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Examining the Teacher Perceptions, Implementations, Barriers, and Benefits Associated with the Missouri Reading Initiative

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Exploring First-Generation Students at Midwestern University and Why They Persist to Graduation

by

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at Lindenwood University by the School of Education

Dr. Susan Isenberg, Dissertation Chair	Date
Dr. Deb Ayres, Committee Member	Date
Dr. Paige Mettler-Cherry, Committee Member	Date

Declaration of Originality

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

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of first-generation college students and learn why they believed they persisted to graduation. First-generation students are students whose parents did not attend college. Research literature on the topic reflects a the concern for first-generation students and their decreased likelihood of graduating college but the problem is there is a lack of information exploring why first-generation students believe they persisted to graduation. The research questions were: Who are the first-generation students at Midwestern University (MWU) who have persisted to graduation as measured by those who applied to graduate? When comparing first-generation students to non-first-generation, what are the similarities and differences between MWU students who complete degree programs? Based on MWU first-generation student responses to interview questions, are there patterns that emerge among first-generation students who persist to graduation? Participants of this study were students enrolled at MWU in the winter and spring terms of 2012, were enrolled in the final two terms of their degree program, and had submitted a degree application for May 2012 graduation. Qualitative methodology was used for this study using data gained from a demographic survey and individual interviews.

Using qualitative methodology, data was collected from 220 demographic surveys and 22 face-to-face interviews. A statistical z-test was conducted on the demographic survey and the interviews were transcribed and analyzed through axial and open coding which identified themes related to why participants persisted to graduation. Seven themes emerged among first-generation participants related to first-generation students' persistence to graduation: college preparedness, encouragement, adjustment, choice of

major, faculty interaction, financial impact, and personal awareness. The salient finding revealed that first-generation students need encouragement in achieving their goal of degree attainment and in understanding and overcoming obstacles. Encouragement from family, faculty, staff, and course colleagues positively influenced first-generation students and was the main reason they persisted to graduation. Universities may benefit from repeating this research and comparing the results in addition to following first-generation freshman cohorts. Programs designed for first-generation students, including programs for families of those first-generation students were recommended as future initiatives.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the Study

Institutions of higher education are held to standards of academic effectiveness by analysis of student retention and persistence to graduation rates. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools is one of six accrediting bodies at the Post-Secondary level and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is one of two independent commissioned members who "accredit degree-granting, post-secondary educational institutions in the north-central region of the country" (Furst-Bowe, 2011, p. 1). Institutions of higher education are expected by HLC to maintain retention data and analyze the information to identify deficiencies and take steps to make improvements in retaining students and encourage persistence to graduation (Furst-Bowe, 2011). Student retention rate is defined as the number of students who begin a college or university and persist from term to term (Seidman, 2005) while persistence to graduation rate is defined as students who academically persist and progress to graduation (Seidman, 2005). College Board (2010) is a non-profit organization which offers associated membership with colleges and universities and provides college entrance testing and planning that contributes to college student success and completion. College Board uses six years as a benchmark for rate of completion and stated in The College Completion Agenda State Policy Guide that only a little over 56% of students attending four-year institutions will graduate in six years or less (College Board, 2010). The percentage of completion rate decreases when focusing specifically on students of color (College Board, 2010). According to Engle, Tinto, and the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (2008),

"Changing national demographics requires a refocus of efforts on improving postsecondary access and success among populations who have previously been underrepresented in higher education" (p. 2).

There are a variety of reasons why students do not remain at the first chosen institution or do not persist to graduation. One reason may be due to choosing a school for the wrong reasons. Students often choose a college or university based on location, athletics, size, finances, and/or friends also attending (Ishitani, 2006). These items identify characteristics of the school, but do not necessarily guarantee a student will feel comfortable or become engaged in their college or university. Pleskac, Keeney, Merrit, Schmitt, and Oswald (2011) conducted a study that identifies unanticipated critical events that cause a student to withdraw. These events include

- recruited by job/ other institution
- unexpected bad grade
- roommate conflicts
- lost financial aid
- clinical depression
- large increase in tuition/living costs (p. 6).

In addition to discussing the characteristics of a college or university and reasons why students decide not to stay, characteristics of the student should also be discussed. Students who attend college come with different levels of education, unique personalities, a variety of expectations of the college experience, and diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Terenzini et al., 1994). Many institutions of higher education choose specific student groups to focus on in relation to student retention. One student

group identified as at-risk is the first-generation student. Previous studies have shown that first-generation students discontinue higher education at a greater rate than students who are not first generation (Engle & Tinto, 2009). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, first-generation students will be the primary focus.

