The second research question guiding this study was: What statistically significant difference exists, if any, in regards to student success, as measured by a 2.0 grade point average, for students in TRIO as compared to students meeting the same criteria not being served by the program?

The purpose of this quantitative question was to determine if a statistically significant difference exists between the two groups. Descriptive statistics were calculated including the mean, median, and mode (Bluman, 2014). The result of a *t*-test showed that at $\alpha = 0.05$, there was no statistical difference between the retention rates of each group.

The third research question linked the responses from two focus groups with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Focus group questions were developed and categorized in an effort to garner senior TRIO SSS students' perceptions of their overall experience at the Midwestern institution. The following focus group questions centered on student experiences, program successes, and ways the program could improve.

Focus group question #1. Tell me a little about yourself and how you came to be a student at the university.

Participants reflected on the main findings regarding their backgrounds and transitions into the targeted institution. Of the students who participated in the focus groups, a large number had transferred from various community colleges and universities from across the state and nation for various reasons. Some of the reasons included advice/guidance from others, academic, social, convenience, and proximity.

Focus group question #2. What is your major or area of study?

Because TRIO SSS works with students from all majors, a variety of responses were received. Students in the study were primarily enrolled in four of the university colleges: College of Natural and Applied Sciences, College of Business, College of Education, and the College of Communication Arts.

Focus group question #3. What challenges have you encountered as a first-generation/low-income student?

Information from the focus groups which emerged centered on many areas outside of academics or the ability to complete the work that needed to be done. Other challenges noted by focus group members included more outside influences as well as self-confidence in their abilities.

Focus group question #4. What role has TRIO played in helping you overcome those challenges?

Participants expressed TRIO provided support that allowed them to be academically successful. Academic success was cited as the byproduct of helping students develop self-confidence through encouragement and mentorship, intrusive academic advising and appropriate degree planning, leadership skills, academic resources, and being a family-oriented environment (Coffman, 2011).

Focus group question #5. When you think about TRIO Student Support Services, what three words come to mind?

While participants expressed a variety of responses, commonalties were summarized into three areas: support, family, and encouragement. These three areas demonstrate the TRIO SSS program's strong commitment to make a significant

difference in the overall experience of first-generation, low-income, and disabled students.

Focus group question #6. In your opinion, what were the top two services provided to you by TRIO SSS?

The majority of participants responded similarly regarding support, connections, and relationships. Specifically, academic advising, stipends and financial assistance, computer lab access, tutoring, mentoring, leadership skills, and cultural events were referenced as pivotal to student success.

Focus group question #7. What can TRIO Student Support Services do to improve service delivery, and if given the opportunity, what would you change about the program?

While TRIO programs are limited by U.S. Department of Education legislation and regulations, there are aspects that can be modified to better meet student needs. One area students mentioned was program reminders regarding appointments, workshops, and other meetings. Additionally, students mentioned increasing campus awareness of TRIO SSS and other resources provided by the program. The responses from focus group participants indicated TRIO SSS students were proud of the services the program provided and had no understanding about limitations of criteria and resources. Participants voiced they would like to see workshops pushed more aggressively, and at least one participant noted he or she would like to see a greater variety of workshops. Students also referenced a desire to take part in more leadership conferences.

Focus group question #8. How likely would you be to recommend TRIO Student Support Services to your peers?

Students indicated they were overwhelmingly likely to recommend TRIO SSS to their peers. Students expressed they want to see other students enjoy similar experiences as they have in TRIO SSS.

Focus group question #9. Have you recommended TRIO Student Support Services to your peers?

Interestingly, all focus group participants indicated they have in fact recommended TRIO SSS to their peers. Multiple students indicated they recommend TRIO SSS to other students on a regular basis. Advocacy of TRIO SSS was very evident. Most new TRIO SSS participants learn about the program from a peer.

Focus group question #10. What role did the staff play in your overall TRIO experience? Does anyone stand out to you? If so, why?

Based on student responses, TRIO staff are a significant piece of the TRIO success story. Specifically, the support staff, academic advisors, and the director were referenced most. Forming positive relationships were determined to be the centerpiece of TRIO.

Focus group question #11. Is there a question you wish I had asked but did not?

