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The Challenges of Persisting First Generation College Students: A Comparison
Between Students with TRIO Support and Those Without

by

ClauDean Kizart

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

Doctor of Education

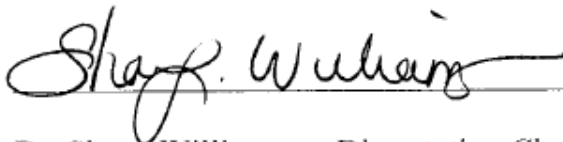
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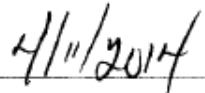
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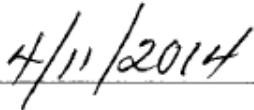
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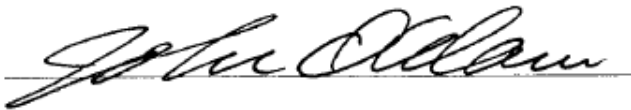
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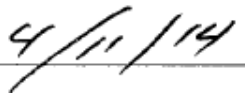
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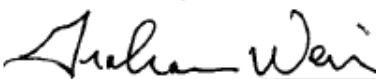
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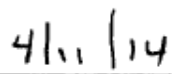
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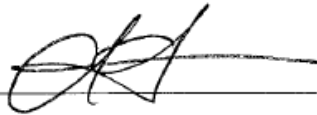
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Declaration of Originality

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

Full Legal Name: ClauDean Kizart

Signature: _____



Date: _____

4/11/2014

Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes to all of those who suggested and inspired me to pursue a doctorate in education. You had faith in me even when I didn't have faith in myself. Thanks to Creola and Levant Hampton, my parents, for being shining examples of hard-work and determination with integrity. Watching you persist and achieve the accolades you have earned in your fields has inspired me to reach higher heights in life. Thanks to Cosette Laticia Hampton, my little sister. It was you that came in this life, softened my heart just enough to want to work in the field of education. And, thanks to Veronica Banks who helped me focus more on being a positive agent of change in the world by encouraging me to go to school. Many thanks to my sisters, Camille Kizart-Clark and Yvette Thomas; whose work in pursuing your doctorates in education while being great teachers, wives, and mothers was inspiring. My heartfelt thanks go to Rodney Lindor for support, love, and verbal reminders that I needed to finish school, and for being such a great father to our Destinae and Jeremie. You took great care of our little ones while I was in class, out writing and conducting interviews, which was incredibly helpful to me while completing this process. Grandma Hoover C. Kizart, it is your words of wisdom that often guide my daily life. Thank you for reminding me to get rest and take care of my health. Countless thanks to Mama Bogaty and Dan for being such a good support system, especially for our children as well, as Paul Bogaty for the hours spent helping me transcribe my interviews.

Thanks to Dr. Shane Williamson, my dissertation chair who guided my work, made time to meet with me, and reminded me to "kick myself" when I felt stuck. Thanks to Dr. Graham Weir who inspired me to select the topic of first-generation

college students during Capstone I, provided encouragement and feedback, and helped me to further develop my work. Thanks to Dr. John Oldani for assisting with the development of my research and to Dr. Cerlestine Johnson who offered words of wisdom on this journey of finishing my dissertation, as well as provided feedback on my work. Many thanks to Dr. Beth Kania-Goshe, who was a fierce leader who offered feedback and workshops with pertinent information that kept me on track during this process. My sincere appreciation to Dr. Thomas Walker for the quiet reminders to finish what I started during those times when I strayed off of the path and SweetArt Bakeshop for giving me an enjoyable place write. Last but certainly not least, thanks to the entire pool of interview participants who shared quality time and information regarding experiences as first-generation college students. Your hard work, tenacity, and courage to defy the odds to pursue a degree of higher education were both inspiring and necessary to the quality of our society. May your light continue to shine brightly, as it is only through doing so that we inspire others to do the same.

Abstract

This qualitative study examined first generation college students who persisted towards completing baccalaureate degrees with and without the assistance of TRIO, a federally funded program that assisted first-generation college students with obtaining baccalaureate degree. The researcher gathered empirical data through conducting semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 20 first-generation students from two universities who were beyond their first year of college and possessed a 2.0 or higher grade point average (GPA). Interviews were retrospective, as all students were upper-class college students who completed at least one year of college at one of two four-year universities. It was important to the study design to understand the challenges and perspectives of first-generation students who defied the odds of persisting beyond their first year of college. The researcher interviewed an equal number of participants from each respective university. While one of the subgroups was involved with TRIO, student support services were not available at the university for those in the second subgroup. Fifty-five percent of those interviewed were African American, while 40% were White, and 5% were Hispanic. Additionally, of those first-generation students interviewed, 35% were sophomores, 45% were juniors, and 20% were in their senior year of college. These demographics provide a snapshot of the diversity within the population that existed among the generational cohorts interviewed.

Various themes emerged regarding the challenges and perceptions of first-generation college students that included family support, college affordability, socialization, academic rigor, and mentorship. Further, these findings suggested that this generational cohort of first-generation students shared similar challenges and

perspectives as they persisted towards completing baccalaureate degrees. Data indicated that involvement in programs such as TRIO seemed to assist participants with progression through college life by providing mentorship, book stipends, and grants, as well as opportunities to fellowship with other success-driven, first-generation college students.

It is important for colleges and universities to understand the perceptions of first-generation college students persisting beyond their first year of college. With this information, colleges and universities alike can make sure to take appropriate measures of providing the necessary tools to help first-generation college students complete degrees of higher education, particularly baccalaureate degrees.

Keywords: first-generation college student, persisting, low income, and academic success

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Chapter One: Overview

First-generation college students are defined as individuals whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, or any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent or whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Higher Education Act Amendment, 1998; United States Education Act of 1965). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that among 2008 high school seniors who began college at four-year colleges and universities first-generation students represented approximately 45% of all undergraduates in 2007-2008 (NCES, 2009). This generational cohort of first-generation college students aspired to complete degrees of higher education like many of their non-first generation college mates, yet they often lacked the familial and social capital needed to support them in their academic endeavors of obtaining baccalaureate degrees.

In a study conducted by Goldrick-Rab (2006) presented in *Sociology of Education*, it was reported that first-generation college students who lacked the support of college-educated parents obtained initial access to college, but had difficulty remaining in college after the first year. According to a study conducted by Ishitani (2006), an International Research Analyst, first-generation college students with lower GPAs were less likely to complete a baccalaureate degree. The same study concluded that first-generation college students with “higher academic skills...were more likely to persist” towards graduation (p. 376). For some, it seemed that persisting first-generation college students were an anomaly. In light of this information, colleges and universities alike must understand the perceptions of first-generation college students, particularly those who persisted beyond their first year of college. Understanding their challenges and

perceptions served as a beacon for other first-generation college students, as well as for administrators, instructors, and other faculty at colleges and universities alike. Therefore the researcher interviewed persisting first-generation college students from fall 2011 through spring 2012. Participants' responses were retrospective, as they were upper-class college students who had completed at least one year of college at a university.

Through interviewing first-generation college students who were beyond their first year of college and possessed a 2.0 or higher GPA, the researcher gathered empirical data that enhanced the current literature on the experiences related to the persistence of first-generation college students at four-year universities. More specifically, this qualitative study examined first-generation college students who persisted towards completing baccalaureate degrees. In this case, persisting refers to first-generation students who were beyond their first year of college

The researcher interviewed first-generation students from two universities located in the Midwest. Students from one university were privy to the various services offered through TRIO, a federally funded program that assisted first-generation college students with obtaining baccalaureate degrees. In contrast, students from the second university did not have support from a formalized student support program for first-generation students. The researcher comparatively analyzed results from interviews to ascertain challenges and perceptions persisting first-generation college students had as they completed baccalaureate degrees. Colleges and universities may benefit from the findings of this research project as it may shed light on the unique challenges and perceptions of such a population of college students.

Information from this study may further equip colleges and universities with the information necessary to ensure appropriate measures to provide the necessary tools to help first-generation college students complete degrees of higher education, particularly baccalaureate degrees. Research suggested that first-generation students tended to discontinue college after the first year of college and students with lower GPAs were less likely to complete a baccalaureate degree (Ishitani, 2006). In the article “Students Whose Parents did not go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment,” Choy (2001) suggested that college-educated parents give advice about major declaration, the financial assistance process, and support students as they prepare for college placement or entrance exams. College-educated parents also assisted their children through attending various pre-college or college events, as well as guiding them through the application, financial assistance, and scholarship processes indicative of pursuing a college degree. Unfortunately this is a luxury that many first-generation students did not have, therefore programs such as TRIO served to fill the gap and helped these students overcome academic challenges that deterred them from completing baccalaureate degrees.

Background of the Study

Higher education was one of the major cornerstones of American society. According to the NCES (2009), in the fall of 2010 college enrollment of 20.6 million students was projected. Interestingly, this projection was higher than previous years and statistical data indicated that enrollment would spiral upward until 2019 (NCES, 2009). Additionally, 43% of students expected to aspire towards postsecondary degrees were first-generation college students (Ishitani, 2003). First-generation college students

typically came from low socio-economic backgrounds, were academically less prepared, attended college part time, and discontinued pursuing baccalaureate degrees after their first year (Ishitani, 2003). However, information was lacking in academic literature on the sources of challenges and perceptions of among this group of students to persist toward completing their baccalaureate degrees.

Nearly all high school students (90%) indicated that they expected to attend college and earn a degree, even if their career choice did not require one (Schneider, Martinez, & Ann, 2006). Unfortunately, there was a conflict between information and expectations, which resulted in what Schneider et al. (2006) called an “ambition paradox” (p. 3). The NCES (2009) reported that among 2008 high school seniors who began college at four-year institutions, 84% of those in the top fifth of the socioeconomic distribution completed their bachelor’s degrees, compared to barely 39% of the students from families in the bottom fifth (see Figure 1). These students typically become first-generation students who made up approximately 34% of undergraduates attending four-year universities in 1995-96 (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). This study also indicated that family background shapes shaped both the opportunities and constraints of pursuing a higher education degree. Further, in a study conducted by the NCES (2009), 38% of students enrolled in college and universities in the United States were first-generation college students. Conversely, only about 15% of those students completed a degree within six years, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

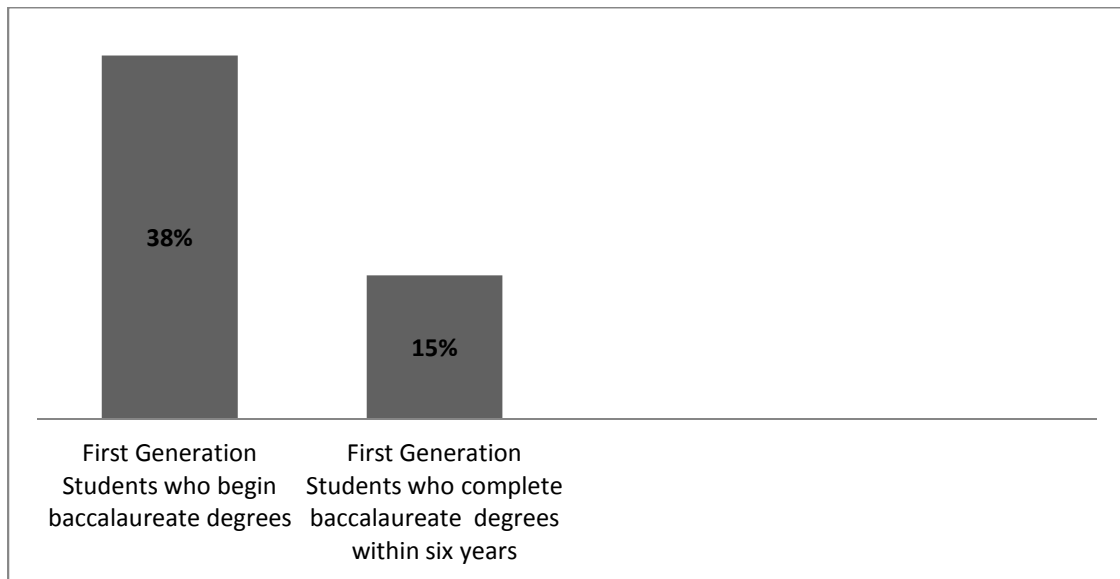


Figure 1. Retention rate of first generation students

Description of Colleges in Study

The researcher gathered empirical data from students at two universities in the Midwest region. Semi-structured, one on one interviews were conducted with 10 students from each university. A total of 20 traditional college students (ages 18-21), who possessed a minimum 2.0 GPA had parents who did not complete postsecondary education, and were classified as college sophomores, juniors, or seniors were interviewed. Ten first-generation college students from University 2 (U2) attended a university that provided a formal TRIO program, which supported first-generation college students. There were eight programs included in TRIO, which were all geared towards assisting first-generation college students with the completion of a baccalaureate degree. TRIO students who enrolled at U2 attended weekly meetings with TRIO advisors and other first-generation college students, as well as periodic workshops held throughout each semester aimed to empower them with the necessary support to complete their degrees of study. Conversely, students attending U1 met the same criteria for this

study, however they did not have the support of TRIO nor any other structured student support service that addressed and met the needs of first-generation college students. To date, a few first-generation students at U1 decided to befriend each other through meeting regularly to provide academic and social support for one another. Although all participants from both universities met the stated criteria, the demographics of the participants and respective universities were dissimilar.

A pseudonym identified each student and university represented in this study. Information gathered about each university derived from each university's catalog, website, as well as the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.

University 1 was a liberal arts university that had one main campus, a second campus located in another state, and 11 off-site locations, as well as over 30 extension locations throughout the Midwest. U1 offered face-to-face and hybrid, as well as online courses to its undergraduate and graduate student populations. Based on data obtained from the university's website, as well as institutional data from Missouri Department of Higher Education, during the fall term of 2011 the university's undergraduate enrollment was approximately 7,814 (U1 Fact Book, 2012-2013, p. 31). Minorities, including non-resident aliens, comprised about 18% of the student population. University 1 offered over 120 degree programs, including but not limited to, accounting, theatre, sports management, philosophy of religion, and education (Carnegie Foundation, 2010). The mission statement emphasized the importance of educating the whole person and empowering students to become productive members of a global community. Institutional data was not available for first-generation college students at U1. Although U1 did not have a formal program specifically for first-generation college students, the

office of First-Year Programs and educational services, such as tutoring and writing labs, were available to assist students. Additionally, during the fall of 2010 the university began to track its first-generation population using questions on the admissions application to identify this generational cohort. Since that time, a small group of students formed the First-Generation Collegians, which was a student organization designed to give academic support for this generational cohort while also offering advice to assist with assimilating to college culture. University 1 was accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

University 2 was a Judeo-Christian university that encompassed approximately 8,670 undergraduate (U2 Fact Book, 2012, p. 18) students in the fall of 2011 (Carnegie Foundation, 2010). Minorities including non-resident aliens totaled about 15% of the student population (Carnegie Foundation, 2010; U2, Fact Book, 2012, p.18). U2 had campuses in the United States and Spain as well as a host of off-site locations. They too offered face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses to their undergraduate and graduate student population. University 2 offered over 100 undergraduate degrees and 60 graduate programs of study (Carnegie Foundation, 2011). Programs of study at U2 ranged from anatomy, nursing, education, criminal justice, and information technology management. The mission of U2 focused on research, health, and cultivating intellect guided by spiritual ideals, as it was considered to be one of the nation's highest researched based institutions. For over 10 years the institutional data department at U2 monitored its first generation population. During the 2010-2011 school year, U2 reported having 1,556 first-generation college students. Four hundred-eighty one of its first-generation student population were considered low income, which was a prerequisite for participation in

TRIO. However, 11% of the first-generation, low-income students were involved with TRIO services for college students on campus (Director of TRIO, personal communication, March 2011). Student Support Services, a TRIO program, provided financial aid information, personal counseling, and one-on-one advising, as well as exposure to cultural events to 175 students that were enrolled at U2 (Director of TRIO, personal communication, March 2011). To qualify for TRIO services, students were required to be first-generation or from a modest-income family, a United States citizen or permanent resident, and/or students with documented learning/physical disabilities. University 2 was also accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Universities.

Statement of Problem

There are growing numbers of first-generation college students in our country. Unfortunately many of these students discontinued pursuing their degrees after their first year of college. According to the NCES (2009), only 24% of first-generation college students completed their bachelor's or baccalaureate degree in 2000. In light of this, especially while college enrollment was rising, it was important for colleges and universities to understand the sources of challenges and perceptions that propelled this population of students to persist toward obtaining their baccalaureate degree after their first year of college. With this information, colleges and universities can make sure they take appropriate measures to provide the necessary tools to help first-generation college students complete degrees of higher education, particularly baccalaureate degrees. Since research suggested that this student population tended to drop out of college after the first year of college, this body of research provides further analysis of sources of student

support services and other assistance needed that drove this population of students to persist in obtaining baccalaureate degrees.

Purpose of Study

This study attempted to add to the body of research regarding the challenges and perceptions of persisting first-generation college students with or without the support of student support services such as TRIO to complete their baccalaureate degree. Providing information on admission and financial assistance opportunities as well as counseling and academic support, such as tutoring, were ways that TRIO supported qualifying first-generation college students. Further, this program aimed to assist this population of college students with the academic and social tools needed to obtain higher educational and economic status. Building self-sufficient, productive citizens was the underlying mission of TRIO support services (Yousif, 2009). However, not all first-generation college students were involved in TRIO.

Research Questions

1. (a) What were the college experiences of first-generation students at two universities related to persistence toward the completion of a baccalaureate degree: and (b) in what ways did TRIO provide support?
2. What kinds of supports did first-generation college students perceive as helpful as they persisted in pursuing a baccalaureate degree?
3. Were there differences between the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college students with TRIO support and those without?

Definition of Terms

Academic Success: For this study, academic success is defined by the following characteristics: A student who had at least a 2.0 GPA and was in positive academic standing.

First-Generation College Student: (A) An individual whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (B) 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 (Higher Education Act Amendment, 1998; United States Education Act of 1965).

Low Income: A student who comes from a family whose taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150% of an amount equal to the poverty level determined by using criteria of poverty established by the Census Bureau (Higher Education Act Amendment, 1998; United States Education Act of 1965).

Non-Traditional College Student: A student who attended part time for at least part of the academic year; worked full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; was considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; had dependents other than a spouse (Higher Education Act Amendment, 1998; United States Education Act of 1965).

Persisting: A college student who was beyond his/her first year of college, currently enrolled at a four-year college or university, and intends on completing all course work relevant to completing a baccalaureate degree.

Social Capital: The familial, community, and social resources that a person, college student in this matter, had that assisted him/her through obtaining degrees of

higher education through providing information, financial as well as networking support (Perna & Titus, 2005).

Traditional College Student: For this study, traditional college students were students who were either coming directly from high school or were recent high school graduates transferring from another higher education institution.