A first-generation student may typically be the first in his or her family to attend college and can be identified as one whose mother and father never attended college with high school as the highest level of education attained (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Murphy and Hicks (2006) identified first-generation students as less academically prepared, less likely to have taken the ACT or SAT, and "at-risk of being academically, socially and economically left behind than non-first-generation students, even when their motivation and academic credentials are equal" (p. 3).

Midwestern University (MWU) is a pseudonym for a private, mid-sized, liberal arts institution, with Presbyterian affiliation. Midwestern University has an enrollment of approximately 17,000 students, which includes students seeking bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees. MWU is located in a suburban area outside St. Louis, Missouri and is considered a residential and commuter school. Students attending MWU are from a variety of areas including both domestic and international (Lindenwood University, 2011a).

Midwestern University uses standard admission criteria to select students—standardized college entrance exam test score, high school GPA, and letters of recommendation. Midwestern University admits a diverse population of students and all are expected to be prepared for college (Lindenwood University, 2011). Even with the expectation of college preparedness, MWU understands that students from

different ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds enter the institution in need of attention and the institution is committed to encouragement of academic and social integration leading to college success (Lindenwood University, 2011). This attention and support may affect not only the commitment to admit, but also the retention of the student and his or her ability to persist to graduation. As an administrative dean, my experience has led to an understanding that a variety of students can also have a variety of issues and obstacles that can hinder academic progress.

As Dean of Student and Academic Support Services (SASS), it is my responsibility to focus on students who may be at risk and to assist students based on individual needs. The SASS department is responsible for student retention and its mission and purpose relates to assisting students and developing programs that encourage them to stay until degree completion. First-generation students were chosen as subjects of this to study based on the connection between first-generation students and lack of retention (Sickles, 2004).

Since 2004, MWU has focused on increasing retention through engagement, attendance monitoring, early intervention, academic accountability, and data tracking (Lindenwood University, 2010). A committee for student retention was formed that resulted in the creation of the SASS department. Retention is monitored through statistical reports representing return rates, academic-hold rates based on academic suspensions, and reports that compare groups within the university and compare MWU retention rates to those of comparable institutions. Assessments of specific student groups allow MWU to monitor and develop programs to improve freshmen

student experiences. Additional assessments allow MWU to compare commuter to resident students, male to female students, international to domestic students, and athlete to non-athlete students.

As part of the selection process, MWU allows some flexibility when considering conditional admission. Students who are fully admitted have met a minimum of a 2.5 high school grade point average (GPA) with a score of 20 on the ACT. Students who fall slightly below these criteria, (earn above a 2.25 high school GPA and a score of 18 or higher on the ACT) may be conditionally admitted. Because previous academic performance is lower than the MWU admission criteria, this student group is viewed as being at-risk academically. Conditionally, admitted students are monitored and required to achieve certain grade results in the first year of attendance. Monitoring of this student group includes attendance review and grade tracking at the four-week grade mark and again at midterm during a typical 16-week semester. Personnel within the SASS department are assigned the mentoring task and meet with these students on a weekly basis. Meetings consist of course and syllabus review, time management and assignment preparation for the semester, and strategies to study and prepare writing assignments. This process allows for early intervention and guidance to appropriate resources. Each student will work with the same mentor for his or her first year of enrollment. A similar process is in place for at-risk first-generation students.

In the fall of 2010, MWU began identifying first-generation students. On a survey, all new students are asked two questions relating to the education level of their parents. The first question specifically asks if either parent attended college. The

second question is a follow-up asking students if their mother or father completed a degree. If students answered no to both questions, they are considered to be first-generation students. This identification of first-generation students allows the SASS personnel and me to track cohort groups related to time of matriculation and to follow their academic progression and retention from term-to-term. Tracking these students not only allows assessment of retention through data tracking, but engages first-generation students in on-going communication and early academic awareness—taking a proactive approach to addressing the at-risk characteristics of a typical first-generation student.

In addition to my professional responsibility for university retention, persistence to graduation, and enrollment management, I too was a first-generation student. My relationship to this topic is a personal one, and my lived experience helped me create questions relating to student success as I experienced it as a first-generation student. After attending many conferences on the topic of first-generation retention, I realized first-generation students are considered at-risk and therefore, a student group worth exploring.