More than one student said the following, "Where do you feel like you would have been without TRIO?" Multiple students indicated TRIO is the reason they remained enrolled at the institution. Students went on to engage in a spirited discussion of ways they could eventually give back to the program through monetary donations and the funding of scholarships.

All of the questions generated responses that were classified into four major themes: relationships, loyalty, trust, and transformation. The results of the focus groups are presented by theme. These themes are discussed in depth in the following section.

Conclusions

This section links quantitative and qualitative results with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Through quantitative research questions, the researcher examined TRIO SSS programmatic impact on the retention rates and grade point averages of participants compared to similarly qualified students not being served by the project. While national statistics show TRIO SSS participants have higher retention rates than their counterparts, this research showed no statistically significant difference (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). This may be a direct result of incomplete recordkeeping regarding first-generation, low-income, and disabled students attending the Midwestern institution.

Focus groups were conducted that included 16 TRIO seniors. Conclusions reached in this study are based on responses to the focus group questions that guided its design. A total of 11 questions were asked to garner student perceptions about their time in TRIO SSS. This information is grouped into the following themes: relationships, loyalty, trust, and transformation.

Relationships. One important conclusion was formulated from the comments made by TRIO SSS students. A critical component of their experiences was the relationships and bonds they formed with staff members and other TRIO SSS students. Because first-generation students have not had the example of attending college set for them, it is incredibly difficult to visualize being successful. Regarding peer support, Student B5 stated:

> A couple things really stand out to me. One is the social network. The support system of TRIO. It really is a community, like a family. I've really appreciated having that community within TRIO. Having a place to come is a really important thing for me, because I didn't know anyone. In my department, we're just not very social creatures. Most of the time I would meet and become friends with someone in my same department through TRIO.

Having an individual or group of individuals who support first-generation, low-income, and disabled students makes all the difference (Tinto, 2012).

First-generation students, especially ethnic minorities, often feel isolated and underprepared for their undergraduate experiences (Coffman, 2011). Disadvantaged student populations often indicate faculty and staff members are less concerned about their success. Student A1 explained, "They [university employees outside of TRIO] pass you off to someone else. Another frustration is instructors don't want to be helpful. If you have any questions, and you ask the questions, then they get frustrated with you." First-generation, low-income, and disabled students are more likely to experience discrimination on a college campus as well (Ishitani, 2006). Student A4 asserted:

> It takes a lot of self-motivation [to be successful], because my family is not super supportive, because no one in my family has gone to college. I felt like that has been a challenge, along with not knowing. I felt like I was a year behind in everything like networking, getting jobs, getting certain applications. I just felt behind until I found TRIO.

The level of support provided from family coupled with the relationships developed and support provided at college directly correlates to individual success and matriculation (Ishitani, 2006).

Supportive relationships for students from disadvantaged populations often take more time to establish due to cultural and social nuances (Drake, 2011). As mentioned in the literature review, while first-generation students are often initially reluctant to work with a counselor, when they do, counselors are often able to help them navigate issues of homesickness, family, changing relationships, and campus life (Drake, 2011).

Specifically, academic advisors and the director of the program were cited as the source of supportive relationships. The importance of supportive relationships to student success was discussed in the literature review. Students who identify at least one advocate on their university campus are more likely to remain enrolled than those who do not feel supported (Roberts & Styron, 2010). Student B5 stated, "It [TRIO] really is a community. In fact, it's more like a family." Student A2 added, "Meeting people with goals like mine is great. It's good to have that support system around you here [in TRIO] as well."

In addition, peer mentorship is an invaluable resource for first-generation, low-income, and disabled students. Multiple students noted the influence of the TRIO SSS peer mentoring experience. Student A2 stated, "The mentoring program allowed me to be a mentee my freshman year and sophomore year. Now, as a senior, I am able to give back what was given to me through mentorship." Student B5 added, "I love my mentor. I've learned a lot from her experiences in life as being a student, as well. She could have been another person in a class if it wasn't for TRIO." Mentorship allows students the

opportunity to be transparent with peers and create lasting friendships (Coffman, 2011). Both mentors and mentees gain valuable experiences as a result of their partnership.