Limitations to the Study

Several limitations were present in this study. The study participants represented a small non-random, purposeful sample represented by one state, Missouri. The researcher examined challenges and perceptions of first-generation students beyond their first year of college, who all met the selection criteria, at only two universities in the Midwest. Further, the researcher conducted a comparative analysis of first-generation college students from these two universities where students at one university were involved in TRIO, and students at the other university were not. In an effort to provide support for future research and recommendations for modifying support services for this generational cohort of students, other limitations are detailed below.

Limited participants. The amount of participation from colleges and students limited the scope of this study. There were over 500 colleges and universities in the Midwest that educated a wide variety of students, including first-generation. The researcher examined challenges and perceptions of first-generation college students from only two universities and did not utilize data from community colleges.

Location. This study was conducted at two universities located in Missouri. In the Midwest there was a considerable amount of ethnic and racial diversity. However, there was a disproportionate number of minorities enrolled in colleges and universities in

that area. For instance, according to the United States Census Bureau (2012) the racial composition of Missouri residence was approximately 84% White, 3.7% Hispanic, and 11.7% Black (pp. 23-24). However, in this study, while 30% of participants were White, 65% were Black, and Hispanics accounted for 0.5% of interviewees used to collect data. Therefore, the findings from this study were not widely generalizable to other national and state regions.

Sampling. A convenience sampling method was used to gather qualitative data for this study. Participants were selected from a pool of first-generation college students. This type of non-random, purposive sampling involved interviewing any students in a pre-organized pool willing to answer questions in a structured interview.

Selection criteria. Participants of the study were required to have a minimum GPA of 2.0. Participants who did not meet the minimum GPA requirement were not interviewed because academic success served as a precursor to completing degrees of higher education (Ishtanti, 2006). High academic achieving first generation students “are more likely to persist” toward graduation, than those with lower GPAs (Ishitani, 2006, p. 376). In this case, academic success describes students who were not on academic probation, therefore meeting a minimum GPA requirement of a 2.0. Due to this requirement, this sample did not convey the challenges and perceptions of first-generation students who had lower than a 2.0 GPA or were on academic probation.

Additionally, since participants were beyond their first year of college, this study did not address the challenges and perceptions of first-generation college students who were just entering college as traditional or nontraditional students, nor those classified as college freshman.

Income guidelines of participants. Participants involved in TRIO met specific federal income guidelines to qualify. On the other hand, first-generation college students at the second university were not obligated to meet such guidelines to participate in this study. Therefore, this data compared first-generation students who met specific guidelines to those not meeting the same income or socioeconomic guidelines.

Incomplete set of data. One of the universities involved in this study was able to procure data that detailed the population of first-generation college students enrolled as well as those involved in TRIO. Not all first-generation college students at this university were involved in TRIO. Alternatively, the second university involved in this study began tracking its first-generation student population in the fall of 2010 based on its transfer and new student applications. Therefore, they did not provide a complete set of institutional data regarding its first-generation college student population for the duration of the timeline examined by this study.

University size and population. Both universities included in this study were Judeo-Christian universities with a fairly sizable student population. However, U1 had a larger minority population than U2; therefore, this data may not be common at other universities.

Summary

This research study report includes five chapters. Chapter One details the background and purpose of this research, as well as research questions and limitations of this study. The purpose of this study was to gather qualitative data that adds to the body of research regarding the perspectives of first-generation college students who persist towards completing baccalaureate degrees with and without the help of TRIO. Empirical

data was collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 20 first-generation college students from two universities in the Midwest.

Chapter Two reviews literature pertaining to first-generation college students. The importance of a college education, attrition, and degree attainment among first-generation college students, the unique challenges facing first-generation college students, as well as a discussion on the first year of college are among the topics discussed in Chapter Two. Additionally, Chapter Two discusses parental and familiar roles in higher education, as well as student support services. Since this study was a comparative analysis of students involved in TRIO compared to those not involved in the program, Chapter Two concludes with details explaining how TRIO assisted first-generation college students as they persisted towards obtaining baccalaureate degrees.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Due to the increasing importance of college as a rite of passage, this chapter begins with information regarding the importance of a college education in the 21st century. Obtaining a college degree is one of the many rites of passage that one encounters in life to assist in progression from one social and economic echelon to another. Earning a baccalaureate degree opens job opportunities for some and serves as a stepping stone to other social, as well as educational advancements. According to Gallardo (2009), Associate Vice President for Student Services and Academic Support Programs at the University of Washington, Seattle, “a thriving economic and social future requires a commitment to making advanced educational opportunities available to all individuals” (p. 64). Researchers Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade (2005) indicated that many positions available in career fields, such as engineering, nursing, computer technology, and higher education, required degrees of higher education. Obtaining degrees of higher education empowers our nation with literate and knowledgeable workers. Scholarly work was often indicative of the academic rigor needed to obtain baccalaureate degrees (Zajacova et al., 2005). Additionally, research concluded that the work towards completing degrees of higher education fostered intellectual development and equipped students with advanced skills, which qualified them for positions that were not available to those without that benefit. Consequently, a more viable and educated workforce also served as a key element in boosting, as well as sustaining, our economic systems (Havemen & Smeeding, 2006; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). In the late 20th century there was a trend of non-traditional students returning to college after serving in

the military. There were also students who returned to college after investing years in unfulfilled careers or after being laid off from positions they served in for years. Students who were not able to afford a college education when they were younger were also among this influx of students during the late 20th century (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). With the high unemployment rate at that time, especially among those with no college degrees, traditional college students were also recognizing the validity of a college education and enrolling at both community colleges and four-year universities at steady rates (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). In alignment with these events, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2009) projected a 19.7% increase in college enrollment every year for a seven-year time period. An estimated 15% of those enrolled in colleges and universities were first-generation college students, however 64% of those students discontinued pursuing their college degree after the first year of college (Ishitani, 2006). Further, a disproportionate amount of minority students were among that 64% and subsequently struggled to thrive in lucrative career fields that required degrees of higher education (Smith, 2004).

Every year, the United States Department of Education reports on trends in higher education. Their report, *College Access, Affordability and Completion* (2009), provided both statistical and qualitative data regarding college enrollment rates, tuition, and fees, as well as completion rates of students attending community colleges and universities. As the United States of America strived to build and maintain its position in the global marketplace, more jobs required a college degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This literature review continues with a discussion regarding first-generation college students specifically, as they possessed the unique quality of being first in their family to complete

a degree of higher education. It was important to understand the relationship between attrition and degree attainment, along with the unique challenges facing first-generation college students in this study. Therefore, these two topics are the third and fourth covered in this literature review. Additionally, due to the disconcerting number of first-generation students who discontinued college after the first year, the researcher explored this topic in this literature review. While many students enrolled in college had the advantage of parental and familiar support, many first-generation college students did not. For that reason, parental and familiar roles in college education are the sixth topics discussed. Many college students, whether first-generation or not, arrived at a point in their educational endeavors where they need academic and/or social support. Support from academic services and other on-campus personnel was often crucial to the success of college students, therefore the role of student support services and TRIO, particularly as it served the need of first-generation college students as they persisted towards completing degrees of higher education, are the last two topics covered in this literature review.

The Importance of a College Education in the 21st Century

Due to the increasing importance of college as a rite of passage with information regarding the importance of a college education in the 21st century throughout the last century, colleges and universities were progressively more accessible to people of various ages, socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and attitudes. Second to China, the United States had the largest rate of college enrollment in the world (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010). Wilmer (2008) indicated that 80% of “future jobs will require the skills that a college education provides” (p. 5). Thus the importance of

obtaining a college degree was becoming more and more necessary to afford the cost of basic necessities associated with daily life, especially if one wanted to advance their socioeconomic status. Additionally, the United States changed from a manufacturing-based economy to an information-based economy. In a study conducted by the NCES (2009) researchers found the value of a college degree significantly increased over a 25 year period. Students who persisted towards completing degrees of higher education degrees did so for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to economic, intellectual, career, and social advancements (Conley, 2005). In the book *College Knowledge: What it Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What we can do to get Them Ready*, Conley (2005) indicated that close to 90% of incoming high school freshmen stated that their goal was to go to college. Pursuing a higher education degree afforded students the opportunity to further their intellectual abilities, excel in their career, increase their income, and further develop their interest through reading, as well as listening to the lectures of top experts in their fields of study. Not only did attending college effect earnings, but evidence suggested that obtaining degrees of higher education influenced one's values "cognitive, moral, and psychosocial characteristics" as well (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 574). The interaction that college students engaged in arguably promoted critical thinking and skills that nurtured new ideas, which allowed for additional growth (Havemen & Smeeding, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition, this type of development gave college graduates an advantage in the workforce compared to applicants who did not have the benefits of higher education.

Robinson (2004) focused research that emphasized the importance of a college education in gaining valuable academic and social resources as students matriculated

through their degree of study. As students increased their involvement in classes and on-campus activities during their college career, more options were afforded to them as they began seeking positions within their chosen fields. In addition, once students secured jobs and started their careers, the importance of a college education was not exhausted because often the value of such education provided greater opportunities for promotion long after students acquired degrees (Robinson, 2006). A good education was considered advantageous for various reasons as it served as the gateway to better immediate and long-term options and career opportunities. For example, college educated persons increased their socioeconomic status through positioning themselves for occupations in which they earned more discretionary income. The availability and use of discretionary income provided experiences in life to travel abroad, retire with a greater sense of financial stability, and impacted their children's knowledge acquisition by affording them with advanced opportunities which those in the lower socioeconomic assemblage were not be able to afford (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). College educated persons were also cited to be more politically involved than those who had not earned degrees of higher education (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The benefits of obtaining a college degree were clear.

First-Generation College Students

The majority of the research literature defined "first generation students as students whose parents have no postsecondary education" (Gofen, 2009; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 249). In some cases, when used as a determining factor for certain grants or scholarships, students who had parents that had not to earn a bachelor's degree were defined as first-generation students.

Experimental research on first-generation college students identified several unique qualities of this population. Horn and Nunez (2000) found that first-generation college students tended to be from low-income families and were more likely to be Hispanic or African American. This generational cohort, as compared to non-first generation college students tended to have lower critical thinking abilities upon entering college, which was often indicative of the academic rigor, or lack thereof, during high school (Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, first-generation students were reported to engage in socializing with professors less than non-first generation college students, feel less welcomed by instructors in college, and received lower degrees of support or reassurance from family members (Terenzini et al., 1996). Students in this population possessed a strong will to both complete a college degree and often believed that they were just as qualified to obtain such degrees (Jeynes, 2005). Much to the students' credit, research indicated that once first-generation college students solidified a major and completed the first year of college, their critical thinking skills were no different than their non-first generation classmates, and they were more likely to complete their degrees of study (Domingo, Terenzini, & Reason, 2006; Ishtanti, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996). These findings predicted that while first-generation college students did not have the support of their families, they could achieve degrees of higher education with the right amount of tenacity and support.

Among the high school graduates in 1992, 27% of those who enrolled in college were first generation college students (Choy, 2001, p. 20). Conversely, approximately 70% of those with parents who completed college degrees attended a four-year university (Alon, Domina, & Tienda, 2010). Forty-five percent of all who earned baccalaureate

degrees in 2008-2009 were first-generation students (NCES, 2009). This generational cohort possessed unique needs that separated them from other students because they faced the challenges of enrolling in college often without parental assistance (Gofen, 2009) highlighted the need for first-generation college students to persist and complete degrees of higher education in an effort to remove educational barriers among their families. His research concluded that first-generation college students exemplified the fundamental nature of the American spirit of egalitarianism which welcomed advancement and equal opportunity through surpassing “intergenerational cycles” (Gofen, 2009, p. 104).

Attrition and Degree Attainment among First-Generation College Students

Ishitani and Terenzini were two prominent researchers in the field of higher education on the topic of attrition. Both professors, along with several others, such as Desjardins (2002) and Domingo et al. (2006), offered a plethora of information on attrition and degree attainment. In Ishitani’s (2003) article “Attrition Behavior of First-Generation Students,” he defined attrition as “a student’s first spell of departure, such as dropouts, transfers, academic dismissals and stopouts” (p. 439). First-generation students had the highest rate of attrition among the diverse population of college students in the United States. According to Ishitani (2003) 71% of first-generation college students discontinued college after the first year, as compared to their non-first generation counterparts. Conversely, it was reported that approximately 25% of first-year college students discontinued after their first year, however this number was “higher among low-income and historically underrepresented students” (Domingo et al., 2006, p. 150). Conflicts with maintaining a full time work schedule coupled with financial needs, family

dependency, lack of involvement on campus, and high school GPA were among the main reasons this generational cohort discontinued after the first year of college (Domingo et al., 2006; Ishitani, 2003). Further, students showed that working more than 15 hours per week had a negative impact on academic and social growth, particularly in the first year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Economic and Family Pressures

As mentioned in earlier in this literature review, a large portion of first-generation college students came from the lower socioeconomic ranks of society. NCES (2009) reported that among 2008 high school seniors who began college at four-year institutions, 84% of those in the top fifth of the socioeconomic distribution completed their bachelor's degrees, compared to 39% of the students from families in the bottom fifth. These students typically were first-generation students who made up approximately 34% of all undergraduates, but only about 15% of graduating college students (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 249). Often these college students were responsible for assisting with financial and household responsibilities throughout high school (Billson & Terry, 1982). This dependency, coupled with the high academic demand that completing a baccalaureate degree entails was cited as one of the major reasons for high attrition rates among this population of students (Billson & Terry, 1982; Ishitani, 2003). Many first-generation college students had families that depended on them for financial support; therefore many of them obtained or kept full time jobs while in college (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). Earnings from full-time jobs were needed to not only assist with purchasing books, supplies, and other necessary tools for college study, but also with helping their parents meet financial challenges at home (Billson & Terry, 1982). Additionally, many first-

generation college students commuted from home to classes on campus or lived on campus and commuted on weekends to assist their families with household chores, and running errands, therefore making full integration into campus life more difficult. This was particularly important because a student's level of persistence beyond the first year of college was also predicated by his or her commute to campus daily (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Further, a qualitative study with first-generation college students conducted by Bradbury and Mather (2009) supported this view:

Many students returned home on weekends, thereby reducing their time on campus. They went home because they were needed. They still played key roles within their immediate or extended families. These roles included: visiting and caring for grandparents; babysitting siblings' assisting with chores; and scheduling appointments, shopping, and running errands. (p. 266)

In an effort to fulfill the obligations and expectations of their families, many students found meeting the high academic demands of pursuing a baccalaureate degree difficult. Working full time was one of the obligations many students, particularly first generation, felt they must fulfill in order to help their families, especially those in dire financial need. College students who came from families with annual incomes of at least \$50,000 had a lower attrition rate; therefore they had a better chance of graduating than students whose families earned less than that amount (Ishitani, 2003). Additionally, "students with family incomes less than \$19,000 were 69% less likely to graduate, while students whose family income ranged between \$20,000 and \$34,000 were 41% less likely to graduate" (Ishitani, 2006, p. 879). Working full-time jobs, especially off-campus, deterred students from being fully engaged in on-campus activities. Domingo et al. (2006) emphasized the

importance of students being “academically engaged” (p. 164). They also reported that students who were less involved in on-campus activities were at a disadvantage (Domingo et al., 2006). Additionally, in a study conducted by Billson and Terry (1982), the relationship between full-time employment and attrition was evident. They conducted a qualitative study which consisted of a total of 701 student participants in surveys and interviews, for the purpose of analyzing the relationship between persistence among first-generation college students and their parents.

Researchers identified student conflict with work schedules, courses, and activities as key reasons this group of students discontinued college after the first year (Billson & Terry, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Other studies found that many first-generation students, particularly because of the financial support their families needed from them decided that working full time was far more important than pursuing a baccalaureate degree. Some decided that the short term, immediate gains of obtaining money for families outweighed the long-term goals of having a more lucrative career after completing a college degree five or six years from now (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Ishitani, 2003). Not only did working full time interfere with their studies, but pressure from families to help meet financial challenges and other tasks their families needed them to accomplish contributed to the proportion of attrition among first-generation students (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). Further, working full time, and traveling back and forth on a regular basis to help with family needs decreased students’ abilities to be involved in on-campus activities.

Lack of On-Campus Participation

Involvement with on-campus activities while working towards a baccalaureate degree was cited as a major reason for attrition, particularly among first-generation college students (Billson & Terry, 1982; Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Steitha, 2010). Because first-generation college students lacked the cultural capital that comes with having parents or guardians who graduated from college, many were often not prepared for the academic and social challenges of college life. Ishitani (2006) observed that involvement with on campus activities in college enriched one's experiences as well as strengthened academic and social networks. Additionally, involvement with on-campus activities was a precursor to higher academic achievement, which was noted through a student's GPA, continuous enrollment, and completion of baccalaureate degrees (Billson & Terry, 1982; Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Steitha, 2010). Further, Ishitani (2006) indicated that students not involved in on-campus activities earned lower GPAs, were placed on academic probation, and seemed to discontinue progress toward baccalaureate degrees at higher rates than those involved in on campus activities. In a study conducted by Stiethe (2010) the importance of involvement in on-campus activities was demonstrated through the following statement, "student persistence was tied to integration into not only academic, but the social life of the university through student-faculty and peer-to-peer interaction within and outside the classroom" (p. 238). Due to the unique challenges of first-generation students, particularly as related to working full-time jobs, Billson and Terry (1982) suggested first-generation students tended not to socialize and study as diligently as their non-first generation counterparts. Often because of their financial and familiar commitments they appeared to "have less commitment to the role of student" (Billson &

Terry, 1982, p. 14). A similar study conducted by Ishitani (2003) reported that many first-generation students lived off campus and commuted to school because they had difficulty affording on-campus housing, were not comfortable with on-campus living arrangements as it relates to living with someone they were not familiar with, and were uncomfortable with the culture of students that were not first in their family to achieve a college degree. Because many first-generation college students commuted to their respective institutions of higher education and typically worked full-time jobs, they rarely participated in on campus activities (Billson & Terry, 1982; Ishitani, 2003). Therefore, the lack of involvement with on campus activities among first-generation college students became another barrier for completing a baccalaureate degree and added to the level of attrition among this generational cohort.

High School Preparation

An additional reason cited for attrition, particularly among first-generation college students was high school preparation or the lack thereof. High schools prepared students for the next level in their academic endeavors. For many students, irrespective of their status as first-generation college students, obtaining a baccalaureate degree was a major goal after receiving a high school degree. During a survey conducted in a mixed-methods study, researchers Schneider et al. (2006) indicated that nearly 90% of all high school students indicated that they expect to attend college. Unfortunately, many students were not adequately prepared during high school for the academic rigor involved in obtaining a baccalaureate degree. In a similar study conducted by Ishitani (2006), it was reported that “students from lower high school class rank quintiles were more likely to drop out of college” (p. 876). Students who developed habits of communicating with

instructors, obtaining tutors when needed, solidifying study skills, and being involved in student activities during high school continued such habits to help them become successful in college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Ishitani, 2003, 2006). Therefore, academic achievement, or the lack thereof, during high school was considered a precursor to attrition, particularly for first-generation college students who tended to come from lower socioeconomic communities where the quality of education was not as rigorous (Cabrera et al., 2006).