I, like many other first-generation students, decided to go to college without the advantage of parental modeling. My parents married young and neither attended college after high school graduation. When it came time for me to make the decision to continue my education beyond high school years, my parents did not promote college. They did not fully understand the value of a college education and therefore were not prepared for my college experience. There was no special college savings plan for my college education. There were no stories about what to do and what not to

do in college. There were no discussions about college reputations and the choice to attend based on those reputations and no assistance or helpful suggestions about how to prepare for the college entrance exams. All I learned about attending college came from friends and a handful of high school teachers. My parents did not discourage college and were proud of my desire and ability to attend and better my life because of it; however, their lack of knowledge and experience restricted them from setting up an expectation of college life for me.

As I entered college, I was unaware of the disadvantages of first-generation students. I only knew that I was using trial and error to get through the college experience, semester-by-semester. Without financial assistance from my parents, I was forced to work 30-40 hours per week to pay my way through school. I worked 10-20 hours per week on campus and 20-30 hours per week at a local retail department store. Due to the number of hours worked, my academic performance suffered, which did not reflect my true ability; however, I still did what I needed to do to make it scholastically and financially semester-to-semester. My experience may not have been as successful without an attentive advisor and a director of financial aid who listened and assisted me along the way. I was also not afraid to ask questions if I was unsure of what to do or how to do it. I assumed it was my work orientation (values, expectations, and feelings that workers bring to a work situation) (Work Orientation, 2002) and outgoing personality that allowed me to keep moving toward degree completion. It was not until I graduated from college and entered into my current profession that I realized work orientation and personality may not have been the only reasons for my persistence to graduation. Through my professional experience and

research, I have learned about student engagement, early intervention methods, and resources offered to assist the whole student.

Statement of the Problem

First-generation students do not persist to graduation at the same rate as students who are not first generation (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Ishitani, 2006; Murphy & Hicks, 2006). Research literature on the topic reflects a the concern for first-generation students and their decreased likelihood of graduating college but the problem is there is a lack of information exploring why first-generation students believe they persisted to graduation. First-generation students are known to experience greater challenges and barriers than non-first-generation students in college (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Ishitani, 2006; Murphy & Hicks, 2006). Based on the lack of studies found in the literature review, there seems to be a need to investigate why some first–generation students, seemingly against all odds, persist to graduation.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of first-generation students at MWU who complete degree programs. A profile of first-generation students who predictably finish (demographics, backgrounds, and perceived attributes) could be used to (a) predict who among first-generation students will complete a degree and who will not and (b) develop and implement an intervention for those who predictably will not complete a degree once they have matriculated into the university.

I chose a qualitative study design—the best way to understand human behavior and the reasons why people act the way they do is to ask them specifically. The attributes of first-generation students has been well researched (Choy, 1998), but only

from the researchers' perspective. Kuh, Kinzie, and Buckley (2006) described the attributes of the first-generation student as perceived by others and what is needed for all students to be successful. I chose a qualitative study to describe the attributes of the first-generation student as perceived by the first-generation student and what they said they needed to be successful.

The study subjects were first-generation students who had applied for May, 2012 graduation. Because I am employed at the university, the first-generation students from MWU were a purposive and convenience sample. Because exploring the perception of this sample group was important to this study, the qualitative component included face-to-face interviews and a survey to explore demographics and backgrounds. The demographic survey was used as a screening tool to identify first-generation students and provide background information for the face-to-face interviews. The face-to-face interviews were used to explore student perceptions.

Research Questions

1. Who are the first-generation students at Midwestern University who have persisted to graduation as measured by those who applied to graduate?
2. When comparing first-generation students to those who are not first-generation, what are the similarities and differences between Midwestern University students who complete degree programs?
3. Based on Midwestern University first-generation student responses to interview questions, are there themes that emerge among first-generation students who persist to graduation?

4. Are there demographics and background information that emerge among first-generation students who persist?

Definition of Terms

- Traditional student – a student between 18-24 years of age and attends college right after high school graduation (Koehler & Burke, 1996)
- First-generation student – a student whose mother and father never attended college (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998)
- Graduation rate – the percentage of students who begin attending a college or university compared to the number of students who graduate from the same college or university within four, five, and six-year time durations (Seidman, 2005)
- Persist /Persistence– a student's progression from one grade level to the next until completion and/or graduation (Seidman, 2005)
- Retention - students who begin a college or university and persist from term to term (Seidman, 2005)
- Socio-economic – relating to both social and economic factors (Terenzini et al., 1994)

Limitations

There were three limitations to this study:

(a) The demographic survey used to collect data was created for this study; therefore, it has not been proven reliable or valid.

(b) Data gathered through the survey and face-to-face interviews are only as valid and reliable as participants are truthful.