Loyalty. Loyalty of students is a critical factor in the success of an institution of higher learning (Coffman, 2011). As a result, student loyalty is a major goal of institutions of higher education (Roberts & Styron, 2010). A loyal student population is a source of competitive advantage. Students who are loyal are more inclined to have a strong attachment to the institution and to give back. Each experience students have can either increase or decrease their respective loyalty. As a result of the supportive relationships developed with TRIO staff, TRIO SSS students expressed a tremendous amount of loyalty to the program. Participants indicated they see the TRIO staff not as temporary, but as long-term connections. This loyalty was expressed by remaining actively involved with the program, promoting TRIO SSS, advocating for the program by sharing their experiences with others, encouraging other students to take part in TRIO, and the desire to see greater program promotion.

Students who come into TRIO SSS are expected to participate during all of their years as an undergraduate student. As with any program, students can stop participating at any time. As demonstrated by the annual performance report submitted to the Department of Education, 97% of all TRIO SSS students in this program continue with the program from year-to-year (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a).

TRIO SSS students indicated they encourage other students to take part in the program as a result of their good experiences. This particular TRIO SSS program consistently has a wait-list for interested students to begin TRIO services (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). This is in part the result of word-of-mouth

advertisement of current, happily served TRIO SSS students. Student A1 stated, "I'm a big ambassador for TRIO." Student A6 added, "I talk about TRIO a lot when I see people who need it [TRIO]."

Another direct result of student loyalty is a desire that TRIO SSS is promoted on a wider scale across campus. The overwhelming majority of students did not understand the limited population TRIO SSS is allowed to serve under the federal grant program. At least one student demonstrated an understanding of this issue. Student B3 stated:

> They [TRIO] only have so much space for everybody, and there's only so much room per semester for everybody, and that's the only reason I think we don't talk about it as much or try to get the word out too much.

TRIO programs, while limited in overall ability to serve larger populations, can be marketed campus-wide to students, faculty, and staff.

Participants also indicated a strong desire to give back by donating their time and portions of their future revenue in order to see the program flourish. Multiple students indicated a desire to develop scholarship opportunities for future TRIO SSS students. Student B7 asked, "Can you donate to TRIO?" Student B3 stated:

> I know if I ever make it big that's the program I would want to help. I would like to be a sponsor to students or helping in that regard. There's got to be a way to give scholarships to this program. We'd call it the "Success of TRIO" scholarships.

TRIO SSS programs welcome donations and are not limited on how funds can be spent by the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Trust. A direct result of loyalty is trust. As referenced in the literature review, first-generation students often do not know what questions to ask or who to ask about navigating college (Coffman, 2011). TRIO SSS students demonstrate their trust by allowing the TRIO staff, specifically academic advisors, to guide them through their time at the institution and provide them overall life direction. Student B7 stated, "She [my advisor] hasn't changed since I've gotten into the program. She has been great." TRIO provides consistent relationships and support for students during their time at the institution. While TRIO advisors are not intended to be primary advisors for participants, multiple students requested to leave their departmental advisors and have their TRIO advisors take the lead on their educational journey.

TRIO SSS students also share their experiences and make simple gestures including, but not limited to, wearing their "TRIO Works" shirts and other gear proudly on campus. This also demonstrates trust and pride in their experience. Student B8 referred to TRIO as his or her "backbone, strong, and powerful." Student B5 described his or her TRIO experience as "helpful, supportive, and comfortable." At least three students referenced utilizing social media to promote the program. Student B1 stated, "I promote and recommend TRIO as my number one option. TRIO is the first option for support."

Participants also demonstrate trust by allowing TRIO staff to direct them financially to be successful. All students are required to participate in a financial aid as well as a financial literacy workshop each academic year in order to remain active with the program. TRIO staff help students complete the FAFSA, personal budgeting, credit analysis and repair, taxes, and apply for additional scholarships in order to help them

make wise decisions. By doing so, TRIO SSS teaches students good stewardship and to be accountable in life beyond school. Student A3 explained, "They push you to [apply for] scholarships." Student A4 added, "I feel like they have been resourceful in looking up graduate schools and helping me plan my finances with financial aid classes and financial literacy classes. Just different things I didn't know about money."