Unique Challenges Facing First-Generation College Students

College represented a difference in culture, climate and requirements that presented various challenges to first generation college students attending colleges and universities (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Detailed interviews from case studies presented in the article “The Importance of Being First: Unique Characteristics of First-Generation Community College Students” indicated that this generational cohort often they felt they had to make drastic decisions regarding attending college or preserving their familiar way of life, which did not include obtaining a college degree. Coupled with breaking familiar cycles, research indicated many first-generation college students descended from the lower socioeconomic ranks of society where they were more likely to obtain education that mirrored their peers (Almquist, Modin, & Ostberg, 2010; Alon et al., 2010; Inman & Mayes, 1999). The pressure from friends and family discouraging the pursuit of a college degree was often intense. Unfortunately, first-generation college students tended to have lower self-esteem, as well as a lower sense of self-efficacy (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Self-efficacy, the measure of confidence that a student has in their intellectual aptitude was often a precursor to their determination and persistence to obtain degrees of higher

education (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Kahn & Nauta, 2001; Zajacova et al., 2005). A student's level of self-efficacy was identified as a factor in the willpower needed to persist beyond the status quo of their families and complete degrees of higher education (Inman & Mayes, 1999).

Parental Level of Education

Several studies have noted the strong connection between the parents' level of education and educational level of their children (Gofen, 2009; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Hertel, 2002). Students who were first in their family to pursue and complete a college degree were often considered an anomaly to some, as research suggested that students lower economic and educational status were less likely to advance to higher levels of education than their peers with higher socioeconomic and educational status (Almquist et al., 2010; Fletcher, 2009). The first-generational cohort often had challenges with self-efficacy as well as with the transition to college culture. This was due to the inability of parents to provide the necessary guidance to assist them through college and lack of support from home. Despite low levels of self-efficacy documented, Khanh (2002) suggested those who persisted did so for a number of reasons: 1) The desire to create a better financial lifestyle for themselves and their children, aspirations to live in more affluent neighborhoods; 2) To gain independence; 3) A passion for learning, encouragement from high school teachers or counselors; 4) Achievement of career goals that require degree(s) of higher education; and 5) Pressure to fulfill expectations of obtaining a college degree by parents or peers. Although some reasons for pursuing college degrees were tantamount to non-first generation college students, first-generation

college students tended to face challenges that were unique to this generational cohort of college students.

The NCES (1998) published *First Generation Students: Undergraduates Whose Parents Never Enrolled in Postsecondary Education*, a statistical analysis. This report highlighted the following information pertaining to challenges of first-generation college students:

First-generation students were; 1.) More likely than non-first generation students to say that being financially well off and providing their children with better opportunities than they had were very important to them personally; 2.) More likely to be older; 3) More likely to have lower income than their non-first generation classmates; 4) More likely to be married; 5) Have more dependents; 6) To be enrolled in remedial courses; 7) Attain college credentials at lower rates than their non-first generation peers at both two and four year institutions. (NCES, 1998 p. 7-18)

Overall, students from lower socioeconomic sectors lacked access to information to assist them with college-related decisions. However, those who had a successful leadership experience in high school or participated in community service were more likely to show academic progress at the college level (Terenzini et al., 1996). Still, first-generation students differed in academic preparation. Interestingly, this generational cohort was also more likely to spend time in the library studying. Terenzini and others (1996) concluded that first-generation college students were also less likely to receive feedback from instructors and spent less time studying per week while working more than non-first generation students (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Critical Thinking and Advanced Course Work

Advanced course work in high school was also an issue for first-generation college students. In a study conducted by Horn and Nunez (2000) it was reported that a small number of first generation college students took advanced courses such as Algebra II during middle and high school. Compared to over 55% of non-first generation this made it difficult for first generation college students to compete with and pursue college degrees, as experience with math beyond Algebra II in high school impacted students' abilities to complete college degrees (Cabrera et al., 2006). When compared to other college students identified through SAT scores, high school grade point average, and general first year college performance, first-generation students scored lower on math, which confirmed that first-generation students were less equipped for college than their other college bound peers. This unfortunately added an additional challenge in their quest for obtaining degrees that could provide them with the academic as well as social skills often necessary to cultivate the desired career and financial stability.

Further evidence showed the unique nature of first-generation college students. Researchers York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) indicated that low self-esteem, low self-efficacy were traits first generation college students possessed due to their lack of academic rigor during high school. Due to this, they tended to experience culture shock when adjusting to the academic and social rigor of college. Results from a survey conducted with over 5,000 students at the University of Kentucky indicated that first generation students came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds which presented them with less financial support than their non-first generation counterparts (York & Bowman, 1991). They also had a different set of goals that motivated their academic pursuits.

Oddly, researchers had not indicated clear differences in the level of desire between first and non-first generation college students as it related to reaching obtaining degrees of higher education (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Actually, the same study concluded that first generation college students tended to dedicated more of their time and effort to their degree of study, especially once they declared a major. Because of the students' desire to succeed, first-generation college students continued their quests in obtaining degrees of higher education through enrolling in college. Fifty-four percent of college students enrolled in colleges and universities were first-generation college students (Choy, 2001). However, "college preparation is knowledge-intensive" (Conely, 2005, p. 21). Therefore students who were unfamiliar or unknowledgeable about the college enrollment, financial, and course requirement processes were challenged by their lack of knowledge when it came to pursuing degrees of higher education alongside other qualified students who had the advantage of receiving guidance from their college educated parent(s). Many challenges existed for the average college student with little direct information on college expectations, procedures, and practices to make all the right choices regarding how best to prepare for college. First-generation college students had the additional challenge of not having parents to assist them through this "knowledge intensive" (Conely, 2005, p. 21) process of obtaining degrees of higher education. Students whose parents were more financially affluent had a higher likelihood of coming to college equipped with cultural knowledge that students from lower socioeconomic families who were first in their family to pursue a college degree did not have (Conley, 2005). Additionally, parents of first-generation college students expected them to perpetuate existing familiar traditions of obtaining jobs directly after high school to bring

in more income to the household or move away from home to start their own families (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011).

Meeting Diverse Needs

According to Inman and Mayes (1999) meeting the diverse needs of both traditional and non-traditional first generation college students was a challenge for colleges and universities alike due to the many barriers to degree attainment generational cohort. Nearly 28% of students graduating from high school that applied for college in 2008 were first generation students as reported by the NCES Longitudinal Study. First-generation college students were among a community of students that represented a segment of the college population that had distinct goals coupled with various constraints associated with achieving them (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Studies indicated that first-generation college students tended to have less financial and social support, did not have adequate study habits, dealt with stress in counterproductive ways, and were less likely to be involved in student activities which promote critical thinking necessary for college success (Hertel, 2002; Mehta et al., 2011). Overall, first-generation college students were often more “economically and educationally disadvantaged” (Hertel, 2002, p. 6). Essential predictors of college persistence included social support, minimal focus on academic study, self-efficacy, academic preparation through high school study, and involvement in on-campus activities, which were all cited as challenges for first-generation college students (Gofen, 2009; Hertel, 2002; Ishitani, 2003; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). Therefore, an understanding of first-generation students, their challenges and perceptions as they pursue baccalaureate degrees, allowed for programs that were more focused on recruiting, and graduation efforts.

The First Years of College

The first year of college marked a period of time when many young adults experienced significant social, emotional, and physical changes. Researchers characterized the first year of college as one of most difficult or rewarding transitions college students made in their academic career (Ishitani, 2003; Meyer, Spencer, & French, 2009). Nationally, approximately 25% of students entering college discontinued their pursuit of a degree after their first year of college (Domingo et al., 2006; NCES, 2009). Comparatively, 71% of first-generation college students dropped out of college after the first year (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). Usually students moved away from home onto a campus where they received a roommate, became more independent or self-reliant in relation to scheduling appointments with advisors, attended classes, studied, and met with instructors. First-year students needed to become acclimated with the campus, as well as adjust to the academic and social differences college dictated. In research conducted by Domingo et al. (2006), faculty members described the first year of college as “a distinct period on which later years build” (p. 166). Not only did college mark the first time many students were away from home for long periods of time, but also a time when students were, in many ways, unmonitored and expected to adjust appropriately to meet the academic and social challenges that awaited them.

In a study that examined the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), researchers concluded that a student’s degree of self-efficacy influenced his or her persistence and fortitude to graduate (Kahn & Nauta, 2001). Colleges and universities measured student success through their commitment to attending classes and maintaining suitable academic standing. The first year of college marked the beginning of that commitment. Therefore,

the habits students developed in the first year of college either propel them towards obtaining baccalaureate degrees or deterred them from reaching that goal (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). In addition to first-year students developing habits that assisted them in obtaining their goal to obtain a baccalaureate degree, colleges and universities had a degree of responsibility in retaining students during the first year (Bradbury & Mather, 2009).

Persistence, coupled with success in college, required students to utilize a repertoire of habits. In a study conducted by Bradbury and Mather (2009), researchers discussed six habits first year students developed that assisted them in continuing beyond their first year of college. Several factors to first-year college success were indicated by researchers: “(a) involvement in campus activities; (b) attending class, taking notes and studying; (c) sitting in the front of the class; (d) actively participating; (e) creating a course schedule with breaks between classes; and (f) completing homework before going out with friends” (Bradbury & Mather, 2009, p. 270). Additionally, in the article “Sense of Belonging in College Freshman at the Classroom and Campus Level,” researchers discussed several other factors that contributed to student persistence and academic achievement during the first year of college (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Students who felt a sense of belonging, interacted with instructors, and had high self-efficacy for succeeding in college were more likely to move beyond their first year of college into the next. More specifically, researchers indicated that “students’ sense of efficacy for succeeding in class and their perception of the value of task required in class were strongly associated with their sense of belonging” (Freeman et al., 2007, p. 205). Hence the colleges and universities noted for having high degrees of attrition among first-

year students facilitated orientation programs which helped foster relationships between students and faculty members (Domingo et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, the first year of college was one of the most important topics covered in higher education as it was a gateway to all other semesters and a pathway to earning degrees of higher education. According to data gathered from a study which included 5,024 faculty members and 6,687 first-year students from 30 four-year universities, those with the highest retention rate of first-year students followed seven “Foundational Dimensions®” garnered by Domingo et al. (2006). These seven dimensions provided guidelines to college and universities to support efforts to “promote the success and persistence of their first-year student” (Domingo et al., 2006, p. 151). After 35 years of research on colleges and universities with the highest attrition rates of first-year students, researchers Domingo et al. created the Foundational Dimensions®. Although impossible to completely describe in this dissertation, a synopsis of the seven Foundational Dimensions® were:

- (a) develop and implement organizational structures and policies that support first year students;
- (b) incorporate all-inclusive, integrated and synchronized plans to address the a wide variety of first-year concerns as well as strategies for successful completion of first-year instruction;
- (c) execute deliberate and appropriate recruitment, as well as admissions processes aligned with institutional missions, practices, and policies;
- (d) communicate the importance of the first year to all faculty members while also encouraging faculty to engage students in both in and out of classroom activities which cultivate skills, behaviors, and attitudes consistent with the institutions mission and philosophy;
- (e) recognize and appreciate the variety of first-year student needs and serve all first-year students

according to their diverse needs; (f) facilitate programs that encourage an appreciation of and address pluralism in worldviews, ideas, as well as among people that will increase first-year student's ability to be productive citizens of diverse communities; and (g) actively engage with professional organizations and other institutions of higher education to assess productivity, while making necessary changes that will further improve first-year programs. (Domingo, Reason, Terenzini, 2006, p. 151-152)

It was also important to note that instructors at colleges and universities with high first-year retention rates were characterized as approachable and organized in their presentation and implementation of course material (Domingo et al., 2006; Freeman et al., 2007).

Parental and Familiar Roles in College Education

Parental and family involvement correlated to the level of engagement students received from their family in endorsing college enrollment, expressing standards and norms of college culture, and finances, as well as interacting with other likeminded parents (Perna & Titus, 2005). Approximately 50% of students who have parents who completed a bachelor's degree were more likely to complete degrees of higher education as compared to 11% of students who did not have parents who completed bachelor's degrees (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 264). One of the most frequently cited reasons for differences in the completion rate of first-generation college students was parental educational attainment (Nichols & Sanchez-Ramos, 2007; Schneider et al., 2006). Fifty nine percent of high school graduates pursuing post-secondary degrees in 1994 were first generation college students (Choy, 2001). Comparatively, during the same year high

school graduates of parents with post-secondary degrees comprised of 93% of students enrolled in postsecondary education. These differences were even more noticeable based on the types of college each student attended. For example, first-generation college students made up approximately 27% of the student population at four-year institutions, while over 70% of their non-first generation compatriots did so (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 268). With this in mind, the role of parental education in helping and directing their children to post-secondary education was important. In the article, *First generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes* (Pascarella et al., 2004), researchers concluded that the level of postsecondary education parents possessed directly influenced the academic experiences of their children, particularly as it related to pursuing and obtaining degrees of higher education. Additionally, compared to parents lacking bachelor's degrees, children of college educated parents were more likely to participate in intellectually stimulating activities at home, such as reading which gave them an academic advantage and greater propensity to adjust to the academic rigor associated with obtaining degrees of higher education. Further, a large body of research demonstrated that family background was associated with the social, cultural, and economic resources that students needed to further educational attainment (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Jeynes, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005). College-educated parents often were more likely to possess a higher degree of determination and personal drive (Jeynes, 2005). Quite naturally the college-educated parents tended to prepare their children for higher education by instilling the importance of post-secondary degrees and providing a real life example of its importance. College-educated parents also gave advice about major decisions, the financial assistance process, and supported them as they prepared for

college placement or entrance exams (Choy, 2001). They also helped their children through attending various pre-college or college events as well as through the application process. This was an assistance that many first-generation students did not have, as many of their parents were not familiar with college culture including selecting a major and the rigorous nature of study required when obtaining a degree of higher education (Perna & Titus, 2005). Parents who did not obtain degrees of higher education tended to have a low degree of involvement in their child's decision to pursue and complete a college degree (Perna & Titus, 2005). Additionally, the jargon and other academic terms associated with college life were often unfamiliar to parents, which intimidated them from being active in their child's educational endeavors (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

The Role of Student Support Services in Higher Education

In the pursuit of obtaining degrees from higher education colleges and universities, students often relied on the support of Student Support Services (SSS) to assist students in their academic endeavors. The mission of SSS was to "help students succeed" (Culp, 2005, p. 33). Programs for at-risk-students, counseling, outreach, student activities, orientation, as well as advising, assessments, and programs for graduates were among the gamut of services that traditional SSS offered. One of the major advantages of SSS to many college students was tutoring, which assisted students with exam preparation (Amenkhienan & Kogan, 2004). All students including traditional, nontraditional, first and second generation, had the opportunity to benefit from SSS offered at essentially all colleges and universities around the world. In a study conducted by Amenkhienan and Kogan (2004), students indicated that support services and academic activities had a positive impact on academic performance. This study also

concluded that writing skills improved with the help of SSS facilities, such as Writing Centers. Immediate feedback on homework assignments, as well as support in creating study schedules were beneficial aspects of SSS (Amenkhienan & Kogan, 2004; Wilmer, 2008). Although the features of SSS were crucial to the effectiveness of programs aimed to improve academic achievement and boost retention, it was essential that SSS faculty were willing to “constantly adapt to changing student and environmental needs” (Potacco & Young, 2006, p. 29). Faculty who facilitated programs in SSS needed to consider the diverse reasons students pursued college degrees, discontinued their education, struggled with classes, as well as considered the types of careers students aspired to have in the future when creating programs. Effective SSS considered the differences between traditional, non-traditional, first-generation and second-generation college students while facilitating programs that addressed varying needs. As college students matriculated in postsecondary institutions, where the stakes for obtaining degrees of higher education were increased compared to years past, support services that creatively integrated a variety of services to maximize the academic growth of students was increasingly important (Culp, 2005; Potacco & Young, 2006; Wilmer 2008). Particularly for first-generation students, SSS provided levels of support for students who had little to no academic support from their family (Becker, 1999).

TRIO

For over 40 years, representatives from the Council for Opportunity in Education reinforced and generated supports, as well as funding, for over 2,700 TRIO programs (Thomas, 1998, p. 390). Helping gain clarity about their academic goals and career aspirations while also providing mentoring, tutoring, monitoring of student’s progress

were the most effective elements of TRIO. According to the text *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), TRIO programs were:

The best known and most widespread of these comprehensive programs and offers perhaps the best example of the range of services that can be provided.....the program offers instruction in basic study skills; tutorial services; academic, financial, and personal counseling....research consistently indicates that such comprehensive programs have a statistically significant and positive effect on student persistent. (p. 405)

Students involved in TRIO had better retention and transfer and graduation rates than other first-generation students who did not receive services through TRIO (Ruiz, 2008; Thayer, 2000). In a study, it was reported over 80% of students involved in TRIO achieved their annual academic goals (Ruiz, 2008). Each program contributed to the academic and social advancement of students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic corners of the nation (Mahoney, 1998). TRIO support services was a federally funded program dedicated to serving first-generation students in completing their bachelor's degrees. Intense training was required of all TRIO counselors and faculty. Training empowered them with comprehensive skills to assist students in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, academic advising, financial aid, learning skills, career placement, and advisement for graduate schools (Mahoney, 1998). While most TRIO programs were designed to assist first-generation, low-income college students, those with disabilities or in foster care were also eligible to participate in TRIO programs (Mahoney, 1998; Walsh, 2000).