(c) Based on the small size of the volunteer participant sample at one institution, the results cannot be generalized to all first-generation students who persist to graduation.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to explore perceptions of first-generation students at MWU who have persisted to graduation. Knowledge from this study will contribute to the already existing literature, discussions, and studies about why first-generation students do not persist to graduation and offer insight into why they do. While researchers such as Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001) focused on quantitative data describing first-generation college students, this study focused on qualitative data by exploring perceptions of first-generation students through one-on-one interviews to add to the ongoing discussion relating to first-generation students and persistence to graduation.

Chapter Two: Review of Framing Literature

The review of the framing literature explores topics related to first-generation college student completion: definitions of the first-generation student, descriptions of the first-generation student prior to college and during college, and retention.

Defining the First-Generation Student

Experts define the first-generation student in multiple ways. Explaining how a student is identified as first-generation relates more to the education level of the parent. A review of the literature revealed four different definitions of the first-generation college student:

(a) students, "whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less" (Choy, 1998, p. 7)

(b) students "whose parents have *no* college experience" (Darling & Smith, 2007, p. 203)

(c) students whose parents have *some* college experience, but no bachelor's degree (Los Angeles Valley College Office of Research & Planning, 2004)

(d) students whose parents have no bachelor's degree (Sickles, 2004)

The parental level of education is a key element in each of these definitions.

Parents, "not having been to college themselves usually cannot provide their college-bound son or daughter much help with details" (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004, p. 429). Sickles (2004) indicated how first-generation students may want to attend and ultimately graduate college to change their current living status. Attending college will help first-generation students "make it out" or to "break the cycle" (Sickles, 2004). This lack of knowledge about the college experience at home,

leads the college-bound son or daughter to seek college information outside the home. A parent's educational level, socioeconomic status, race, and gender are all things out of the student's control but are known to impact first-generation student success (Warburton et al., 2001).

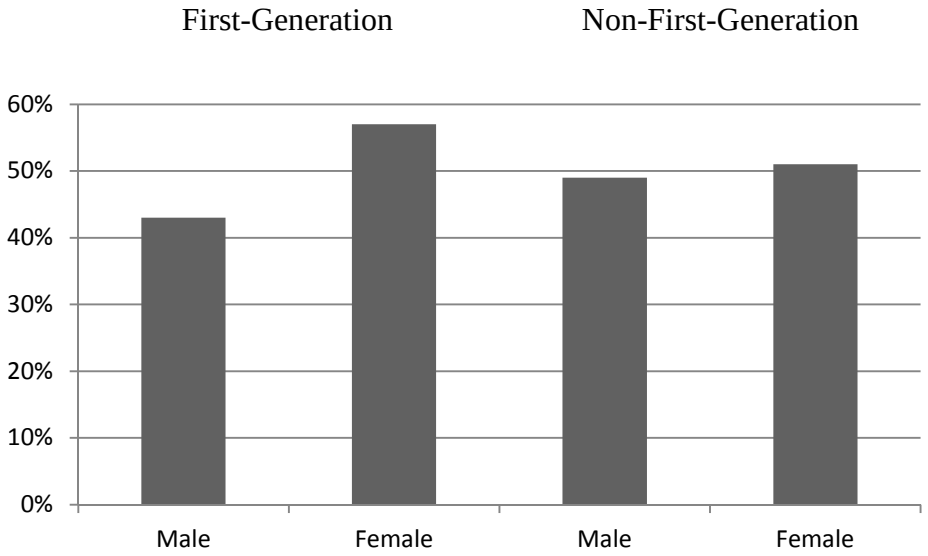
Describing the First-Generation Student Prior to College

Traditionally, first-generation students are perceived to be less prepared and less likely to graduate from college than students who are not first-generation (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Ishitani, 2006; Murphy & Hicks, 2006). The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of first-generation college students on why they persisted to degree completion. Understanding specific demographics backgrounds of first-generation college students was important to understanding the student profile.

Gender. Nunez and Cuccara-Alamin (1998) studied first-generation student characteristics and found first-generation freshmen more likely to be female. The gender difference is much less among non-first-generation freshmen (Nunez & Cuccara-Alamin, 1998). Nunez and Cuccara-Alamin found first-generation students to be 57% female and 43% male versus non-first-generation students who were 51% female and 49% male (see Table 1).