Transformation. TRIO SSS has been a transformative experience for seniors who participated in the focus groups. Through participation in TRIO SSS, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students gain self-confidence that allows them to move from a place of dependence to self-advocacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2014d). This self-confidence helps students believe they can accomplish their goals, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared for and respected. Learning how to be a leader allows students to take control, moving from someone who is supported to an individual in a position to be an advocate. Student A3 stated, "TRIO has helped develop me into a leader." Student A2 added:

> TRIO has allowed me to understand the ins and outs of being a first-generation college student and overcoming the label associated with it. I felt like I was doubted, but TRIO helped me to know and live out the fact that no matter what statistics may say, it's all about me and what I want to achieve.

When student dependence develops into self-advocacy and independence, students have a greater opportunity to perform as their non-first-generation counterparts. If students are positioned and equipped to advocate for themselves as the result of their new-found confidence, collegiate success can be achieved.

As noted in the literature review, students indicated relationships with their academic advisors are vitally important (Roberts & Styron, 2010). Academic advising plays an important role in students' decisions to persist and also affects their graduation outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students who leave institutions without graduating cite poor advising as one of the significant triggers for their departure decisions (Tuttle, 2009).

The goal of TRIO is to show students they are capable of being successful in post-secondary education and their dreams are valid (U.S. Department of Education, 2014d). To accomplish this task, TRIO programs utilize intrusive academic advising and provide resources that allow students the same access as non-first-generation, low-income, or disabled students. When students are able to become independent self-advocates, they also become leaders. While leadership development is not a direct goal of TRIO SSS, it is an indirect result of the tools and resources provided to participants who actively engage in the program.

Implications for Practice

As an era is reached where institutional funding from the state is increasingly becoming tied to retention, graduation, and other key performance indicators, successful matriculation procedures are more important than ever (Drake, 2011). In addition, there are projected to be more minority students than white students in higher education by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Along with the increasing population of minority students, there will be more first-generation, low-income, and disabled students enrolled in higher education in the coming years (Drake, 2011).

Now is the time for institutions to ramp up support for all students to decrease attrition rates, specifically students from disadvantaged populations (Tinto, 2012). TRIO grants, especially TRIO SSS, are useful tools from the U.S. Department of Education (2014a) that support first-generation, low-income, and disabled students to obtain college degrees while becoming self-advocates. Exhibiting successful TRIO SSS programs would lead to increased support and the development of a sense of belonging for first-generation, low-income, and disabled students. Aside from these student populations, students who are not first-generation, low-income, or disabled may still be at risk of higher attrition rates if supportive relationships are not developed and maintained (Tinto, 2012). It is clear from these findings TRIO SSS students at this Midwestern institution feel a great deal of commitment, pride, trust, and loyalty to the program. Many of the TRIO SSS seniors credit TRIO SSS for their collegiate success and retention. Based upon the findings of this study, there are four main implications for practice.

Proper identification and tracking of first-generation students. Sometimes very simplistic steps can change the outcome of a procedure. This was certainly the case in the present study. Upon starting this study, the researcher was unaware the system used by the institution failed to identify first-generation, low-income, and disabled students. Undoubtedly, the results of the quantitative analysis in the study that focused on retention rates and grade point average data would likely be different if all students were identified and tracked properly. As a result of having limited data, it was difficult to obtain an accurate picture of the outcomes.

Consequently, all applications for admission, regardless of the institution, should require students to indicate their first-generation status. The institution utilized in this

study asks the question; however, answering the question is not a requirement. According to the office of institutional research office at the institution, over 60% of students fail to complete the question. This could be in part because students may not understand what it means to be first-generation. In order to adequately support first-generation students and keep up with current trends of supporting students from this demographic, the key is quality data collection (Crosling et al., 2010).

When proper identification and tracking are in place, institutions may appropriately and adequately serve first-generation, low-income, and disabled students. When this population is appropriately served, graduation rates increase for the university, which lead to greater institutional pride (Coffman, 2011). Higher matriculation rates also mean increased revenue for the institution and a larger alumni base (Braxton et al., 2014). Successful retention is equally beneficial to both the institution and the students served (Tinto, 2012).

When proper identification and tracking are not in place, students suffer because they do not receive the necessary support to be successful. In addition, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students who are not satisfied with their academic experiences lead to higher attrition rates. Aside from the lower retention rates for the institution, revenue decreases for an institution when students are not supported appropriately (Coffman, 2011). A decrease in revenue can lead to cuts for programs such as those that support similar populations (Coffman, 2011).