There were eight programs included in TRIO, which were all geared towards assisting first-generation, low-income persons with their academic progress from middle school until the completion of baccalaureate degree. The eight programs housed under TRIO were:

1. Educational Opportunity Centers
2. Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement
3. Student Support Services
4. Talent Search
5. Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff
6. Upward Bound
7. Upward Bound Math-Science
8. Veterans Upward Bound. (Becker, 1999, p. 7)

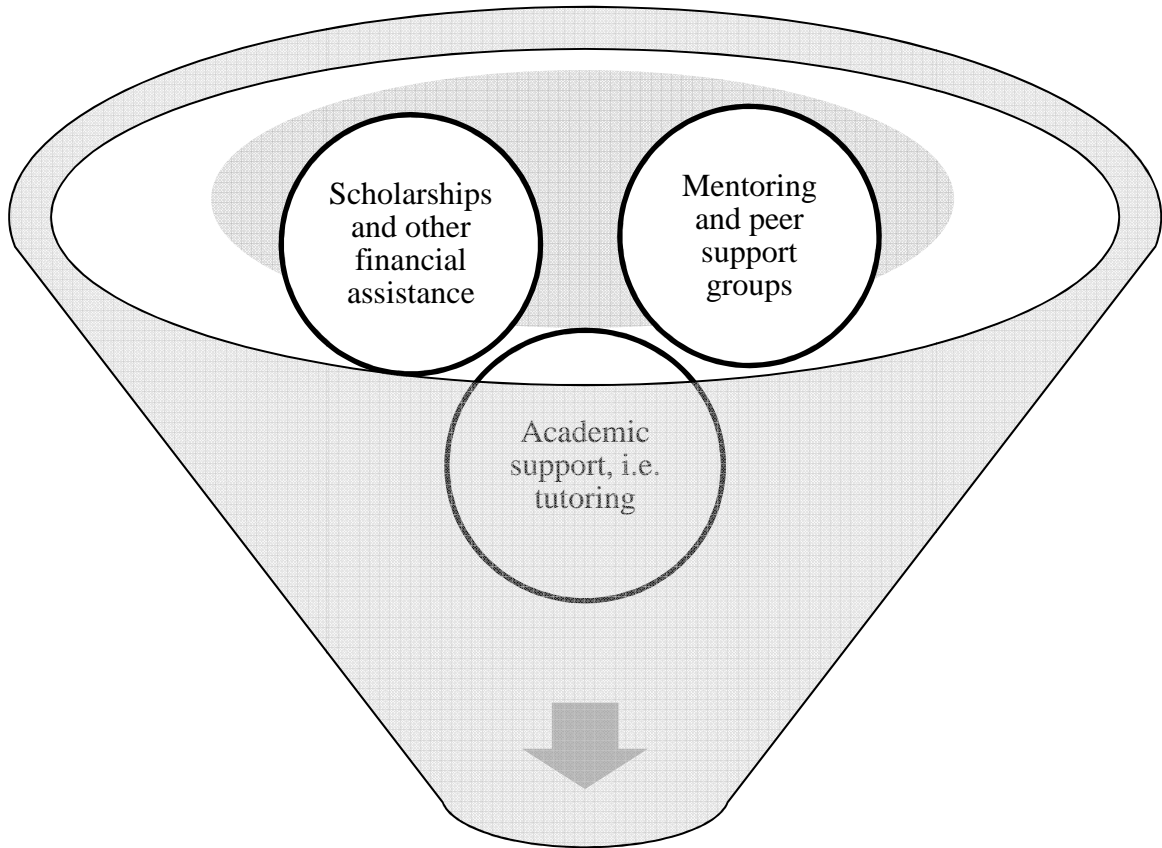


Figure 2. TRIO Student Support Services

Student Support Services was the TRIO program that assisted first-generation college students who were working towards their initial baccalaureate degrees with academic tutoring in core subjects, such as mathematics, science, writing, and reading (Mahoney, 1998). Student Support Services also provided first-generation college students with financial awareness through providing workshops that focused on empowering this population of college students with completing financial aid applications, while also servicing as a resource for locating private, as well as public, scholarships (Figure 2).

In the article “Unique and Effective Practices for TRIO Student Support Programs,” Walsh (2000) provided clear evidence as to the effectiveness of TRIO through this statement:

More than 80% of TRIO students persist in their academic goals each year . . . graduation rates, transfer rates and GPA levels of these students far exceed those of similar students who are not enrolled in TRIO programs as documented in annual programs evaluation. (p. 1)

Additionally, a longitudinal study concluded that participants in TRIO persisted and earned higher GPAs than first generation students who were not involved with TRIO programs (Thayer, 2000).

Because TRIO is a federally funded program that grants funds to colleges and universities The United States Congress set income guidelines for participants. At least 66% of the students involved in the program need to be dependents of parents who did not obtain a college degree who also earn fewer than 28,000 a year (Thomas, 1998). Funds allocated to colleges and universities for TRIO programs were not only for “low income, first generation” students, but for “disabled students “as well (Standing, 1999, p. 12-14). In 1999 TRIO served approximately 725,000 students, which included aspiring college graduates from sixth-12th grade (Standing, 1999; Walsh, 2000). However, programs such as McNair Scholars and Student Support Services helped meet the academic and social needs of a diverse number of college students.

In 2009, nearly 63% of TRIO participants were non-white, 22,000 were students with disabilities, and over 25,000 were U.S. veterans (Fletcher, 2009). With this, TRIO served a diverse population of students (Becker, 1999; Walsh, 2000). Since TRIO was a

federally funded program, national reports as to the effectiveness of TRIO programs were conducted regularly. In a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, approximately 91% of students serviced through TRIO indicated that they were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with the program (Standing, 1999). In contrast, only 9% of the students in that same report indicated they were not satisfied with the program. The programs offered through TRIO provided support to first-generation and disabled students alike that further equip them with skills as well as support from trained counselors and faculty endeavor that assisted them in their pursuit of post-secondary degrees. Through multiple programming including advising, mentorship, financial assistance, and counseling, TRIO support services served as a beacon of light to many first-generation college students.

Summary

Chapter Two included a review of literature that supports this research. The topics discussed were: the importance of a college education in the 21st century, first-generation college students, attrition and degree attainment among first-generation college students, unique challenges facing first-generation college students, the first years, parental and familiar roles in college education, the role of student support services in higher education and TRIO. The literature review provided specified information on past research pertaining to similar topics necessary for offering in-depth knowledge on first-generation students who persist beyond their first year of college with or without the support services of TRIO.

In a study conducted by Amenkhienan and Kogan (2004), students indicated that support services and academic activities had a positive impact on academic performance.

For over 40 years representatives from the Council for Opportunity in Education reinforced and generated supports as well as funding for over 2,700 TRIO programs. TRIO support services was a federally funded program dedicated to serving first-generation students in completing their bachelor's degree. The eight programs included in TRIO were "(1) Educational Opportunity Centers (2) Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement (3) Student Support Services (4) Talent Search (5) Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff (6) Upward Bound (7) Upward Bound Math-Science (8) Veterans Upward Bound" (Becker, 1999, p. 7). Helping gain clarity about their academic goals and career aspirations while also providing mentoring, tutoring, monitoring of students' progress were the most effective elements of TRIO. Students involved in TRIO had better retention, and transfer and graduation rates than other first-generation students who did not receive services through TRIO (Ruiz, 2008; Thayer, 2000). In a study it was reported that over 80% of students involved in TRIO achieved their annual academic goals (Ruiz, 2008). Each program contributed to the academic and social advancement of students, particularly first generation college students (Mahoney, 1998).

The researcher discussed the methodology used in this study in Chapter Three. The following chapter will discuss the population sample, purpose, and detailed data gathering procedures used in this research study. Chapter Four contains results from empirical data gathered through interviews the researcher conducted with a total of 20 first generation college students, while Chapter Five provides a summary of results, recommendations, and conclusions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This research study examined first-generation college students who persist towards completing baccalaureate degrees with and without the assistance of TRIO. The purpose of this study was to gather data regarding the perspectives and challenges of first-generation college students and provide a comparative analysis to ascertain the challenges and perspectives of first-generation college students who employ the use of TRIO student services to those who do not have access to formal student support services such as TRIO. Chapter Three provides details about the methodology used in this research, including the type of study, research questions, purpose, data collection, and analysis.

According to a study conducted by Terenzini et al. (1996), there was not a great deal of information pertaining to first-generation college students as it related to their experiences while working to complete degrees of higher education (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Purpose

According to a study conducted by Terenzini et al. (1996), there was not much information pertaining to first-generation college students as it related to their experiences while working to complete degrees of higher education. Therefore, the researcher endeavored to gather qualitative data that would enhance the body of research regarding first-generation college students who persisted towards completing baccalaureate degrees. In this case, persisting referred to first-generation students who were beyond their first year of college. A large body of research discussed the characteristics, challenges, college readiness skills, and degree completion rate of first-

generation students; however there was not sufficient data regarding their college experiences, which guided them to complete degrees of higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004). Former research indicated that first-generation students who attended a four-year college or university as opposed to a two-year institution were more likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Khanh, 2002; Pascarella et al., 2004; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Therefore the researcher enlisted participants from two different universities who were beyond their freshman year. Through interviewing first-generation college students who were beyond their first year of college and currently possessed a 2.0 or higher GPA, the researcher gathered empirical data that may enhance the current literature on the experiences that were related to the persistence of first-generation college students in four-year universities. Although grades were not considered the more complete measure of a student's level of academic development, research suggested that they were indicators of student success and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, the researcher's decision to interview participants who possessed a 2.0 GPA or higher was based on evidence suggesting that these students were more likely to persist towards completing baccalaureate degrees. Students in good academic standing with a minimum 2.0 GPA coupled with completion of the first year of college "increases a student's likelihood of earning a baccalaureate degree by two to three times" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 397).

Research suggested that the level of postsecondary education parents possessed had direct influences on the academic experiences of their children, particularly as it related to pursuing and obtaining degrees of higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004). Further, according to the article "Students Whose Parents did not go to College:

Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment,” Choy (2001) offered that college-educated parents give advice about major declaration, the financial assistance process, and support students as they prepare for college placement or entrance exams. Another study suggested that second or non-first-generation college students have the advantage of parents who influenced their thoughts about college life, planning for college, the application process, selecting a college, financial aid, and served as beacons of motivation during tough academic or social adjustment times while in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Unfortunately, this was a luxury that many first-generation students did not have; therefore programs such as TRIO served to fill the gap and helped these students overcome academic challenges that deterred them from completing baccalaureate degrees.

TRIO support services was a federally funded program dedicated to serving first-generation students in completing their bachelor’s degree. According to an article in the *Journal of the Council for Opportunity in Education*, faculty in TRIO served as an extended family that first-generation college students called on for support (Becker, 1999). First-generation students tended to have different personal and demographic characteristics as well as varied educational preparation and less knowledge about college life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). TRIO endeavored to provide the necessary support this generational cohort needed on their path to completing postsecondary degrees.

There were eight programs included in TRIO, which were all geared towards assisting first-generation, low-income persons with their academic progress from middle school until the completion of baccalaureate degree. The eight programs housed under TRIO were: “a) Educational Opportunity Centers, b) Ronald E. McNair Post-

Baccalaureate Achievement, c) Student Support Services, d) Talent Search, e) Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff, f) Upward Bound, g) Upward Bound Math-Science, and h) Veterans Upward Bound” (Becker, 1999, p. 7). Student Support Services was the TRIO program that assisted first-generation college students who were working towards their initial baccalaureate degrees with academic tutoring in core subjects such as mathematics, science, writing, and reading (Standing, 1999). College retention and assisting students with degree completion was required of administrators and faculty members involved in TRIO (Becker, 1999; Terenzini et al., 1996). In this case, persisting refers to first-generation students who were beyond their first year of college. Former research indicated that first-generation students who attended a four-year college or university as opposed to two-year institutions were more likely to complete a bachelor’s degree (Khanh, 2002; Pascarella et al., 2004; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Therefore, the researcher enlisted participants who were beyond their freshman year at two four-year universities. Through interviewing first-generation college students who met the stated criteria, the researcher gathered empirical data that would enhance the current literature on experiences related to the persistence of first-generation college students in four-year universities. All participants from both universities were required to meet the following criteria: (a) they must have attended college as a traditional college student (ages 18-21); (b) possess a minimum 2.0 GPA; (c) participants were students whose parents did not complete postsecondary education; and (d) classified as college sophomores, juniors, or seniors.

Student Support Services

According to a study conducted by Ishitani (2006), an International Research Analyst, data indicated that first-generation college students with lower GPAs were less likely to complete a baccalaureate degree. The same study concluded that first-generation college students with “higher academic skills . . . were more likely to persist” towards graduation” (p. 376). Further, according to the article “Students Whose Parents did not go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment,” Choy (2001) suggested that college-educated parents gave advice about major declaration, the financial assistance process, and supported students as they prepared for college placement or entrance exams. They also helped their children through attending various pre-college or college events, as well as through the application process. Unfortunately, this was a luxury that many first-generation students did not have, therefore programs such as TRIO served to fill the gap and help these students overcome academic challenges that deterred them from completing baccalaureate degrees. TRIO support services was a federally funded program dedicated to serving first-generation students in completing their bachelor’s degree. There were eight programs included in TRIO, which were all geared towards assisting first-generation, low-income persons with their academic progress from middle school until the completion of a baccalaureate degree. The eight programs housed under TRIO were: “(a) Educational Opportunity Centers, (b) Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement, c) Student Support Services, (d) Talent Search, (e) Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff, (f) Upward Bound, (g) Upward Bound Math-Science, and (h) Veterans Upward Bound” (Becker, 1999, p. 7). Student Support Services was the TRIO program that assisted first-

generation college students working towards their initial baccalaureate degrees with academic tutoring in core subjects such as mathematics, science, writing, and reading.

Student Support Services also provided first-generation college students with financial awareness through providing workshops that focused on empowering this population of college students with completing financial aid applications, while also serving as a resource for locating private, as well as public scholarships. College retention and assisting students with degree completion was a requirement of administrators and faculty members involved in TRIO. Additionally, providing information on admission and financial assistance opportunities, as well as counseling, academic support, such as tutoring, were ways that TRIO supported qualifying first-generation college students. Further, this program aimed to assist this population of college students with the academic and social tools needed in obtaining higher educational and economic status. Building self-sufficient, productive citizens was an underlying mission of TRIO support services (Yousif, 2009). However, not all first-generation college students were involved in TRIO. Therefore, this study attempted to add to the body of research regarding the challenges and perceptions of persisting first-generation college students, with or without the support of student support services, such as TRIO, to complete their baccalaureate degree.

Type of Study

This qualitative study investigated challenges and perceptions of persisting first-generation college students who were beyond their first year of college as they pursued baccalaureate degrees. Due the nature of this study's perceptions, it was necessary to gather empirical data. Therefore the qualitative research method was the most suitable.

Qualitative methodology is useful in studying views and perceptions because of the emphasis on meaning, interpretation, interaction, and subjective experiences (Daly, 1992). The theoretical frameworks in qualitative research are phenomenology and symbolic interactions. Phenomenology attempts to “understand the meaning of events and interactions and the subjective aspects of people’s behavior” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 34). Further, symbolic interactionism stresses that “human experience is mediated by interpretation . . . objects, people, situations, and events do not possess their own meaning, and rather meaning is conferred on them” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 36). Therefore, to understand the challenges and perceptions of first-generation college students, it was important to explore the personal experiences of those within this context, in addition to how they interpreted as well as perceived the meaning of those experiences.

Research Questions

Question 1: (a) What were the college experiences of first-generation students at two universities related to persistence toward the completion of a baccalaureate degree, and (b) in what ways did TRIO provide support?

Question 2: What kinds of supports did first-generation college students perceive as helpful as they persisted in pursuing a baccalaureate degree?

Question 3: Were there differences between the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college students with TRIO support and those without?

Independent Variables

There were two independent variables in this study, which were participant involvement in TRIO verses noninvolvement and socioeconomic status. Participants

were enrolled at two universities, referred to as U1 and U2. Students at U2 were part of TRIO, a federally funded program aimed at assisting first-generation, low-income students in completing baccalaureate degrees. This generational cohort attended weekly meetings, summer intensives, and was privy to mentors, tutors, as well as scholarship opportunities (TRIO Personnel, personal communication, March 2011). Conversely, students attending U1 did not have TRIO services available as part of the university's student support services programs for first-generation students. U1 did offer traditional services, such as writing labs, tutors for academic disciplines, computer labs, as well as academic counseling. Additionally, to be involved in TRIO, students were required to be first generation, but also came from low-income families. However, students included in this study from U2 were not asked to meet certain income criteria as a requirement for participation.

Dependent Variables

There were several dependent variables included in this study. All students from both U1 and U2 were first-generation college students who met the stated criteria. All participants from both universities were required to meet the following criteria: (a) they must have attended college as a traditional college student (ages 18-21); (b) possess a minimum 2.0 GPA; (c) participants were students whose parents did not complete postsecondary education; and (d) classified as college sophomores, juniors, or seniors.

Limitations

The researcher examined challenges and perceptions of first-generation students beyond their first year of college who all met the selection criteria, however, there were several limitations of this study. First, the study participants represented a small non-

random, purposeful sample that represented one state, Missouri. Second, the number of participating colleges and enrolled students limited the scope of this study. There were over 500 colleges and universities in the Midwest that educated a wide variety of students, including first generation. In addition, the researcher examined challenges and perceptions of first-generation college students from two universities and did not utilize data from community colleges. Third, location of the study presented a limitation, as this study was conducted at two private universities located in one Midwestern state, where there was a disproportionate amount of minorities enrolled. In lieu of this, universities in other national and state regions may not be able to generalize the outcomes of this study. Fourth, a convenience sampling method was used to gather qualitative data for this study, in which participants were selected from a pool of first-generation college students. Fifth, participants of the study were required to have a minimum GPA of 2.0 because academic success served as a precursor to completing degrees of higher education (Ishtanti, 2006). Participants who did not meet the minimum 2.0 GPA requirement were not interviewed. Due to this requirement, this sample does not convey the challenges and perceptions of first-generation students who have lower than a 2.0 G.P.A or were on academic probation. The sixth limitation of this study deals with the academic classification of participants. Since participants were beyond their first year of college, this study did not address the challenges and perceptions of freshman or nontraditional first-generation college students. The next limitation was income guidelines of participants. While participants at U2 involved in TRIO were required to meet specific federal income guidelines to qualify, first-generation college students at U1 were not obligated to meet such guidelines to participate in this study. Therefore, this data

compared first-generation students who met specific guidelines to those who did not meet the same income or socioeconomic guidelines. Next was the incomplete set of data. U1 was in the beginning stages of tracking its first-generation student population, while U2 was able to provide in-depth institutional data on its first-generation population, as well as those involved in TRIO. However, not all first-generation college students at this university were involved in TRIO. Finally, the size and population of both universities was such that results from this study were not generalizable to other universities with a differing size or population. Both universities included in this study were Judeo-Christian universities with populations of over 15,000 students. Additionally, U1 had a significantly larger minority population than U2, therefore data may not be common at other universities.

Population

The population of participants in this study included full and part-time students at both universities. In an effort to gather accurate data on both universities included in this study, the researcher gathered and examined data from websites of each respective university as well as from student handbooks, fact finders, institutional data reports and the Missouri Department of Higher Education, to ascertain population data of students from both campuses.

University 1

Enrollment for the fall of 2011 approximately 7,814 (U1 Fact Book, 2012-2013, p. 31-32). The attendance status for full-time students at U1 was 77% and 23% for part-time. Enrollment data included graduate students and other adult non-traditional college students. University 1 was a Jesuit college in the Midwest with over 7,000 students.

University 2

U2's undergraduate enrollment was approximately 8,670 for the fall 2011 term (U2 Fact Book, 2012, p. 18). Conversely, 60% of the students at U2 attended school as full-time students, while 40% were enrolled part-time. Enrollment data for U2 also included graduate students and other adult non-traditional college students.

Additionally, the researcher gathered data on admission criteria for both universities, in an effort to ascertain the academic quality of their student populations.