Table 1

First-Generation to Non-First-Generation Student Comparison by Gender



Capriccioso (2006) reported 6% of the freshman population in the participating sample as first-generation. Within that 6%, the number of female students was over 2% higher than male students. Bennett (2011) provided some insight into why there are a higher number of female first-generation students than male. Bennett (2011) stated, "Women now surpass men in college degrees by almost three to two" (para. 3). Bennett (2011) explained how our culture has focused on the rights of women and supporting their advancement and now males are receiving less support. All first-generation students lack the knowledge of college preparedness from parents and additional assistance outside the home is especially beneficial to female first-generation students attending college (Nunez & Cuccara-Alamin, 1998).

Race. In Latino/Latina families, males have very specific culture and gender roles in the family; however, roles are changing in the areas of income and education with Latino men now considered to be the main financial provider for the family (Aranda, Castaneda, Pey-Jinan, & Sobel, 2001). Because of family responsibility,

first-generation male college students who are Hispanic may be torn between choosing college or maintaining their place in the cultural community (London, 1989).

Smith (2008) studied first-generation black female students. He addressed how the upper-class gets the upper-hand when considering access to higher education. Smith (2008) explained how many first-generation black students are in a lower socioeconomic class and typically have less access to educational opportunities. Since a parent's level of education defines the first-generation student, Smith (2008) examined parental involvement for the same group of black female students in his study. Smith (2008) explained how these students experienced parental involvement from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Smith concluded that for black female first-generation students in the study, parents who were involved wanted to see their child succeed in college. Smith (2008) argued that education community must "embrace" this student group by reaching out and informing the student and the parents about overcoming the barriers.

Ting (2003) conducted a longitudinal study predicting academic success of first-generation students. Ting described how ethnic minorities who are first-generation students experience greater challenges in achieving academic success. Lack of support from home, insufficient academic preparation, and sometimes discrimination, may all be factors in this student group's lack of academic success (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Compared to white students, Nunez and Cuccara-Alamin (1998) reported Hispanic students are more likely to be first-generation. Hispanic students make up 11% of the total first-generation population compared to the 5% of the white first-

generation student population (Nunez & Cuccara-Alamin, 1998). More black students are known to be first-generation than non-first-generation (Nunez & Cuccara-Alamin, 1998). "Moreover, first-generation students were slightly more likely than non-first-generation students to attend a school where more than three quarters of the student body was identified as underrepresented minority students" (Warburton et al., 2001, p. 11).

Knowing first-generation students are mostly students of color gives a greater understanding of academic and social preparedness challenges for these students in college. Sedlacek (2004) argued that the psychological and physiological effects from the "feeling" of racism hinder a student's success. Sedlacek (2004) explained, "When people are under stress they are particularly likely to fall back on strategies learned from those who came before them" (p. 24). This simply means that if a student comes from an environment where racism was experienced, a student could retreat back to the "negative messages of his or her family" (Sedlacek, 2004, p. 24) hindering successful transition into a different environment like college. Sedlacek (2004) also explained how important it is for students of color to be a part of a community with which they can identify to help increase the odds of academic success.

Family socio-economic status. Family finances and socio-economic status seem to play a part in predicting academic success of first-generation students. Murphy and Hicks (2006) conducted a study of 203 freshmen college students. Their findings indicated "about forty-nine percent of students with a household income level under $25,000 had parents with no college experience" (Murphy & Hicks, 2006, p. 4). According to Ishitani (2006) this finding is consistent—first-generation students are

typically within a lower socio-economic class than students who are non-first-generation. Ishanti (2006) found that "family income was associated with student attrition behavior" (p. 862). Conversely, "a higher level of socioeconomic status had a positive effect on academic and social integration and ultimately influenced one's enrollment decision" (Ishanti, 2006, p. 862).

Since many first-generation students are from low-income backgrounds, many researchers have chosen to study the correlation between low-income and attrition (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Choy (1999) explained how students from low income families who completed high school were less likely to go to college directly after high school. Low income family high school completers graduate at a rate of 49% compared to middle income family high school completers who graduate at a rate of 63% (Choy, 1999). Choy (1999) stated, "[College] enrollment rates of 1996 high school completers immediately after high school ranged from 45 percent for those whose parents had less than a high school education to 85 percent for those whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher" (p. 6).

Academic preparedness. In a 2006 commissioned report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success, Kuh et al. (2006) addressed socio-economic status impact on student success by stating, "Rigorous academic preparation, high educational aspirations, and family support are easier to come by if the family has economic resources" (p. 22). They went on to explain how socio-economic status determines the type of school the student will attend and what resources will be available to him or her (Kuh et al, 2006). Low income level coupled

with an impoverished neighborhood requires the first-generation student to learn how to learn in an environment without the embedded resources.