Support of first-generation student academic success goes beyond TRIO. Acknowledging first-generation, low-income, and disabled students are a unique population is critical to successful student retention. Cookie-cutter programming will not

promote the success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). First-generation, low-income, and disabled students come to the table with their own set of needs that must be understood and supported (Tinto, 2012).

First-generation students do not have the same amount of social and cultural capital, often have to overcome a lack of college preparation, and have to balance the demands of their families as discussed in the literature review (Coffman, 2011). Programming must be designed to specifically address those challenges. Adequate programming for this population should be designed to provide equal opportunity despite student backgrounds (Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

Students who participated in the focus groups noted the success of TRIO is in large part due to the supportive relationships and access to resources TRIO SSS provides. Due to the limited population of students most TRIO SSS programs can serve, services could be replicated or expanded through university support and funding. This expansion would allow similar support and a quality experience for all first-generation, low-income, and disabled students. Academic success centers that provide services, such as tutoring, peer mentoring, financial assistance, equipment lending, academic advising, and exposure to cultural activities for first-generation, low-income, and disabled students, goes a long way. As indicated by focus group participants in this study, those services, when coupled with supportive relationships, are invaluable.

Enhancing the campus climate to promote inclusiveness. Having programming that promotes student success only works if the campus climate is supportive of such programs. Generally, TRIO programs are funded 100% by U.S. Department of Education grants, and institutions offer little to no financial support

outside of the grants. The purpose of the grants is to enhance what the institution is doing to promote the success of disadvantaged populations, not to fund the campus's entire programming for this population.

First-generation, low-income, and disabled students need more than just TRIO. Being a part of a larger campus drive to ensure their success would provide an optimal experience. TRIO SSS services are completely voluntary. University initiatives to promote student success with mandatory requirements would be beneficial. This type of structure would be uncommon to most and would require institutional climate change in order to be a reality. In order to ensure the best experiences possible for first-generation, low-income, and disabled students, strong relationships between faculty and staff are necessary.

People matter. As expressed by the students involved in this study, supportive relationships are perhaps the most critical aspect of student success (Coleman-Tucker, 2014). It is for this reason the right people must be on the team. The right people are compassionate, devoted, and dedicated to student success. Student affairs personnel are often required to work beyond the typical 40 hours each week in order to meet student needs. This commitment to student success requires sacrifice of time and energy.

Employers are not the only ones who feel the effects of a bad hiring choice (Collins, 2015). Students bear the brunt of those poor hiring decisions as the direct customers of the institution. The importance of character cannot be diminished when selecting a candidate. Hiring for character and training for skill is strongly encouraged. Essentially, getting the right people on the bus is the key to good hiring decisions (Collins, 2015). It is much easier to train someone to perform job duties than to change

his or her overall attitude towards his or her role. The cost of terminating an employee and replacing him or her is expensive (Collins, 2015).

While TRIO is a federally funded program with a lot of rules and regulations, the governmental legalities do not have to be widely known to the campus community, especially not the students who are served. A good administrator and staff can minimize barriers to student success by not promoting those aspects of the program and can highlight all of the quality services available to students.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study contributes to the knowledge and body of research of the impact of TRIO SSS, it is by no means exhaustive. The limitations of this study noted in Chapter One should be addressed in future studies by correcting the limited scope of the sample. Because this study was conducted at one Midwestern institution, several future studies should be considered to gain a more comprehensive view of the role of TRIO SSS in other areas of the country. Geographic, cultural, and programmatic operational differences may have an influence on the impact of TRIO SSS on retention and grade point averages as well as how TRIO is perceived.

Because much of the research on this topic is descriptive, there is little research on how these findings parallel the experiences of TRIO SSS students at other campuses. Furthermore, there is no focus on how first-generation students navigate and develop in the absence of any guidance. Multiple institutions should be included in a single study to gain a more holistic view of TRIO SSS, since the experiences of TRIO SSS students may vary from institution to institution. As mentioned earlier, university administration and program staff tremendously influence a student's overall experience. Additional focus

groups could be scheduled within a larger study to obtain more in-depth student perceptions that detail their program satisfaction.