Demographics of Student Population

The two colleges involved in the study demonstrated similarities in demographics. The Missouri Commission of Higher Education's Coordinating Board collects and disseminates data regarding all public, private, and not-for profit institutions throughout Missouri. Institutional Data and Research departments at most colleges and universities were responsible for collecting and reporting valid school data to the Missouri Commission of Higher Education's Coordinating Board for Higher Education. Coupled with institutional data gathered through each university's website, the following demographic information was gathered. In the fall of 2011, approximately 60% of the student population at University 1 was White, while 0.11% was African American, 0.03% American Indian, 0.04% Asian, and 0.02% Hispanic (U1 Fact Book, 2012-2013, pp. 31-33).

Conversely, data from the same sources reported the following data regarding student demographics at University 2. In the fall of 2011 approximately 70% of the student population was White, 0.06% African American, 0.001% American Indian, 0.05% Asian, and 0.03% Hispanic (U2 Fact Book, 2012, p. 18). In total the researcher

interviewed a racially diverse student population where 40% of participants were White, 5% Hispanic, while 55% were African American (Figure 3).

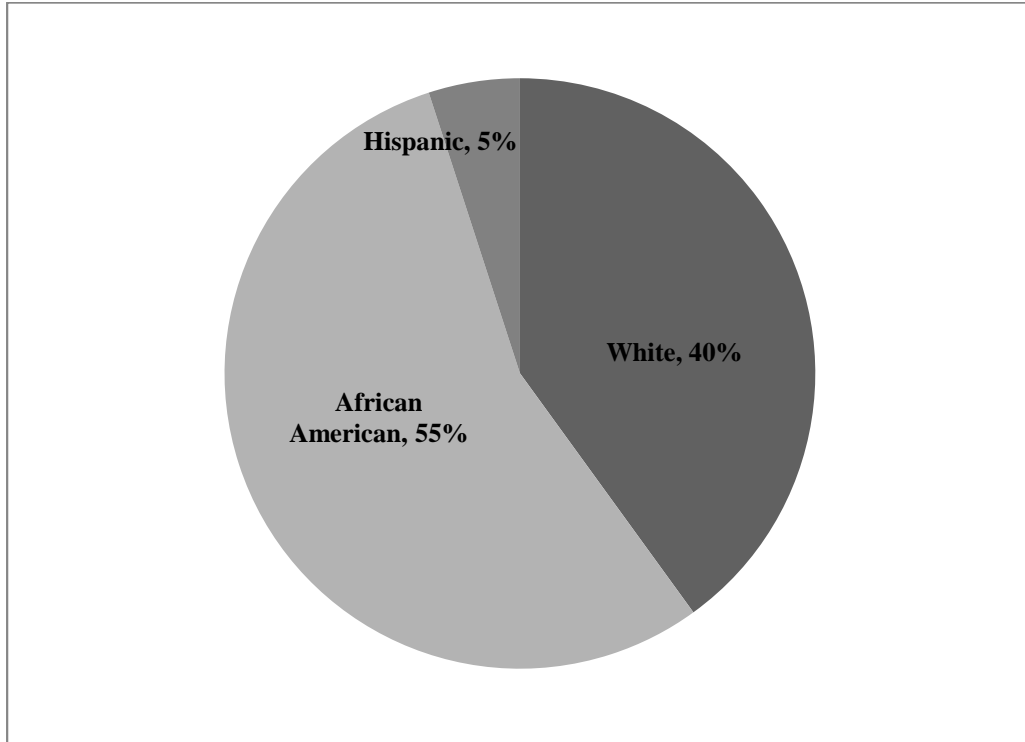


Figure 3. Demographic of participants by race

Sampling

The researcher interviewed an equal number of participants from two universities located in the Midwest. The researcher interviewed 10 students from both University 1 and University 2 on their respective campuses. While one of the subgroups involved in the study were participants of TRIO Student Support Services, students at the second university were not privy to such services uniquely designed for first-generation college students. Also, 55% of students interviewed were African American, while 40% were White, and 5% were Hispanic. Additionally, of those first-generation students

interviewed, 35% were sophomores, 45% juniors, and 20% of the total population was in their senior year of college (Figure 4).

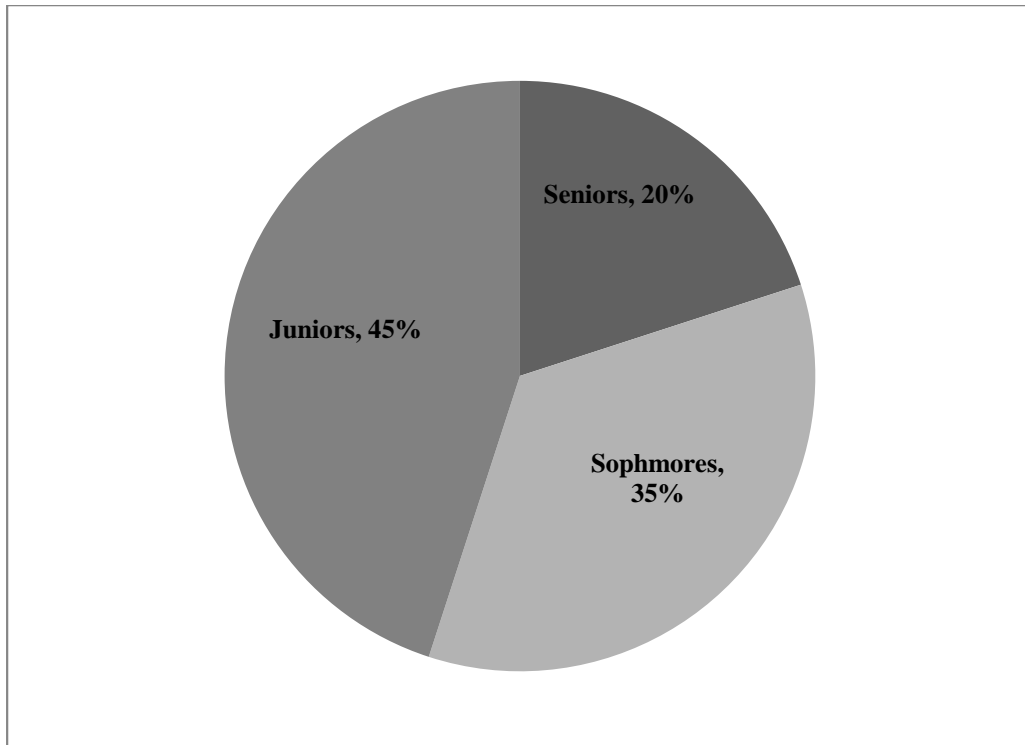


Figure 4. Academic classification of participants

The researcher used a small purposeful sample, consisting of 20 first-generation college students from two universities, as interviewees to gather concrete and in-depth information. Further, to be included in the study, participants from both universities met the following criteria: (a) enrolled in college as a traditional college student (ages 18-21); (b) possessed a minimum 2.0 GPA; (c) participants were students whose parents did not complete postsecondary education; and (d) classified as college sophomores, juniors, or seniors. Although grades were not considered, the more complete measure of a student's level of academic development, research suggested that they were indicators of student

success and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, the researcher's decision to interview participants who possessed a 2.0 G.P.A or higher was based on evidence suggesting that these students were more likely to persist towards completing baccalaureate degrees. Good standing G.P.A's coupled with completion of the first year of college increased "a student's likelihood of earning a baccalaureate degree by two to three times" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 397).

Description of Universities

University 1 was a Judeo-Christian liberal arts university that had one main campus, a second campus in another state, and 11 off-site locations, as well as over 30 extension locations throughout the Midwest. U1 offered face-to-face, hybrid, as well as online courses to its undergraduate and graduate student populations. University 1 offered over 120 degree programs including, but not limited to accounting, theatre, sports management, philosophy of religion, and education. The mission statement emphasized the importance of educating the whole person and empowering students to become productive members of a global community. University 1 was accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

University 2 was a Judeo-Christian university that had campuses in the United States and Spain, as well as a host of off-site locations in the United States. This institution also offered face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses to its undergraduate and graduate student populations. University 2 offered over 100 undergraduate degrees and 60 graduate programs of study. Programs of study at U2 ranged through anatomy, nursing, education, criminal justice, and information technology management. The mission of U2 focused on research, health, and cultivating intellect guided by spiritual

ideals. University 2 was also an accredited university, deemed so through the North Central Association of Colleges and Universities.

The researcher collected freshman and transfer student admissions criteria from each university to ascertain the academic quality of students admitted. The researcher procured and examined information from each university’s online catalog, which included lists of admissions criteria for each college (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Admissions Criteria for Each University

Admissions Criteria	University One	University Two
Complete Admissions Form	X	X
Official Transcripts	X	X
ACT or SAT results	X	X
Application Fee	X	
Personal Resume	X	
Letter of Recommendation (recommended, but not required)	X	
Personal Essay	X	

Note: Criteria obtained from each university’s website and Institutional Research Office(s)

Each university required freshman and transfer students to complete an application, submit official transcript(s), and ACT or SAT results. University 1 had four additional requirements for admissions, which included a \$30.00 non-refundable application fee and a personal resume detailing the applicant’s involvement in

community service and extracurricular activities. Additionally, a personal essay describing the applicants' goals and rationale for furthering their education required of all first-time and transfer students. U1 requested letters of recommendation for applicants, however, its website indicated that this was not a requirement for admission to the university. The researcher examined each respective university's average admissions statistics as reported from the Institutional Research Office(s). The average GPA for first time freshman and transfer students admitted to U1 during the fall of 2011 was 3.13. Conversely, the average ACT score was 22.24 while the average SAT score was 1007 for the same population of students (U1 Fact Book, 2012-2013, p. 88). Freshman and transfer students admitted to U2 during the fall of 2011 possessed an average 3.7 GPA (U2 Fact Book, 2012, p. 11).

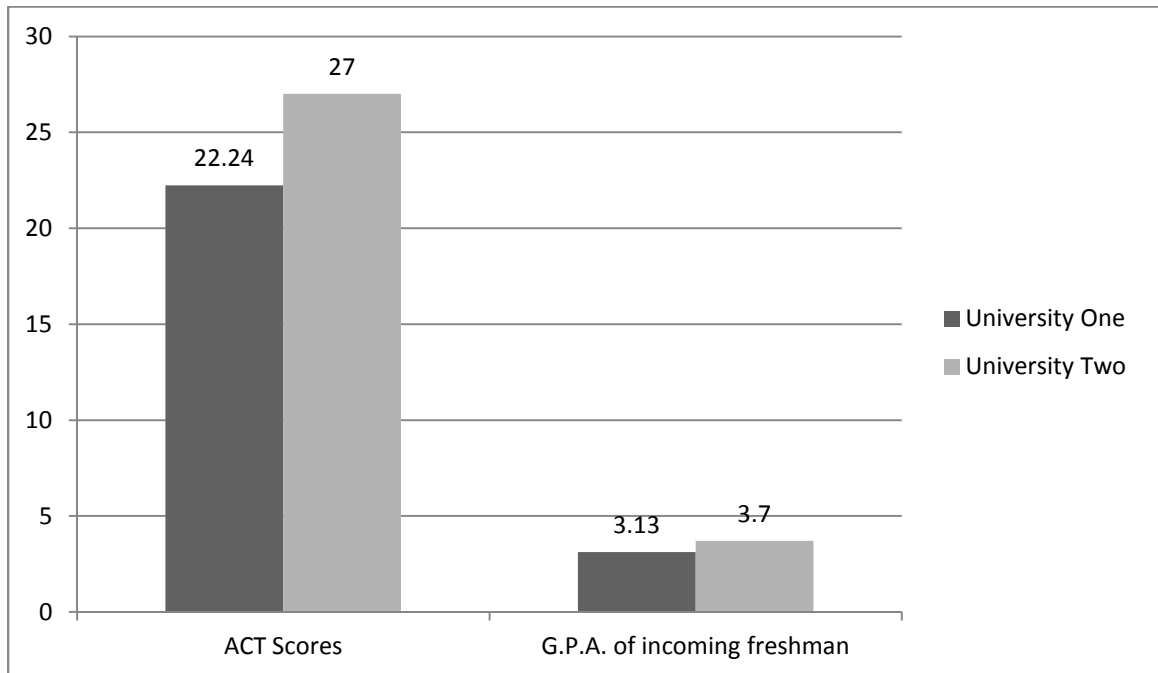


Figure 5. Average admissions statistics fall 2011

The average ACT score of freshman and transfer students admitted during that same term was 27.0 (Figure 5). U2 did not specify an average SAT score, however, institutional data noted that SAT scores were equivalent to ACT scores (U2 Fact Book, 2012, p. 11).

Procedure

University 1

1. The researcher met with and discussed the proposed research with the Dean of First-Year Programs.
2. The Dean of First-Year Programs forwarded the researcher's request to procure institutional and student data as well as permission to interview 10-15 of the university's pool of first-generation college students. The Vice President of Student Development submitted a letter of approval for the researcher to gather data and interview the university's pool of first-generation college students.
3. The researcher constructed the *Invitation e-mail to Potential Participants* (Appendix B) which the researcher e-mailed to The Dean of First-Year Programs at University 1. The Dean of First-Year Programs forwarded the *Invitation e-mail to Potential Participants* to each first-generation student who met the selection criteria. Once a week the researcher composed messages to the group of first-generation college students who met the selection criteria until the researcher secured the necessary number of participants. Feedback between the Dean of First-Year Programs and the researcher was ongoing throughout this portion of selecting students.
4. Once students e-mailed the researcher regarding interest in participating in the study, the researcher sent the *Follow-Up e-mail for Confirmed Interview* letter

(Appendix D) to each interested participant. This letter assigned each student with a pseudonym in an effort to establish confidentiality and requested a contact phone number.

5. The *Follow-Up e-mail for Confirmed Interview* letter requested that interested students reply via e-mail with a phone number. Once students provided their phone numbers to the researcher, the researcher called participants within 24 hours of the e-mail. In some instances the researcher e-mailed participants who responded to the *Invitation e-mail to Potential Participants* letter on more than one occasion to secure contact information to establish a mutually agreeable time to conduct an interview.
6. With the exception of two separate interviews conducted over the phone, the researcher set up individual face-to-face interviews at a quiet location on University 1's campus where there were minimal distractions.
7. Before the interview(s) began the researcher asked each interviewee to sign the Informed Consent Letter (Appendix A) which granted permission to use the content of each interview for data gathering and reporting purposes. Again to ensure confidentiality, the researcher reminded each interviewee of the pseudonym, which was also explained on the consent/authorization form.
8. Once interviewees provided signatures to indicate permission to use information provided through the interview as a means of gathering and reporting data, the researcher gave each participant a \$5.00 gift certificate from Subway.
9. During the interview(s) the researcher referred to the student(s) by their respective pseudonyms.

10. The researcher tape-recorded and wrote notes during each interview.
11. Once the interviews were complete, the researcher transcribed each interview and searched for recurring themes relating to the challenges and perceptions of first-generation students at University 1.
12. The researcher coded recurring themes using highlighters to denote similar challenges among first-generation students.

University 2

1. The researcher scheduled a face-to-face meeting with the Director of TRIO services at University 2 to discuss the purpose of the research and request permission to interview students involved in TRIO.
2. Through this meeting the Director of TRIO forwarded information about the research as well as the researcher's information to the Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs, Director of Institutional Research, and Director of Student Educational Services.
3. After a few correspondences from the Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs, the researcher attached a draft of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) form to the Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs. Upon receiving satisfactory information about the study, the Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs addressed an approval letter to the IRB committee at Lindenwood University expressing his permission for the researcher to access data and interview University 2's first-generation college students.
4. Once the Director of TRIO at University 2 received a copy of the approval letter from the Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs, the researcher gained

permission to attend meetings, which first-generation students in TRIO attended every week.

5. The Director of TRIO at University 2 permitted the researcher to discuss the purpose of the research and solicit participation during whole group sessions.
6. After speaking with students in TRIO, the researcher gave students a sign-up sheet which requested each interested student to provide a name and contact information.
7. The researcher sent an *Invitation e-mail to Potential Participants* letter to each student who signed up and conducted follow up phone calls, which were necessary to schedule interviews.
8. Once students e-mailed the researcher regarding interest in participating in the study, the researcher sent the *Follow-Up e-mail for Confirmed Interview* letter (Appendix D) to each interested participant. This letter assigned each student with a pseudonym in an effort to establish confidentiality and requested a contact phone number.
9. The *Follow-Up e-mail for Confirmed Interview* letter requested that interested students reply via e-mail with a phone number. Once students provided their phone numbers to the researcher, the researcher called participants within 24 hours of their e-mail. In some instances the researcher e-mailed participants who responded to the *Invitation e-mail to Potential Participants* letter on more than one occasion to secure contact information to establish a mutually agreeable time to conduct an interview.

10. With the exception of two separate interviews conducted over the phone, the researcher set up individual face-to-face interviews at a quiet location on University 2's campus where there were minimal distractions.
11. Before the interview(s) began the researcher asked each interviewee to sign the Informed Consent letter (Appendix A) which granted permission to use the content of each interview for data gathering and reporting purposes. Again, to ensure confidentiality, the researcher reminded each interviewee of the pseudonym, which was also explained on the consent/authorization form.
12. Once interviewees provided their signatures to indicate their permission to use information provided through the interview as a means of gathering and reporting data, the researcher gave each participant a \$5.00 gift certificate from Subway.
13. During the interview(s) the researcher referred to the student(s) by their respective pseudonyms.
14. The researcher tape-recorded and wrote notes during each interview.
15. Once the interviews were complete the researcher transcribed each interview, and searched for recurring themes relating to the challenges and perceptions of first-generation students at University 2.
16. The researcher coded recurring themes using highlighters to denote similar challenges among first-generation students from both universities.
17. The researcher conducted a comparative analysis of the challenges of persisting first generation college students between students with TRIO support and those without.

Additionally, the researcher developed interview questions (Appendix E) for both groups of students considering input gathered through reviewing current literature, analyzing similar studies, as well as through solicited advice from educational experts including those who served on the dissertation committee. Although many of the questions for both groups of students were the same, there were two questions designed particularly for University 1 students and two different questions designed for students in TRIO at University 2.

The researcher organized interview questions to gain insight on several areas of their college experience. The researcher designed questions that addressed the appropriate subheadings, which were as follows: (a) academic experience, (b) social experience, (c) interaction with family, (d) critical experiences, (e) social/cultural capital and adjusting to college, and (f) socio economic (Appendix E). Additionally, the researcher created two sets of interview questions to specifically address first-generation students with the support of TRIO for those who attended the university that did not have a support program in place. A copy of the full list of interview questions is located in Appendix E. Some of the detailed questions were as follows:

- (1) Where did you receive most of your help academically?
- (2) Describe your involvement with any extracurricular activities/programs on or off campus (e.g. social fraternity/sorority, student clubs/groups, leadership training, etc.).
- (3) Discuss your experiences in and out of the classroom with faculty and staff.
- (4) Do you think there is a relationship between participation with TRIO services and your academic outcome? Explain your reasoning.