Murphy and Hicks (2006) identified the first-generation student as less academically prepared, less likely to have taken the ACT or SAT, and "at-risk of being academically, socially, and economically left behind than non-first-generation students, even when their motivation and academic credentials are equal" (p. 3). "Studies have shown that first-generation students have poor pre-college preparation, lower career aspirations, lack of family support, lack of faculty and peer support, fear of the college environment, and poor study skills or habits" (Murphy & Hicks, 2006, p. 6). First-generation students may have access to higher education, but co-existing factors may cause them to be less successful than non-first-generation students (Murphy & Hicks, 2006).

Early awareness of postsecondary education is advantageous to college access according to Warburton et al. (2001) in the National Center for Education Statistics publication, Bridging the Gap-Academic Preparation and Postsecondary Success of First-Generation Students. According to this report, first-generation students are less likely to take high school courses with academic rigor than students who are non-first-generation students (Warburton et al., 2001). This lower level of academic challenge in high school also led to lower college entrance exam scores, lower grade point averages in the first year of college, and were less likely to stay continuously enrolled (Warburton et al., 2001). The results did change, however, for first-generation students who took more rigorous high school courses. This study found, "in this case, first-generation students were as likely as students whose parents had a college degree

to be continuously enrolled or to have attained a degree" (Warburton et al., 2001, p. vi). This information suggested that while in high school, students benefit from taking more challenging courses to better prepare for what is expected of them at the postsecondary level and persisting to graduation. In profiling students of their study, Warburton et al. (2001) found there were great differences in the type of high school attended by first-generation students and non-first-generation students. More non-first-generation students in this study attended a private high school than first-generation students. Warburton et al. (2001) found 18% of non-first-generation students attended private high school and only 8% of first-generation students attended a private high school.

Some parts of college preparation can also fall beyond the student's control even when a student can identify weaknesses that need to be strengthened when preparing for college. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) accurately identified this when they said first-generation students, "are at a somewhat greater risk of being academically, socially and economically left behind" (p. 276) than non-first-generation students, even when their motivation and academic credentials are equal.

According to Murphy and Hicks (2006), the first-generation student is not as prepared academically and may not be able to perform at the higher levels required in college. Not only do first-generation students enter college less academically prepared, but they are also less prepared for the "process" of college (Rodriguez, 2003). This lack of knowledge and preparedness can lead first-generation students to pretend as if they know what they are doing rather than being "discovered" that they do not know what they are doing (Rodriguez, 2003).

Academic rigor. Academic rigor is one significant factor in college academic preparedness (Warburton et al., 2001). Warburton et al. (2001) defined academic rigor as the number of courses a student completed within the main secondary education level including English, math, science, social students, and possibly foreign language; the math and science level completed; and whether the student completed college level courses offered in high school through Advanced Placement or honors courses (Warburton et al., 2001). Research found that 40% of first-generation students did not exceed the core basic curriculum, only about 9% of first-generation students took rigorous high school courses, and an even lower percentage of first-generation students reported taking an Advanced Placement course (Warburton et al., 2001). Even though first-generation students may have similar critical thinking abilities as non-first-generation students, first-generation students may not achieve successful completion if not appropriately prepared (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Academic intentions. Taking more advanced and rigorous courses in high school is not always enough to place the first-generation student on the same playing field as the non-first-generation (Horn, Nunez, & MPR Associates, Inc., 2000). Gibbons and Borders (2010) researched factors other than academic ability that could influence the first-generation student and his or her decision to attend. Their research identified how intentions and attending college does not predict college completion (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Gibbons and Borders (2010) also acknowledged how most research has focused on the first-generation student once he or she begins college rather than factors that influenced decisions prior to college. Gibbons and Borders

(2010) chose the Social-Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as a tool to help identify intention to attend college in middle school students. The SCCT involves three major parts which interact with each other and which may affect educational intentions and actions (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). These three major parts include the student's perceived ability to complete academic tasks, outcome expectations, and goals (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). The researchers explained how the SCCT relates to the first-generation student, even in middle school, because it links academic intentions to attend and graduate from college while also considering the first-generation student's background including demographics and family income levels (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). The results of the study illustrated how middle school first-generation students had lower educational goals when compared to non-first-generation students (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). The study also reported lower number of students perceiving to have the ability to attend and complete college, higher perception of barriers, less parental support, lack of educational planning role models and guidance, and lower positive outcome expectations (Gibbons & Borders, 2010).