If future studies are conducted, the researcher recommends working with institutions that have accurate and complete information regarding the number of first-generation, low-income, and disabled students on their campuses. Countless students were excluded, including 130 TRIO SSS students, because they were not appropriately coded by institutional research or financial aid. It is recommended future research involve examination and identification of institutions that adequately track adequate data as well as those that do not. The ultimate goal of such research would be to aid institutions in the appropriate identification, tracking, and support methods.

Additional research is also needed on the different experiences of students who persist compared to those who leave. A mixed methods study that focuses on the experiences of students who do not remain enrolled in higher education would be particularly informative. This type of research will give a program or institution a greater knowledge base of issues facing first-generation, low-income, and disabled students in their area.

Further tracking and follow-up of student participants to determine degree completion, graduate school enrollment rates, and gainful employment statistics should be considered. Because TRIO, in part, develops leaders, it would be interesting to see how many former participants eventually embark in leadership roles. This should be studied from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective.

Future studies should also be expanded to other retention programs designed to work with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, much like TRIO, to determine their

success rates. While this study was conducted and centered on TRIO, this study could benefit multiple other programs.

Summary

This mixed methods study was intended to discover the outcomes and experiences of TRIO SSS students and non-TRIO SSS students. Using Tinto's theory of student departure as the theoretical framework, the study was guided by research questions intended to determine if statistically significant differences existed in the retention rates and grade point averages between the two groups (Tinto, 2012). In addition, the overall programmatic experiences were discovered and examined through the use of focus groups.

In Chapter Two, the literature review detailed Tinto's theory of student departure, citing students leave institutions for three primary reasons: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and a student's failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution (Tinto, 2012)**.** A discussion of the history of TRIO programs, specifically TRIO SSS, confirmed a lack of research existed that coupled quantitative data with qualitative student perceptions of first-generation, low-income, and disabled students who need unique supports designed to help them reach their full potential. Some of the struggles faced by first-generation, low-income, and disabled students include the following: pre-entry characteristics that include a lack of college preparation, issues navigating campus, social and cultural factors, work and family obligations, and socioeconomic status (Tinto, 2012)**.**

After testing two quantitative research questions that required examination to see if differences in retention rates and grade point averages exist between TRIO SSS students and non-TRIO SSS students, it was determined that no statistically significant relationship exists between the two groups. These data were inconsistent with previous research that indicated TRIO SSS students are more academically successful than their counterparts (Coffman, 2011). This could in part be due to the incomplete records of first-generation students held by the university. Focus groups revealed TRIO SSS students are incredibly satisfied with their overall TRIO experiences. The emerging themes, relationships, trust, loyalty, and transformation were discovered.

As the population of first-generation, low-income, and disabled students who enroll in college grows, providing the necessary support to ensure student success, especially for these populations, is vitally important. While the quantitative data did not demonstrate a statistically significant difference between the retention rates and grade point averages provided, an important discovery that the university does not have quality procedures in place to identify and track first-generation, low-income, and disabled students was made that will help future researchers. The goal of any institution should be the academic success and retention of students, regardless of their backgrounds. Part of this drive for student success is the understanding different students have different needs.

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself and how you came to be a student at the university. (Please ask for clarification or more information as needed).

2. What is your major or area of study?

3. What challenges have you encountered as a first-generation/low-income student? (Please ask for clarification or more information as needed).

4. What role has TRIO played in helping you overcome those challenges?

5. When you think about TRIO SSS, what three words come to mind?

6. In your opinion, what were the top two services provided to you by TRIO SSS?

7. What can TRIO SSS do to improve service delivery, and if given the opportunity, what would you change about the program?

8. How likely would you be to recommend TRIO SSS to your peers?

9. Have you recommended the TRIO SSS program to anyone during your time at the university?

10. What role did the staff play in your overall TRIO experience? Does anyone stand out to you? If so, why?

11. Is there a question you wished I had asked that I did not?

Field Notes

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Appendix B

Host Institution IRB Approval

LINDENWOOD

LINDENWOOD UNIVERSITY ST. CHARLES, MISSOURI

DATE: March 25, 2015

TO: TaJuan Wilson
FROM: Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: [697747-1] The Impact of TRIO Student Support Services at a Midwestern Institution
IRB REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APROVED
APPROVAL DATE: March, 25, 2015
EXPIRATION DATE: March 25, 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 March 25, 2016.