- (5) How did your family and friends adjust to your life as a college student?
- (6) Socially, who do you spend the most time with when on campus?
- (7) Tell me about some of the struggles that you faced during your first year of college.
- (8) Who had the greatest influence on your persistence as it relates to continuing college past the first year (social/cultural/capital)?

The researcher also asked each participant to share advice with future first-generation college students, which is among the data reported in Chapter Four.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with a total of 20 participants who were all first-generation college students who met the stated criteria. Semi-structured interviews are useful for gathering empirical data for qualitative research (Creswell, 2008). With the exception of two interviews the researcher conducted over the phone, face-to-face interviews were the major component of the semi-structured interviews. Each interview was audiotaped in areas where there was minimal noise and later examined for recurring themes regarding challenges of persisting towards completion of baccalaureate degrees as first-generation students. Interviews provided the researcher with opportunities to gather empirical data about the challenges of being and persisting as a first-generation student.

Each interview ranged from approximately 30 to 60 minutes long. Audiotapes allowed the researcher to transcribe and further analyze participant's responses. The researcher used participant's pseudonyms when transcribing interviews to maintain confidentiality. Further, audiotapes gave the researcher the ability to listen to and re-

listen, and were necessary to transcribe data and to further understand the context of each provided response. Developing a greater understanding of qualitative data leads to in-depth analysis of the experiences and challenges of each participant.

Data Analysis

In an effort to understand and analyze data the researcher listened to and then transcribed student interviews. The researcher read through each interview and highlighted common themes relating to the challenges of this group of first-generation college students as they persisted towards completing baccalaureate degrees. The researcher highlighted words and phrases using various colors to organize each reoccurring theme. The researcher copied and pasted direct quotes from each interviewee that specifically related to challenges. This was necessary to clearly separate information pertaining to persistence and challenges while completing bachelor's degrees from other rhetoric provided during the interviews. Once the researcher ascertained the most common challenges of first-generation students who were pursuing a bachelor's degree, the challenges were reported and detailed.

Summary

Qualitative methods are useful in gaining in-depth knowledge and study of experiences, views, and perceptions. Conducting interviews provided greater detail on this generational cohort by providing empirical data regarding the challenges and perspectives of first-generation college students. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews allowed the researcher to obtain a greater understanding, as well as provided a comprehensive analysis of this topic. Audiotaped interviews were useful because it enabled the researcher to assess and re-assess interviews while also examining codes that

gave greater insight of common challenges and perceptions of first-generation college students with and without support from TRIO. The analysis of this information allowed the researcher to make suggestions for colleges and universities, which aim to retain its first-generation population and propel them towards being the first in their family to earn baccalaureate degrees.

Chapter Four contains results from empirical data gathered through interviews the researcher conducted with a total of 20 first-generation college students. The researcher gave a pseudonym to each participant to help ensure confidentiality, since results indicated specific and detailed information regarding background information of participants as well as challenges and perceptions they encountered as they pursued baccalaureate degrees. Further, the researcher compared challenges and perceptions among first-generation students involved in TRIO to those who did not have the formal support of TRIO services. Chapter Five provides a summary of the results, recommendations, and conclusions.

Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges and perceptions of first-generation college students who persist towards completing baccalaureate degrees with and without the assistance of TRIO support services. In this chapter, the researcher provides results from empirical data gathered through conducting semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 20 first-generation students from two universities who were beyond their first year of college and possessed a 2.0 or higher GPA. Interviews were retrospective, as all students were upper-class college students who completed at least one year of college at a four-year university. The researcher interviewed an equal number of participants from each respective university. The results of this study promotes further research and programs that lend towards assisting first-generation college students to having greater success with obtaining baccalaureate degrees. During interviews the researcher asked participants to share pertinent information regarding their family, major of study, and classification. Before discussing the findings of this study, the researcher provided a brief description of each participant.

Biographies

The researcher interviewed a total of 20 participants with the following racial breakdown: 55% African Americans, 40% Whites, and 25% Hispanics (Table 2). Additionally, of those first-generation students interviewed 35% were sophomores, 45% were juniors, and 20% were in their senior year of college (Table 3). The researcher used a small purposeful sample, consisting of 20 first-generation college students from two universities, as interviewees to gather concrete and in-depth information.

Table 2.

Frequency and Percentage of Participants by Race

Race	N	Percentage
White	8	40%
African American	11	55%
Hispanic	1	5%

Further, to be included in the study participants from both universities met the following criteria: (a) currently enrolled in college as a traditional college student (ages 18-21); (b) possess a minimum 2.0 GPA; (c) participants were students whose parents did not complete postsecondary education; and (d) classified as college sophomores, juniors, or seniors. Although grades were not considered the more complete measure of a student's level of academic development, research suggested that they were indicators of student success and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Table 3. *Frequency and Percentage of Participants by Classification*

Classification	N	Percentage
Sophomore	7	35%
Junior	9	45%
Senior	4	20%

Amelia. Amelia was born in the United States to a mother and father who migrated from Mexico when they were young adults. She was raised in the household with both parents, as well as her twin brother and two younger siblings. As her parents' eldest daughter, she taught herself English and "couldn't rely on her parents help with her

education after the second grade,” as both her parents were lay workers who still struggled with speaking English since neither of them went to school in the United States. Amelia was a member of the Hispanic Society and was focused on setting a “positive example for her siblings and other Hispanics back in California.” She was a sophomore at U1 and her major was Spanish, with a minor in Mass Media. As one of the 20 participants who was Hispanic, Amelia served as an anomaly but provided a depth of insight regarding her experiences as a first-generation college student and a first-generation immigrant in the United States.

Margareta. Margareta was a White student who was born in Missouri and decided to attend a university close to home. Her father passed when she was two-years-old, so she was raised by her mother and grandmother. At the time of the interviews, Margareta lived at home, which was approximately 30 minutes from campus. She was a sophomore at U1 and her major was Math, with a minor in Secondary Education. She aspired to become a high school math teacher.

Jerry. Jerry was classified as a junior Physical Education major at U1. Jerry was a White student who lived on campus and was active with the Student Government Association and his fraternity. His mother “raised five boys by herself and worked hard to make sure he went to college.” He took pride on selecting a major that he was passionate about as he “loves to work with kids” and hoped to become a teacher after graduating.

John. John was a junior at U1 who was raised in the household with both parents, as well as an older brother. While his older brother was the first to go to college, he discontinued after his first year leaving John to hold the reigns. After his second year

at U1, John decided on a Sales and Marketing major, with a minor in Business. John was a White student who was involved with several organizations, was the recipient of scholarships including the Athletic Booster Scholarship, and enjoyed socializing with the wide array of people on campus, which he felt was one of the reasons he “struggled so much during his first year of college.” During his interview he stressed how proud his parents were of him for bringing up his grades and focusing more on obtaining his bachelor’s degree.

Angel. Angel was a sophomore Secondary Education major, with a minor in Language Arts at U1. She was raised in the home with both parents, as well as a younger brother. Although she was one of the few African American students on campus, she credited her ability to get along with others by being a “military brat,” which afforded her the opportunity of attending high school in Germany. Angel did not have a great deal of stability at home or school as she attended 10 elementary schools due to the constant movement as a daughter of two parents who were enlisted in the Army. She was nominated as the Homecoming Queen and was known around campus for the amount of time she spent in the library.

Pierre. Pierre was a sophomore at U1. He decided to major in Biology after first declaring Physical Education as a major, which he decided “was not as important.” He too was a White student raised in a home with both parents. His parents were “lay workers” but encouraged him and his brother to focus on school. Pierre’s interview seemed to be the briefest of them all as he was straight to the point. He mentioned the close relationship with his brother who also attended U1 and discussed the importance of their relationship in influencing him to continue pursuing his degree.

Debra. Debra was a junior at U1 who majored in Non-Profit Administration. She was one of few African American students on campus and was involved with the CRU, a Christian student organization, and First Generation Collegians, a newly founded group for first-generation college students. Debra was raised in a single-parent home with her mother and grandmother who were both supportive of her academic pursuits. Her decision to go to college was based on observations of being “poor,” as she described herself as spending considerable time “looking at home life and not seeing family advancing.”

Vaughn. Vaughn was a senior Biochemistry major at U1 during the time of the interview. Since the age of 10, Vaughn loved science and wanted to have a career in that field. He was a White student who regretted that his “family didn’t teach him how important school is.” His father and stepmother, who he described as “two hard workers,” raised Vaughn. However, they were both, as he briefly described, supportive of his academic endeavors.

Amber. Amber was an Accounting major in her sophomore year at U1. As a member of Alpha Phi Omega and the Cross Country team she prided herself on “keeping her grades up” while also being active on campus. She was a White student who was raised by her mother in a single-parent household. As an only child she did not have anyone to look up to who encouraged her to pursue a college degree, however she spoke of her middle school teachers who made her believe that she could do anything she put her mind to. Taking care of her mother and wanting her family to have better lives were two of her motivations for completing a degree.

Mary. Mary was raised in a small town in a very “family oriented” household, with support from her mother, father, aunts, and uncles. As an out-of-state student, she kept up with her family through SKYPE, but still often felt “home sick.” She was a White student who was a member of the Student Marketing Club and U1’s Rugby team. She was a Human Resource Management major in her junior year of college during the time of the interview.

Samantha. Samantha was a junior, Social Work major at U2 who dreamed about going to college since middle school. Raised by her mom in a single-parent household, she shared a good relationship with her father and considered them both to be to be “encouraging” of her academic endeavors. Her father hoped she would be the “child that changes everything,” as they were raised in a lower socioeconomic community he desired her to move away from. As one of few African American first-generation students on campus, her involvement with TRIO was a “good thing.” She actively participated in the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, served as a volunteer for Campus Kitchen, and tutored in the Keep-a-Child Alive on campus program.

Nicole. Nicole was a double major at U2 who also was an active member of TRIO. She was classified as a senior, African American Studies and History major who endeavored to teach at the university level. Both her mother and father raised Nicole. She described them as having “remedial jobs” and still not accustomed to her being away at college. Nicole was an African American student who was an active member of the Student Government Association and volunteered as a tutor.

Victoria. Victoria was a Criminal Justice major at U2 who also was a member of TRIO. An African American student, she was classified as a junior. Victoria was active

with various on campus organizations including Students United for Africa, Black Student Alliance, and University Christian Fellowship. She also served as a Resident Advisor. She was brought up in a community she described as “hard economically” by her mother, who she described as “supportive, but not understanding of what college is like.”

Teron. Teron described himself as a “cool nerd.” He was an African American student who was raised by his mother and stepfather. Both Teron’s parents were supportive of his academic endeavors. Teron was a junior Structural Engineering major who was also active with TRIO, National Society for Black Engineers (NSBE), and the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Janet. Janet was classified as a junior at U2 who endeavored to be a Clinical Lab Technician. She was a member of TRIO, as well as the Black Student Alliance, and assisted with various community service projects on campus. Since she wanted to go to college somewhere close to her family, she selected U2. Both her mother and father raised Janet and often called to check on her academic progress. She was an African American student.

Thomas. Thomas was a senior Philosophy major, with a Theology minor. He did not speak of his parents at all during our interview, however he mentioned his uncle as a motivating force behind his choosing to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Thomas was an African American student who lived off campus and was a member of TRIO, Phi Theta Kappa, and a Jesuit College organization on campus. He was the only student in this study who had a child, which he discussed in great detail as one of the reasons he commuted to school daily and gave it his all.

Whitney. Both Whitney's mother and father raised her, along with two younger siblings. She described them both as "very loving, supportive parents" who "work hard to provide her with the additional financial support she needed to pay for books and other things she needed while away from home." Whitney was an African American student who was a member of TRIO, Intersity Christian Fellowship, and the Black Student Alliance. She also served as a Residential Advisor on campus, which she decided to do in an effort to get to know more people because she "didn't feel like she belonged" in college during her first few years of college. Whitney was classified as a junior during the time of the interview, and she was an Occupational Therapy major.

Maggie. Maggie was born in Liberia and moved to the United States when she was 12, with both her mother and father. Neither her mother nor father graduated from college; however she described her father as "astute," especially in matters of foreign policies, and her mother as one who "will work extra hours to see that she has all of the things she needs" so that she may concentrate on her academics. Due to the political nature through which she and her family had to relocate, she grew an interest in politics. During the time of the interviews, Maggie was a sophomore Political Science major at U2. Maggie was a member of Bridge to Success, the Tennis Team, and TRIO.

April. April was an out-of-state student at U2 who was raised by both her mother and father. Although her parents didn't graduate from high school they were "quite happy and supportive of her." They, along with her older sister who just completed a college degree, encouraged her to succeed. During the time of the interviews, April was classified as a senior. Her major was Psychology, Spanish, and Pre-law. She too was a Resident Advisor and member of the Black Student Alliance, as well as TRIO.

Stacey. Stacey was a sophomore at U2 who was an active member of TRIO, Black Student Alliance, and a peer-mentoring group that helped incoming freshman acclimate to college life. During the time of the interviews, her major was Nursing, which she changed after the first year of college from Biology and Pre-Med because she wanted to be more in contact with people in the healthcare field. Stacey was raised in a single parent household where she witnessed her mother “sacrificing to take care of family.” As an only child she felt a lot of pressure to prove to herself and her family that she could live a “better life.”

Common Challenges

Transportation

During a study, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that students who lived on campus tended to make greater academic and social gains as compared to those who commuted to campus. Students’ levels of persistence beyond the first year of college was also predicated on their commute to campus daily. As Debra commented “transportation has been a big challenge, I live off campus, which is a 45 minute walk!” Unfortunately for her, there was no more student housing on U1’s campus when she registered, which added to her feeling that college “seems like survival of the fittest.” Amber had a similar issue with transportation, except she had medical issues that required her going off campus to pick up prescriptions. In her words, “most challenging was being away from home, especially my first year . . . when I didn’t have a car to get snacks or medicine.” Amber did not grow up close to U1; therefore she was unfamiliar with the local transportation system. Depending on others or local transportation was a challenge for her, which she met by obtaining a car during her sophomore year. Teron’s frustration

with transportation was unique. Like Debra, he commuted from off-campus housing to campus daily. Unlike Debra, he lived with his family, including his mother.

Teron's family relied on him to transport them to and from their daily errands, which often was a barrier to his solidifying necessary study times. His family did not always understand the demands of pursuing a college degree. For him, TRIO mentors were "therapeutic" and assisted him with solidifying the trip of his life! During a study abroad trip to Spain, Teron noticed a difference in his study habits and "did a lot better that semester academically", because he did not have the pressures from family members regarding their needs for him to transport them to various places on a daily basis. In his words "I was completely independent . . . I didn't have my family, I wasn't commuting so I could fully have time for myself." He described his trip to Spain as one that helped him manage his time better, which led to greater academic success, because "it was just me and my textbook." Thomas's challenge with transportation was linked to his not always having enough money to afford the public transportation cost to commute back and forth from home to campus daily. Although transportation appeared as one of the common challenges, Debra, Amber, Teron, and Thomas were examples of how varied this one challenge was to first-generation college students.

Money

Being a first-generation college student was even harder for students like Debra, Thomas, Nicole, Victoria, and April because of financial hardships. Financial pressures can interfere with a student's academic and social interactions, which have been shown to be related to college persistence (Pascarella et al., 2004). Although federal and state institutions give approximately \$74 billion in student aid every year (U.S Department of

Education, 2009) students like Thomas and Victoria had a difficult time affording necessary items, such as books to continue their college education. During his interview, Thomas discussed having to drop out of school “two days after classes started” because he “couldn’t afford books.” According to Thomas, the “TRIO program is the reason I’ve been able to do as good as I have done in college, they gave me laptop, money for books, all that stuff . . . my mom doesn’t even know what school I go to, no one is really part of my college education.” Unfortunately, he was not the only first-generation college student to experience financial difficulties that otherwise led some students to discontinue their educations. Victoria recollected the second semester of her freshman year:

I didn’t know how I was going to be able to pay for my books. I was like “I don’t know how I am going to pay for these, I don’t have a way.” I remember e-mailing someone from TRIO and they told me to apply, gave me this information and I think in the next few weeks I had a grant like to be able to buy my books that I needed for school.

She also discussed a time when TRIO assisted her with a scholarship to help her take summer classes, which she needed to stay on course to graduate on time.

For Debra and Nicole, the pressure to “make good grades” to keep their scholarships and other stipends was one of their financial challenges. On the contrary, April found her financial challenges lifted the summer after her freshman year, when she learned of a scholarship established by her great-great grandmother. In her words, “while at a family reunion I learned that we had a family scholarship.” Not many students were as fortunate as April. Unfortunately, the cost of completing a college degree had increased over the past decade as well (Altbach et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini,

2005). The increasing cost of completing college degrees often places students in situations where they must work to pay for books and other educational expenses their parents were not be able to afford. For students like Debra, Thomas, Victoria, and Nicole, the financial challenges of paying for books, or having enough money to afford transportation to campus, was a source of frustration which caused them to discontinue their education.

Adjusting to Academic Rigor

Understanding expectations of college instructors was a key element in passing courses students needed to complete for degree attainment (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Mehta et al., 2011). Exhibiting academic competence was a key factor in college completion; however, understanding the culture and having a support system was important, as well (Collier & Morgan, 2004). Adjusting to academic rigor was one of the challenges that 10 of the participants identified. Five of the 10 students at U1 and six of the 10 students at U2 characterized three areas of adjusting to academic rigor as major challenges to pursuing their bachelor's degrees: time management, study habits, and a more difficult workload.

During the researchers' interviews, Mary, Margaret, Jerry, Maggie, Samantha, Janet, and John made similar comments regarding their struggles with time management. Janet's sentiments synthesized the concerns of all six interviewees; "Coming from high school where everything is decided for you, your schedule is already set for you and you're just use to that." She also stated, "you'll have a lot of free time, and if you cannot manage it and that's going to be a really big issue." Similarly Margaret stated, "in high school you have classes all day from 7 am until 2 o'clock, and in college you can choose

your classes and decide if you want a break or not.” The difference in class schedules during high school and the amount of freedom indicative of college life was clearly a challenge for some college students. In college, students, often along with the assistance of an academic advisor, select their classes and decide what time of day they would like take their classes. Unlike high school, they have the responsibility of selecting courses at various times of the day throughout the week, including Saturdays, which often required a degree of self-knowledge. It would seem that college students need to know what time of day they were most alert, as well as the type of study habits that work best for them. Vaughn and Stacey, from two different universities, shared their concerns regarding developing study habits. In the words of Vaughn, a student from U1:

You have to work harder because I was use to high school and there I didn't study that much-hardly at all because I was used to getting by on my intelligence alone.

I mean I had experiences where I had to study, but not like you do here.

Stacey echoed his sentiments with her comment “when you come to college you’ve got to really learn how to study!” This by far was one of the most difficult challenges for a large majority of students in this study.