Early awareness. Academic rigor, intentions and decision making, and a need to understand financial planning for college preparation has become part of an early awareness initiative taken on by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) (as cited in Collins, 2011). Chairperson Patty Montague of NACAC's human relations committee stated, "The comprehensive approach among professionals to serve students from elementary school through college is invaluable on many levels to students, families, and communities" (as cited in Collins, 2011, para. 5). NACAC developed the Step-by-Step program to bring all parties involved

with first-generation students and under-represented students together to show college as a viable option and to also recommend strategies to bring early awareness to human differences and greater allowance of equal access to postsecondary education (as cited in Collins, 2011).

It is also known that programs that assist students in making the transition from high school to college show stronger persistence to graduation, which leads to a stronger foundation by which to build a future (Rogers, 2010). The Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) was established by the United States Department of Education to increase the number of low-income students attending postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2011). The program follows cohorts of low-income students, typically starting in seventh grade, and follows those students through the completion of high school (USDE, 2011). The program provides resources, which may not typically be offered to students in low-income areas (USDE, 2011). The program is designed to offer academic rigor, community and academic engagement, and increased parent and student awareness of the postsecondary environment (Chicago GEAR UP Alliance, 2012).

Family impact. Parent education levels are helpful in defining the first-generation student; however, little research has been published about how the family influences the first-generation student and the college experience (Hodge, 2010). Coburn and Woodward (2001) described characteristics of effective parent orientation programs as, “acknowledging and supporting the family transition, giving parents information and tools to support the students success, defining the relationship

between parents and the institution, and creating a connection to the institution" (p. 37). Coburn and Woodward (2010) stated that if a connection is made with the parents, they feel more receptive to an ongoing relationship with the institution. The more parents are involved the greater their ability to support their student—reducing their anxiety levels when approaching challenging situations, and improving academic success by helping them feel more confident and comfortable in the college environment (Weiser & Riggio, 2010).

Describing the First-Generation Students During College

First-generation students face greater barriers in preparing for college than non-first-generation students (Murphy & Hicks, 2006). Literature explains how these barriers prior to college also continue during college. First-generation students who prepare academically for the college experience still experience barriers in academic engagement, achieving academic success, managing college and family responsibilities, transitioning to the college culture, participating in extracurricular activities, and self-efficacy (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1994).

Academic engagement. **A**cademic engagement plays a part in degree completion of first-generation students (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). Conley and Hamlin (2009) addressed engagement through justice learning which is defined as "pedagogy designed to enhance academic and civic engagement for first-generation college students from low-income, urban neighborhoods using a uniquely situated community-based approach" (p. 47). Smith (2004) believed first generation students have a difficult time in understanding the college culture and blamed this disconnect

on the *hidden curriculum*. The hidden curriculum is the unwritten and unspoken rules of how to successfully navigate through the culture of higher education, which is essential to their academic success (Smith, 2004). Curriculum in this explanation does not suggest there are problems with the academic curriculum. The hidden curriculum is knowledge of what is needed to function in the college culture. College programs target first-generation students offering tutors, freshman programs, and remedial courses. Smith (2004) explained that even though first-generation students are not adequately prepared for the college environment, it is imperative for all to understand that even if a student is unfamiliar with the postsecondary academic culture, it should not be assumed that the student is deficient academically and unable to figure out the hidden curriculum.

There are a variety of reasons why students choose an institution to attend and then choose to leave. Students often choose a college or university based on location, academic reputation, size, finances and opportunities after graduation (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki, & Tran, 2010). It is important to understand how students prepared for college life, why some chose to leave the institution, and why some persisted to graduation. Students who attend college come with different levels of education, unique personalities, a variety of expectations of the college experience, and diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Terenzini et al., 1994). Terenzini et al. (1994) stated those differences can be used as predictors for student success and academic progression. For example, many students will begin their college career but will not attain a degree (Murphy & Hicks, 2006). Conley and Hamlin (2009) found

that first-generation students are at higher risk of not continuing education beyond high school.

Family impact. Weiser and Riggio (2010) conducted a study on family impact to determine if a student's perception of their own ability can intervene or reconcile the relationship between academic achievement and family. This study was not specific to first-generation students, but demonstrated that family background is related to both self-efficacy and academic achievement. Participants included students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. A survey was used and qualitative results were reported which found that both self-efficacy and academic achievement could be accurately predicted by identifying family background variables (Weiser & Riggio, 2010).

Lack of parental involvement and support from home is related to underperformance in first-generation college students (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Students who have parents who guide them in the college transition show higher levels of confidence and have stronger beliefs in their own ability to succeed at a postsecondary institution (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Some parents believe if their child attends college, it will disconnect the family and break tradition especially if the parent believes college is pointless because he or she has been able to "manage" without a college education (Terenzini et al., 1994).