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

If you have any questions, please contact Megan Woods at (636) 485-9005 or mwoods1@lindenwood.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

If you have any questions, please send them to mwoods1@lindenwood.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board's record.

Appendix C

External IRB Approval

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

[redacted]
Web site:
[redacted]
Federal wide Assurance (FWA) #4733

To: TaJuan Wilson

[redacted]

From: [redacted] IRB

Date: 4/08/2015

RE: Agreement to Rely on External IRB
Study #: 15-0400

Study Title: The Impact of TRIO Student Support Services at a Midwestern Institution

Your application for Single IRB Review has been approved. Lindenwood University is acknowledged as the IRB of record.

Investigator's Responsibilities:

It is the [redacted] Principal Investigator's responsibility to inform the [redacted] IRB about any actions by the external IRB regarding their approval to conduct the study, approval of modifications to the study, approval for continued conduct of the study (renewal), termination of study approval and any unanticipated problems.

In the future, you will continue to receive reminder notices from the [redacted] IRB for renewal of IRB approval. In response, please submit evidence of current approval and all renewals from the external IRB.

Appendix D

LINDENWOOD

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

"The Impact of TRIO SSS at a Midwestern Institution"

Principal Investigator _ TaJuan R. Wilson_____
Telephone: 417-[redacted] E-mail: [redacted]@yahoo.com

Participant_____
Contact Info_____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by TaJuan Wilson under the guidance of Dr. Rhonda Bishop. The purpose of this research is to examine the overall programmatic experience of TRIO SSS Students and draw conclusions and themes.

2. a) Your participation will involve

- Participating in a focus group and answering a total of 11 questions about your time in TRIO SSS.

- This will be a one time commitment that will occur at an agreed upon on-campus location.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be 2 hours.

Approximately 20 TRIO SSS seniors 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 TRIO SSS and may help society.
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, TaJuan Wilson 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
Signature of Principal Investigator Date	Investigator Printed Name

Appendix E

Proctor Instructions

Thank you for agreeing to be a proctor for this study. In order to be consistent and reliable, each of you is being trained to facilitate this process. Please follow the instructions given and ask any questions to clarify and simplify the process as needed.

1. Using the voice recorders and video camera provided, audio record each focus group session using the provided voice recorder. Turn the tape recorder and video camera on and begin recording so the entire process is available for review. Each audio recording should be labeled and copies of the files should be maintained in four different secure locations: the original device, drop box, email, and an external hard drive.
2. Verbally go over the consent form with the group. Remind students that they do not have to respond to every question, and that they can terminate their participation at any time.
3. Identify each focus group by letter and each student by number (ex. Focus Group A, Student 1, Focus Group B, Student 1, etc.). In this step each focus group will be identified by a letter and each participant will be assigned a number. For example, the members of the first Focus Group can be labeled A1-A6, the members of the second Focus Group B1-B-6, and so on. At this point, assign each student by letter and number and have him or her speak the number. Inform student that each time they speak they will also need to reference their assigned group and number to ensure consistency. It can be before or after their statement.
4. Ask each question in order, and give opportunity for each student to answer. For example, each student should be given the opportunity to respond to question 1 and provide their corresponding identifying information before moving on to other questions.
5. Ask for clarification as needed. Some students might not provide you with the appropriate detail needed to draw conclusions and themes from during the analysis process. It is acceptable to ask for clarification as you feel necessary. For example, if a student replies that her or she has recommended the TRIO SSS program to others during time his or her time at the university (see question 9), it is acceptable to ask how many times and the context of the situation.
6. Maintain field notes during the process in order to make the analysis less difficult. Field notes are taken by recording major themes, ideas, comments, and observations regarding group dynamics in hand-written. In addition, make regular member checks by summarizing information and questioning participants to ensure accuracy.
7. Summarize key ideas in the field notes section. Essentially, look for patterns of findings.
8. After the focus group has ended, please label all recordings and maintain them on the original device, in drop box, via email as well as the external hard drive provided.

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