Taron, Samantha, Nicole, and Margaret’s difficulty with adjusting to academic rigor was more about the difficulty of assignments given in college. Nicole suggested that the workload in college made her feel “inadequate,” while the others simply stated “workload” or the “intensity of work” when asked to describe their most challenging experiences adjusting to college. Maggie summarized this section best with the following sentiment,

I think the biggest thing to overcome was just being able to adjust to this different world, and being able to adjust to myself, but to be there for others who are adjusting or even people coming in after me who are still trying to figure out how to do this...I think it's a growing thing, and along the way you learn and try not to be ashamed of your experiences but to own them...as a first-generation student TRIO helps me because they help me figure out my main plan...how to set up my schedule, set me up with the right advisor and the right people to lead me and guide me through.

Social Interaction

Being successful in college not only requires a sense of academic ability, but also was predicated on one's capacity to adjust to the social norms or culture college life demands. Simple operations, such as dealing with registering for classes, financial assistance, obtaining books, tutoring, cooperative learning assignments, and appropriate engagement with faculty regarding lessons, as well as assignments, were areas in which a degree of social engagement was critical to one's success. Social interaction was one of the areas which 35% of students participating in this study identified as one of the major challenges as they pursued a baccalaureate degree. Interestingly, an equal number of participants from both universities cited this as a major challenge. Angel, Jerry, Debra, and Amelia, all students of U1, shared similar sentiments, stating that while in college they had to find a balance between hanging out with friends and focusing on their studies. Angel's struggle with social interaction was clear in her statement, "you kind of have to adapt to making new friends." She further went on to comment that she "weeded out a lot of friends. I felt hat we weren't really compatible to be friends . . . whether it was

drinking a lot, going to places all the time or doing drugs, that just wasn't my style."

Conversely, Debra shared commentary that many other college students, especially those who are only children, might identify with as well:

College life was very different, adjusting was hard because I went from being an only child to almost having to deal with everyone! It was at a very fast pace...I got here and I'm like I have a roommate. I have to share a room with this person and I can't have my own room...it really took a toll on me. People don't have to talk to you, in college people can walk right past you and be like, whatever I am focused on me. If you don't figure yourself out first or second semester you literally may not ever come back. If I don't know who I am floating around with majors and these people do this and I don't do that or I don't identify with these groups...its survival of the fittest.

Whitney, Maggie, Victoria, and April, all students from U2, shared similar sentiments regarding their challenges with social interaction on campus. However, their challenges with social interaction had more to do with "racial tension," as April stated,

My first year there was a lot of racial discrimination on campus...you could feel the tension between people who are different...there's a division between the White kids that sit on one side of the room and the Black kids sit on the other side. You don't need all this tension, we can come to an agreement and that's why we are here at this institution to learn and see different aspects.

Strangely, Victoria felt similar "racial tension." However, as an African American student she felt isolation from both Black and White students. She shared her biggest challenge was "adjusting to the atmosphere that was predominantly White."

Consequently, she did not find refuge among other African American students either. In her words, “a lot of them seemed to be really stuck up so this is part of the reason I really wanted to leave freshman year.” Victoria surmised “the Black people were really stuck up, and the White people were really isolated, so I didn’t fit in with anybody, so the social aspect was part biggest challenge, academic-wise I was fine . . . but I didn’t click with anybody.

Family

There were two subjects that emerged within the theme of family as a challenge for first-generation college students in pursuit of a baccalaureate degree. The process of leaving home and missing one’s family was one area with which Pierre, Amelia, Amber, and Samantha struggled. Amelia, a Hispanic American student at U1, found it “hard emotionally” to be away from her family. Amelia thought of eating food on campus as “hard” due to the differences in cultural meals, including seasonings. She went on to state “at home my mom cooks every day, I miss my brothers, but when I act like I am strong when I talk to them.” Pierre recalled what he identified as his “toughest experience”:

Leaving my parents...my parents are my best friends. When I first left I was pumped and excited and scared all at the same time. I was sitting in my car on the way up here right when we got on the exit from my town I realized that I wasn’t going to be staying in my bed anymore. I wasn’t going to be able to wake up to mom. I wasn’t going to be able to joke with my dad and I broke down and started bawling like a baby...that was the toughest thing, them my puppies and my cat. I didn’t want to leave them alone either.

Amber and Samantha simply stated that they “missed being home.” They did not provide as much commentary, however the sentiment and level of seriousness was still felt during the interviews.

The second area that emerged regarding family as a challenge was feeling ill-prepared for college because they did not know what to expect. Taron, Debra, Maggie, and Nicole were among the students in this study who clearly identified this as a point of contention for them. Debra provided a more concise response about not being “warned” about college life, while Maggie offered detailed comments. Maggie stated “no one in my family really knew what it was like to be at a university and then also be away from home . . . no one could help me in that aspect of knowing how to adapt to being here.”

When people were able to observe behaviors that led to success, then often those observers were more likely to practice similar behaviors that led to their success as well (Nichols & Sanchez-Ramos, 2007). First-generation college students were not privy to observing behaviors that warranted college success among their parents. Unfortunately, some students, such as Amber and Nicole had the added pressure of dealing with parental guardians who were ill. This caused another degree of worry while, in Debra’s words, also wishing they “had a parent who went or someone in my family or friends who went to college and said hey this is what it is like, this is what you look for, this was my experience.” As a student who commuted to campus, Taron provided insight regarding the pressures from family when you do not live on campus and commute from the family’s home to school:

I say this every weekend, every weekend-Saturday and Sunday I need to get this work done...then it’s oh we need to do this today and we need to do this

tomorrow and can you drop us off at church and do this and it just becomes Sunday night when I am starting my homework and it's like where did the weekend go?

Summary

Chapter Four presented results the researcher gathered through empirical data during semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 20 first-generation students from two universities, who were beyond their first year of college and possessed a 2.0 or higher GPA. The researcher interviewed an equal quantity of students from two universities in the Midwest. While students from one university employed the assistance of TRIO student support services, first-generation students from the second university did not have such programs available to them. The researcher noticed that while there was no significant difference in the challenges and perceptions of the two subgroups of first-generation college students, involvement in TRIO assisted them in coping with, as well as overcoming, challenges much easier than those without TRIO support. In Chapter Five the researcher provides conclusions, suggestions for further research, and recommendations that may empower colleges and universities to retain more of their first-generation college students in an effort to increase the baccalaureate degree attainment rate of this student population.

Chapter Five: Summary and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gather qualitative data to enhance the body of research regarding first-generation college students who persist towards completing baccalaureate degrees. In this study, the term ‘persisting’ referred to first-generation students who were beyond their first year of college. This qualitative study involved data from a total of 20 first-generation students from two universities located in the Midwest. The researcher gathered empirical data to ascertain the challenges of first-generation students who persisted toward the completion of a baccalaureate degree. Two generational cohorts of first-generation college students were included in this study in an effort to provide a comparative analysis of those involved with TRIO student support services with those not receiving support from such programs. Ten first-generation college students from each university participated in this study. To be included in the study, participants from both universities met the following criteria: (a) they must have attended college as a traditional college student (ages 18-21); (b) possess a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA; (c) participants were students whose parents did not complete postsecondary education; and (d) classified as college sophomores, juniors, or seniors.

The three questions that guided the direction of this research, as well as a brief synopsis of the researcher’s findings are as follows:

1. (a) What were the college experiences of first-generation students at two universities related to persistence toward the completion of a baccalaureate degree: and (b) in what ways does TRIO provide support?

The researcher found that both sets of first generation college students shared similar experiences related to persisting toward the completion of baccalaureate degrees.

Adjusting to academic rigor was by far the most commonly challenge among both sets of students at U1 and U2 in their academic pursuits. TRIO provided support to students at U2 by offering tutors, mentors and peer support sessions. Whereas first generation college students at U1 were not provided academic support specifically geared towards this generational cohort. Additionally, students at U2 seemed to experience greater financial difficulty, which may simply be indicative of the increased expense incurred as a student of that university. Participants of TRIO at U2 were offered stipends, scholarships and grant opportunities to assist them with continuing their education. Also noteworthy was the common experiences that both sets of students had with parental and family. Having parents, other family, and friends who did not fully understand the academic demands nor the culture of college seemed to be a disadvantage for the sample of students at both U1 and U2. However, interaction with TRIO support staff and other students involved in TRIO seemed to help students at U2 persist through this challenge by providing a structured support system.

2. What kinds of supports do first-generation college students perceive as helpful as they persist in pursuing a baccalaureate degree?

Considering the various accounts of students who indicated that financial assistance provided through TRIO served as a means for them to continue their education, the researcher found this to be most helpful to first generation college students in their pursuit of their baccalaureate degrees. Staying on campus rather than with family off campus also seemed to be helpful to both sets of first generation college students, in that they were less deterred or sidetracked by family or friends who did not fully understand the necessity for increased study time and other academic demands. A formal

support group such as the faculty and student meetings mandatory for those involved in TRIO seemed to have a positive effect on the educational outcomes of first generation students at U2. Although students at U2 experienced some challenges with not having family and friends who understood college culture and the academic demands indicative of completing a college degree, the relationships as well as the workshops provided through TRIO made it easier for students at U2 to persist.

3. Were there differences between the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college students with TRIO support and those without?

There were slight difference between the experiences and perceptions of first generation college students with and without TRIO support. An equal number of participants from both universities experienced difficulty with social interactions. Making new friends, balancing academic responsibilities and socializing with peers both on and off campus seemed to be a challenge for both sets of students. Students at U2 seemed to have additional concerns with racial tension on campus, which made being away from home more difficult and having TRIO support all the more important in their quest for baccalaureate degrees. In addition to social interactions, adjusting to the academic rigor required during the pursuit of a baccalaureate degree from a four year university was an experience that 50% of the sample students at U1 and 60% of the students at U2 characterized as a major challenge as first generation undergraduate students.

Through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, the researcher was able to ascertain empirical data that represented the thoughts, ideas, challenges, and perspectives of two different groups of first-generation college students from two similar universities.

Interviews were retrospective, as all students were upper-class college students who completed at least one year of college at a four-year university. This chapter provides background of the researcher, review of methodology, discussion of results, recommendations, and suggestions for further research.

Review of Methodology

In order to determine the challenges and perceptions of persisting first-generation college students, it was necessary to gather empirical data, therefore the qualitative research method was the most suitable. Qualitative methodology is acutely useful in studying views and perceptions because of its emphasis on meaning, interpretation, interactions, and subjective experiences (Daly, 1992). Hence, the researcher interviewed an equal number of participants from two universities located in the Midwest. The researcher conducted interviews ranging from approximately 30-60 minutes in length with 10 students from both U1 and U2, on their respective campuses. With the exception of two interviews, which the researcher conducted over the phone, participants were involved in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The researcher asked each participant approximately 21 questions. Sixty-five percent of students interviewed were African American, while 30% were White, and 5% were Hispanic. Additionally, of those first-generation students interviewed, 20% were sophomores, 40% juniors, and 45% of the total population was enrolled in the senior year of college. The researcher conducted interviews held on each respective campus in areas where there was minimal noise, so they could be audiotaped. Interviews provided the researcher with opportunities to gather empirical data about the challenges of being and persisting as a first-generation student. Each interview ranged from approximately 30-60 minutes long. The researcher used

participants' pseudonyms when transcribing interviews to maintain confidentiality. Audiotapes allowed the researcher to transcribe and further analyze participants' responses by affording the researcher the opportunity to listen to and re-listen, where necessary, as well as transcribe data to further understand the context of each provided response. Each participant signed an Informed Consent Form before the interview began, which authorized the researcher to audiotape, transcribe, and use data for reporting purposes. After conducting interviews with each participant, the researcher listened to, transcribed, and read through each interview while using a highlighter to note common and/or recurring themes related to challenges first-generation college students had as they persisted towards completing baccalaureate degrees (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009).

Discussion of Results

The researcher used a small purposeful sample, consisting of 20 first-generation college students from two universities to gather empirical data regarding challenges that this generational cohort experienced while in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees. The researcher interviewed a total of 55% African Americans, 40% Whites, and 25% Hispanics. Thirty-five percent of students interviewed were sophomores, 45% were juniors, and 20% were in their senior year of college. During interviews various challenges emerged, however transportation, money, adjusting to academic rigor, social interaction, and family were the most dominant. Fifteen percent of those interviewed cited money as a challenge, while 20% identified transportation as the major challenge. Social interaction was a challenge that 35% of those interviewed faced. The two largest areas of concern for first-generation college students participating in this study were adjusting to academic rigor and family (Figure 6).

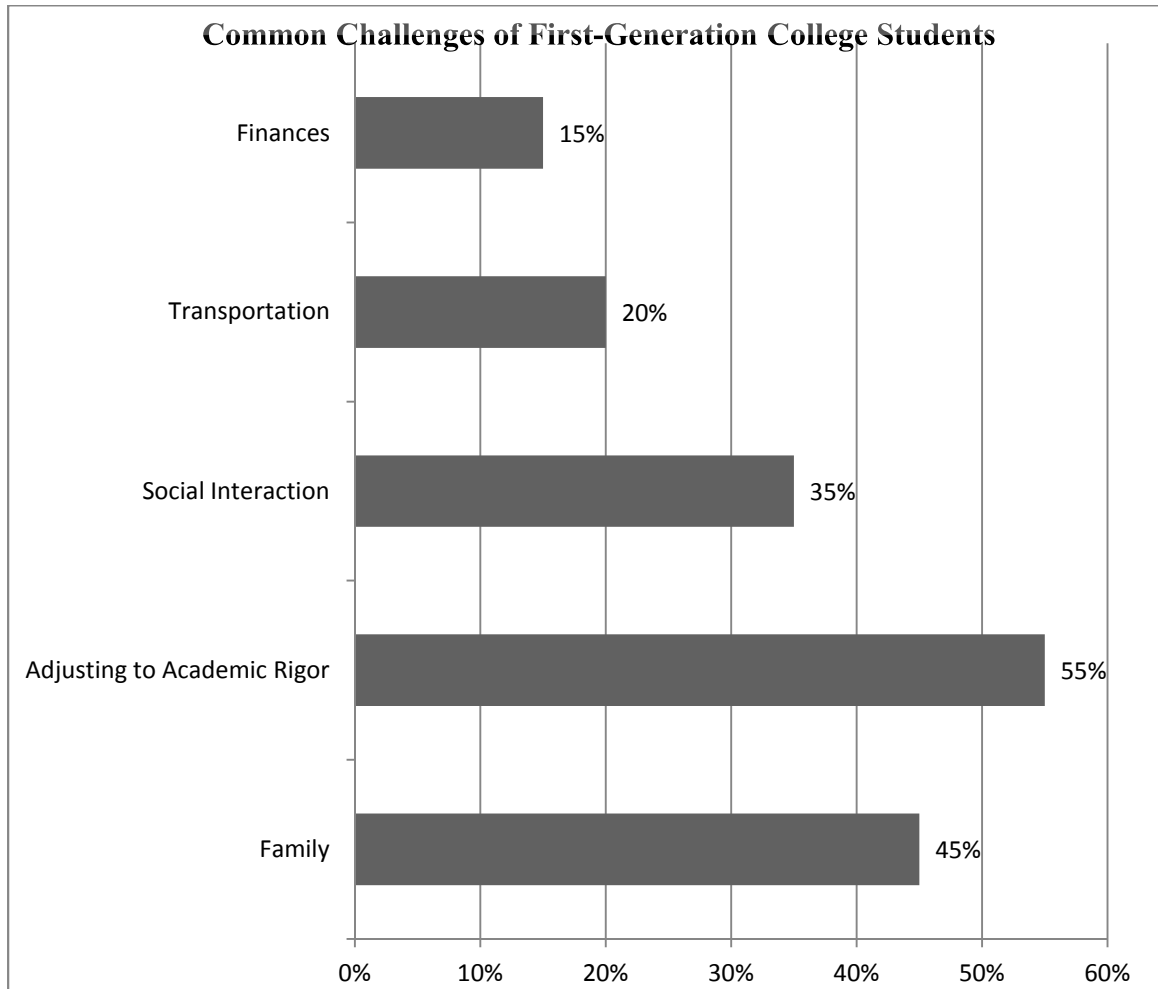


Figure 6. Common challenges of first-generation students

Implications

Students who possessed the desire to pursue degrees of higher education irrespective of their socioeconomic or generational status benefitted even more from completing degrees of higher education due to being first in their immediate family to complete such a journey. Being the first in the family to complete a baccalaureate degree may motivate others in their family to do the same, while also raising the bar on their own socioeconomic status.

There were a number of implications that arose through this study. In order to increase the number of first-generation graduates, a degree of sensitivity and assistance is necessary. According to Terenzini et al. (1996), “institutions will have to change if they are to become more hospitable and accommodating to the learning needs of first generation student” (p. 17). First-generation students were reported to engage in socializing with professors less than non-first generation college students and felt less welcomed by instructors in college (Terenzini et al., 1996). Instructors need to communicate expectations, such as grading practices, late work policies, and other pertinent information to students clearly, to help ensure student success (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Robinson, 2004). First-generation students particularly benefitted from having instructors who created a sense of belonging and were aware of the unique challenges they faced without pacifying unproductive behaviors or ill quality work; yet encouraged excellence and helped them succeed in their academic endeavors.

It is also important not to only pay attention to the challenges that these student bring. Rather, it is vital that professionals recognize the assets, the hopes, and dreams that are central to these students’ experiences. The pull of home is significant. As the needs of family members may draw students to attend to issues at home, faculty members and student affairs advisors should be sensitive to the complex and deep relationship that manifest in these students’ lives. (Brandbury & Mather, 2009, p. 277).

Coupled with receiving lower degrees of support or reassurance from family members, first-generation college students needed more support from faculty and staff at institutions of higher education. Unfortunately, this generational cohort also reported

experiencing discrimination and higher levels of disconnection from non-first generation students, professors, and staff (Ishitani, 2003; Gofen, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The level of 'educational ethos', a term which describes the level of faculty interaction with students, as well as the quality of instruction and the way students feel about how they fit in, was a necessary element that institutions of higher education needed to consider to help raise the attrition rate of first-generation college students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Faculty and staff at colleges and universities need to examine the level of sensitivity and knowledge regarding current diverse population of students including their first generation population. Serious assessments of programs and services that support attrition particularly among first-generation college students are necessary. Moreover, colleges and universities need to create, and implement action plans and services that assist this generation cohort with completing bachelor's degrees as well as other degrees of higher education.

Interestingly, much to their credit, researchers indicated that once first-generation college students solidified a major and completed the first year of college, their critical thinking skills were not different than their non-first generation classmates, and they were more likely to complete their degree of study (Domingo et al., 2006; Ishitani, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996). These findings suggested that while first generation college students did not have the support of their families, they could achieve degrees of higher education with the right amount of tenacity and support. For instance, first-generation college students were more likely to spend time in the library studying than they were to receive feedback from instructors (Terenzini et al., 1996). This information indicated

that this generational cohort had the desire to learn and possessed the academic intensity needed to complete degrees of higher education.

Additionally, assisting first-generation college students with solidifying a major was critical as research indicated that those who did not do so within their first year tended to discontinue shortly thereafter (Terenzini et al., 1996). Students who were undecided in their major had a more difficult time completing college degrees due to their lack of focus on a career, which was the ultimate goal for many college graduates (Dietz, 2010). Therefore assisting students who are undecided in their major to discover their passion or career focus so that they will declare a major will also increase the attrition rate of first-generation college students. Colleges and universities may find it beneficial to employ the use of technological instruments such as the Holland Code, a career model assessment that measures skills and interest in order to more effectively assist first-generation college students with solidifying a major. On-campus resources such as the offices of Career and Employment Services might serve as portals for helping students in this critical area of their academic career.

Further, inadequate financial aid can interfere with a student's academic and social interactions, and working more than 15 hours per week has a negative impact on student's academic and social growth, particularly in the first year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Providing more financial assistance through grants, scholarships, and educational stipends might benefit first-generation college students, as well. Research indicated that a students' level of persistence beyond the first year of college was also deterred by their commute to campus daily (Bradbury & Mather, 2009;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Greater financial support could curtail the issue of commuting to campus, as students would be better able to afford on-campus housing.

In spite of the host of challenges first-generation college students faced, colleges and universities can employ the use of strategies that elevates their chances for completing degrees of higher education. Managing course enrollment and achievement through documenting the progression of first-generation students is an approach colleges and university may employ to assist their population of first-generation college students in completing degrees of higher education (Robinson, 2004). As the academic global revolution continues, it is imperative that obtaining a college degree become less illusive for first-generation college students and become more obtainable.

Recommendations for Future Studies

According to a study conducted by Terenzini et al. (1996), there was not a great deal of information pertaining to first-generation college students as it relates to their experiences while working to complete degrees of higher education. Several of the limitations in this study direct the recommendations for future studies needed to increase the volume of information pertaining to this generational cohort. The data from this study represented a small, non-random, purposeful sample represented in a single state. Further research regarding first-generation college students should be conducted at multiple colleges and universities throughout the Midwest. Incorporating institutions of higher education in various states will also produce a wider scope of the challenges this generational cohort experiences as they persist towards completing bachelor's degrees. In an effort for the results to be generalizable to a greater population of students, collecting data in various areas where there is more diversity will provide an array of

challenges not derived from this study. Including a qualitative study in colleges and universities that were located in both urban and rural settings may also provide a different perspective of this issue.

Additionally, the researcher gathered qualitative data from students pursuing baccalaureate degrees in varying stages. The researcher suggests that a similar study that includes first-generation college students who were classified as seniors and those pursuing graduate degrees be conducted. This will also expand the depth of research on this generational cohort beyond earning an initial college degree.

Participants of the study were required to have a minimum GPA of 2.0 because academic success served a precursor to completing degrees of higher education (Ishtanti, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additionally, since participants were beyond their first year of college, this study did not address the challenges and perceptions of freshman or nontraditional first-generation college students. Two recommendations of study emerged from this limitation; researchers should (1) gather qualitative data on first year first-generation college students will provide a greater understanding of why this specific generational cohort tends to have a higher rate of attrition; (2) gather qualitative data on nontraditional first-generation college students geared towards understanding their motives for attending college and their attrition rate, as well.

The income guidelines of participants were a limitation as well. While participants at U2 involved in TRIO were required to meet specific federal income guidelines to qualify. First-generation college students at U2 were not obligated to meet such guidelines to participate in this study. Therefore this data compares first-generation students who meet specific guidelines to those who do not meet the same income or

socioeconomic guidelines. Designing and implementing a study in which all participants were from similar socioeconomic backgrounds will also provide further analysis of first-generation students, and give additional insight into their challenges. A longitudinal study of the challenges and perceptions of first-generation college students who persist beyond their first year of college would also shed light on both challenges and provide information as to how this generational cohort overcomes these challenges throughout each semester. More elaborate studies which include collection of qualitative and quantitative data, such as comparative analysis of the graduation rates of this generational cohort would assist institutions of higher education in providing more adequate programming and services to assist first-generation college students in completing baccalaureate and other degrees of higher education.

Summary

The American Graduation Initiative (2009) recognized the importance of United States' citizens receiving post-secondary degrees. The statement "in an increasingly competitive world economy, America's economic strength depends upon the education and skills of its workers," (p. 1) spoke volumes as to the relevance degrees in higher education had to the economy. According to Altbach et al. (2010) the best jobs and fastest growing firms, will gravitate to countries with a highly qualified workforce. A highly qualified workforce describes those who are college-educated or have professional training through a trade school. A significant amount of high school graduates will continue to fill the classes of universities all around the world. Many of these students will be first-generation college students. Unfortunately, too many students in this population discontinued college after their freshman year. Some felt overwhelmed by the

academic rigor required of colleges and universities, while others succumbed to the family pressures or became unable to afford to complete baccalaureate degrees.

Conversely, there were some first-generation college students who persisted after their first year of college and eventually obtained their bachelor's degree. This group of students defied the odds and went on to be the first in their generation to complete a post-secondary degree, within their families. Granted, there were some students who had the support of structured services on campus, such as TRIO, while others did not.

Nevertheless, both groups of first-generation college students were either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to persist toward the completion of their bachelor's degree. In the age of No Child Left Behind, it was imperative that first-generation college students do not get left behind as well. Since higher education is one of the cornerstones of our society, students who decide to pursue higher education need to be supported in their endeavors.

During the time of this study, qualitative research on sources of the challenges and perceptions that propel this unique group of students to persist in obtaining post-secondary degrees were lacking and needed greater analysis. Therefore, the goal of this study was to compliment the body of research aimed at empowering colleges and universities with knowledge, which will help retain this generation of students and assist them being first in their family to graduate with a degree of higher education. Obtaining degrees of higher education often strengthens a person's academic and social status. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of first-generation college students discontinued pursuing baccalaureate degrees after the first year of college, and some researchers argue our system of higher education should treat all students the same

irrespective their socioeconomic, generational status, and other differences (Mahoney, 1998). Perpetuating and operating from this frame of thought would only diminish the purpose of education, and dismiss the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which speaks to the quality of education not being truncated based on place of residence, sex, income, or race (U.S. Constitution, amendment 14 S 1)

This study concurred with former research which indicated that the decisions of first-generation college students to discontinue shortly after beginning their college degrees was caused due to various reasons. The limited support from parents and other family members, lack of support services specifically designed to meet the unique challenges of this population of students, and challenges regarding communication with, as well as receiving help from, instructors or other college faculty were among those reasons (Billson & Terry, 1982; Ishitani, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, despite the numerous challenges first-generation students have, students involved in this study proved that it was possible for first-generation college students to persist beyond their first year of college in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees. Tebbs and Turner (2005) summarized an “assessment of institutional policies in the recruitment and retention of low-income students needs to be carried out in a manner that takes into account differences in the underlying pools of potential students” (p. 41). As college enrollment rates increase, so too does the number of first-generation students who begin their journey to complete degrees of higher education. It is important for colleges and universities to employ practices that will help raise degree completion rate of students in this population. The possibility of achieving degrees of higher education is equally, or more so important, to first-generation college students as being first in their family to

obtain baccalaureate degrees aides in inspiring other family members to pursue degrees of higher education and propel them into greater opportunities for academic, economic, and social advancement.

Background of and Reflection by Researcher

I spent the early years of my life with my mother and sister, living in comforts of our grandparents' home. My grandparents prided themselves on having a house that served as a beacon to our large family. Out of the 28 grandchildren my grandparents have, only five of us completed a baccalaureate degree. My sister and I are among those five who completed post-secondary degrees. My sister is the first in our family to complete a doctorate of any nature. However, it was not an easy road. Unfortunately, there are times that we pay the price in our family for completing and further pursuing degrees of higher education. For example, some of our relatives call us "snowflakes" and accuse us of "acting White" because in their opinion our educational endeavors makes us "like White-folks" and college was not for "real" Black people. Quite frankly, I clearly disagree with their assessment.

Although we grew up in the same household with our cousins, many of them either started college and did not finish or didn't pursue a post-secondary degree at all. Sometimes I wonder if the fact that my mother completed a college degree, while her parents, sisters, and brothers did not was truly a factor in assisting my sister and I to complete degrees of higher education. While our mother is quite the academic and professional in her field, I cannot say that she forced us to go to college. However, she was supportive in our educational endeavors through verbal encouragement and financial support when needed. At the same time, my personal desires to make a positive impact

in the field of higher education specifically helped me to overcome the challenges of obtaining degrees of higher education for many years.

As a beginning college student my challenges were not unique as compared to other first-year and first-generation students. During my first year of college my poor academic standing forced me to discontinue pursuing a baccalaureate degree. I lacked focus, did not have a definitive major, and the general studies courses were disinteresting so I did not place a great deal of energy in them. Although my mother had completed a college degree and I saw her work every day, even at home during her “off” hours, the value and knowledge of what it took to obtain a college degree was not visible to me at the time. During the time in which I discontinued college I began working at a summer camp for inner-city youth. I loved working with children so much so that I wanted to become an elementary school teacher, which became the impetus I needed to get me back in college. This time around I became much more involved in campus activities through working with the Student Government Association at my college and other on-campus activities. I sought help from instructors and acquired tutors when needed. Being more actively engaged on campus assisted me in obtaining my goal of earning a baccalaureate degree in Elementary Education and I began teaching in inner-city schools. One semester after completing my baccalaureate degree I began pursuing a Master’s of Educational Leadership. At the time I entertained the thought of becoming a principal of an elementary or middle school. Little did I know that my course of study would lead me to teaching in higher education. I loved it! Because I believe that you should do your best to finish what you start, I completed my master’s degree but instead of focusing my efforts on elementary education, I decided to focus on adult education. The same year

that I started working in higher education I began my journey of completing a Doctorate of Educational Leadership from Lindenwood University.

Needless to say, I am often amazed at how far I have come. While working on this dissertation I was an adjunct professor at Saint Louis Community College, which is a career field that I did not fathom being in when I first began my educational journey. Working to empower adult learners to further their education in an effort to experience a higher quality of life is extremely rewarding. I still love children and continue to work to help increase their quality of education through working with their parents and teachers who seek to educate them. I often feel that I am living a dream that in the words of Colin Powell “took sweat, determination and hard work.”

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Appendices

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

I, _____ state that I am 18 years of age or older and that I voluntarily agree to participate in a research project conducted by ClauDean Kizart, Doctoral Candidate, Lindenwood University, St. Charles, Missouri.

This research is being conducted in order to ascertain knowledge regarding challenges and perceptions of persisting first generation college students, with or without the support of TRIO, to complete their baccalaureate degree. Participants will be required to participate in an interview in a secure location on campus. The discussion will be audio taped in order to allow transcription and analysis. The interview will last for approximately 60-90 minutes.

I acknowledge that the researcher, ClauDean Kizart, has explained the task to me fully; has informed me that I may withdraw from participation at any time without losing the \$5.00 Subway gift card offered to me as a token of appreciation. Further, I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions that I have concerning the research procedure. The researcher has assured me that any information that I give will be used for research purposes only and will be kept confidential.

I understand that any use of the audiotape of this interview will not be used for purposes that are not directly related to research venues, such as presentations in meetings or

conferences open to the public or press, without my further written consent. I also understand that the researcher will never include information in ways wherein I can be directly identified – my participation will be kept confidential from the public. I also acknowledge that the benefits derived from, my participation have been fully explained to me. I have been promised, upon attendance and at the beginning of participation in the interview a \$5.00 gift card from Subway as a token of my appreciation.

Any questions about this study following time of participation may be directed to:

ClauDean Kizart, Doctoral Candidate, Lindenwood University at

ck676@lionmail.lindenwood.edu [—] or Dr. Shane Williamson, the Dissertation Chair at

swilliamson@lindenwood.edu . My signature below indicates that I fully understand and

agree with all information provided in this consent form.

Print Name

Signature

___/___/___

Date

Appendix B**Invitation e-mail to Participants at University 1**

DATE

Dear _____:

I write today to ask for your assistance in gathering data for my research on persisting first generation college students at U1. First generation students are defined as: (A) individuals whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (B) 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, 2011). Expanding the knowledge base of first generation college students who persist beyond their first year of college to obtain baccalaureate degrees will help improve services to first generation students across the country.

Because you are a first generation student who successfully completed their first year of college, you are part of a select group invited to participate in a doctoral dissertation study. This study will be conducted by ClauDean Kizart, Ed.D. candidate at Lindenwood University.

Your participation in this study can directly benefit other first generation students at U1 as well as others like you across the country because: (1) it will help better understand the specific needs/experiences of persisting first generation college students like yourself as

they work toward a baccalaureate degree, and (2) it will also specifically help U1 student services evaluate its service in light of the research findings.

Participation in this study consists of a 60-90 minute interview at a time and mutually agreeable quiet location convenient to you such as a library, office area or another secure campus location. Only 10-15 individuals will be selected for this study. The first 10-15 students to respond to this e-mail and complete the 60-90 minute interview will receive a \$5 gift certificate to Subway as a token of appreciation.

If you are interested in participating in this project, please contact ClauDean Kizart at 314-814-6001 or ck676@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

ClauDean Kizart

Ed.D. Candidate

Lindenwood University

Appendix C**Invitation e-mail to Participants in TRIO at University 2**

DATE

Dear _____:

I write today to ask for your assistance in gathering data for my research on persisting first generation college students in TRIO. First generation students are defined as: (A) individuals whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (B) 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, 2011). Expanding the knowledge base of first generation college students who persist beyond their first year of college to obtain baccalaureate degrees will help improve services to first generation students across the country. Because you are a first generation student who successfully completed their first year of college, you are part of a select group invited to participate in a doctoral dissertation study. This study will be conducted by ClauDean Kizart, Ed.D. candidate at Lindenwood University.

Your participation in this study can directly benefit other first generation students in TRIO as well as others like you across the country because: (1) it will help better understand the specific needs/experiences of persisting first generation college students

like yourself as they work toward a baccalaureate degree, and (2) it will also specifically help TRIO evaluate its service to students in light of the research findings.

Participation in this study consists of a 60-90 minute interview at a time and mutually agreeable quiet location convenient to you such as a library, office area or another secure campus location. Only 10-15 individuals will be selected for this study. The first 10-15 students to respond to this e-mail and complete the 60-90 minute interview will receive a \$5 gift certificate to Subway as a token of appreciation.

If you are interested in participating in this project, please contact ClauDean Kizart at 314-814-6001 or ck676@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

ClauDean Kizart

Ed.D. Candidate

Lindenwood University

Appendix D

Follow-Up e-mail for Confirmed Interview

Hi _____:

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study. Your assistance is greatly appreciated. Please know that to ensure the anonymity of all participants' each person will be assigned a pseudonym to be used throughout the process. For the duration of this study your pseudonym will be _____.

To complete your participation please provide me your updated phone number. I will contact you to set up an interview at a time and mutually agreeable quiet location convenient to you such as a library, office area or another secure campus location.

Thanks again for agreeing to participate in this study. Please do not hesitate to contact me at ck676@lionmail.lindenwood.edu or 314-814-6001 with any questions you might have.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best Regards,

ClauDean Kizart

Ed.D. Candidate

Lindenwood University

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Interviewer statement: This interview will be recorded to ensure the accuracy of data documentation by the Primary Investigator. The Primary Investigator will not use your name throughout the interview to ensure your anonymity. However, the pseudonym we discussed prior to our interview will be used in place of your name. Only you and the Primary Investigator, ClauDean Kizart, Ed. D candidate at Lindenwood University will have knowledge of the person each pseudonym applies to. The audio recording of this interview will be replayed only by the Primary Investigator and a transcriptionist to document accurate responses during data collection. The recordings are kept in a secure location to ensure confidentiality.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Questions (specific names of universities were removed and replaced with pseudonym)

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself focusing on your upbringing and rationale for pursuing a baccalaureate degree?
2. Describe the steps you took to decide your academic major.
3. Discuss your experiences with TRIO, particularly as it relates to helping you as a first generation college student? **(U2 TRIO question only)**
 - Probing: What types of support did this program provide?
 - Academic?
 - Social?
 - Other?

4. Discuss you're (a.) academic (b.) social (c.) personal experiences at **U1**, particularly as a first generation college student. **(U1 question only)**
5. Discuss you're (a.) academic (b.) social (c.) personal experiences particularly as a first generation college student. **(U2 TRIO question only)**
6. Do you think there is a relationship between participation with TRIO services and your decision to continue pursuing your baccalaureate degree after your first year of college? Explain. **(U2 TRIO question only)**
7. Share with me your involvement with any extracurricular activities/programs on or off campus (e.g. social fraternity/sorority, student clubs/groups, leadership training, etc.)?
8. If you were not involved in any, can you discuss why you were not involved in extracurricular activities/programs on or off campus?
9. Can you discuss your experiences in and out of the classroom with faculty and staff?
 - Probing: What types of experiences did you have with faculty members?
10. Describe your most challenging experiences adjusting to college.
 - Probing: How did you overcome these challenges?
11. How have your family and friends adjusted to your life as a college student?
 - Probing: Were your parents/family members supportive of your decision to attend college? Were friends?
12. Do most of your closest friends go to college? If not what did they do?
 - Probing: If so, where?
13. How would you describe your relationship with your family and friends in terms of supporting your decision to continue pursuing your baccalaureate degree?
14. Does going to college change/strain your relationship with family or friends? If so, how do you cope with this change/strain?
15. Socially, who do you spend the most time with when on campus? How did you meet/become involved with this person/group/activity?

16. Describe how you pay for college.
 - Probing: Did you rely on any other means of financial resources outside the traditional loans, grants, FWS offered through other family, friends, the institutional financial aid package (e.g. credit cards, parent loans)?
17. Who has the greatest influence on your persistence as it relates to continuing college past the first year? (social/cultural/ capital)
 - Probing: How do they influence you?
18. Describe the types of employment you have had since starting college?
 - Probing: Did/do these jobs add value to your academic experiences? Did/do they distract you from your educational goals?
19. Data suggests that first generation college students as a group tend to drop out after their first year of college. Do you have any opinions as to why this might be the case?
20. If you could give one piece of advice to a first generation student who was beginning his/her journey toward a baccalaureate degree, what would it be?
21. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Vitae

ClauDean Kizart received a Bachelor's of Science Degree in Elementary Education with a minor in Social Studies from Harris-Stowe State University. She completed coursework towards her Masters of Education in Administration from Saint Louis University in May 2007. After beginning her teaching career, she obtained a reading certification from Fontbonne University.

ClauDean Kizart spent her teaching career in the Saint Louis public and charter school system as both a lead teacher and mentor in the Beginning Teacher Assistance program. She served in elementary and middle school classrooms as a Communication Arts, reading, and social studies teacher for a span of 10 years. She began working as an adjunct instructor at Saint Louis Community College in 2008, where she continues to teach Developmental Reading and college orientation courses. In addition to serving at the community college, she dedicates time towards mentoring first year and other emerging teachers as an Educational Consultant.