Ziemniak (2010) studied the relationship between student success and family involvement. Ziemniak (2010) acknowledged how there have been many interventions recommended by a variety of studies to improve student success of first-generation students; however, there are few studies tied solely to how families support

this category of students. The study used Gofen's (2009) model of family capital framework, which involves ways that first-generation students' families support their persistence in college. A narrative approach was taken and first-generation students, family members, and college administrators were interviewed.

The group of participants in Ziemniak's (2010) study included 11 students between the ages of 20 and 23 years old, nine family members, and two student affairs administrators (Ziemniak, 2010). Themes emerged from the qualitative data which indicated family matters to first-generation student's college persistence; there is a difference in the way family support is manifested in first-generation students than for non-first-generation students. First-generation students' families played a minimal part in assisting their student with college responsibilities and a disconnection was discovered between the first-generation students' families and the institution (Ziemniak, 2010). Recommendations were made for higher education institutions to address the needs of not only the first-generation student, but also the needs of their parents (Ziemniak, 2010).

Academic success. When compared to non-first-generation traditional college students and first-generation students with similar ACT/SAT scores, first-generation students have lower GPAs (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). Murphy and Hicks (2006) found that when first-generation students are compared to non-first-generation students, they are more likely to earn lower first-semester grades and first-year grade point averages. Inkelas et al. (2007) examined programs that focused on first-generation students' perception of academic and social transition to college: the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (Inkelas et al., 2007). This new

approach has shown how successful college transition leads to a first-generation student's academic success and social involvement in the college community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Even though Living-Learning programs are not specifically designed for the first-generation student, the programs benefit them because they connect students living in campus housing with formed learning communities, service learning projects, and faculty-involved projects and research (Inkelas et al., 2007). All students in a wide variety of public institutions with these programs overall had a smoother academic transition in the first year of college (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).

The National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) researched 33 postsecondary institutions from 24 different states and had a sample size of 1,335 first-generation students (Inkelas et al., 2007). Like some studies conducted by Pascarella et al. (2004) and Terenzini et al. (1996) where the first-generation students had strong numbers of non-traditional aged and commuter students, this study focused on residential students in these institutions as part of the Living-Learning programs (Inkelas et al., 2007). A survey instrument included question on background information, college environment, and students' descriptions of their experiences and outcomes (Inkelas et al., 2007). The study showed first-generation students perceived ease with their academic and social transition to college (Inkelas et al., 2007). One finding of the study was surprising in that participants found faculty mentoring relationships to negatively affect transition to college possibly due to more strain on time and less involvement in developing relationships with their peers (Inkelas et al., 2007). Terenzini et al. (1996) indicated how first-generation students focus more

effort toward academic experiences than social. Inkelas et al. (2007) explained how faculty and staff who develop programs for first-generation students should be more mindful of how this student group views the college experience and create programs which are structured to create formal academic and social interactions within the college experience.

Academic transition. Inkelas et al. (2007) made the correlation between academic success and social interaction for first-generation students in general; Carter and Robinson (2002) studied a specific group of first-generation students who were from rural families and low-income. In 1992, half of first-generation students were from low-income families and were more likely to be black and/or Hispanic (Horn et al., 2000). Literature refers to first-generation students as mostly black or Hispanic (London, 1989; Smith, 2008), but Carter and Robinson (2002) went beyond the traditionally known black and Hispanic first-generation student and studied first-generation Appalachian students. Appalachian students are not as well-known to be first-generation, but many in the Kentucky area are and Carter and Robinson (2002) studied their perception relating to transition to college.

First-generation Appalachian students. Carter and Robinson (2002) explored cohort groups of students and how they were prepared for college, patterns based on cultural norms, financial assistance provided, and overall transition to the college experience. Participants were from two cohort groups, non-college high school juniors enrolled in an academically focused summer program and first-year college students enrolled in their first semester at the University of Kentucky (Carter & Robinson, 2002). Instruments used were pre and post surveys that later led to

interviews within focus groups (Carter & Robinson, 2002). The study participants were first-generation Appalachian students, involved in the Robinson Scholars Program, which awards funds to first-generation students who graduate and are able to attend University of Kentucky or a Kentucky community college (Carter & Robinson, 2002). The Robinson Scholars Program extends beyond just funding, by providing early awareness and a connection to the University of Kentucky. The program makes college more accessible to others because students who participate can take their experiences back to their home communities and act as advocates for education (Carter & Robinson, 2002). The researchers believed in the importance of early intervention programs, which focus not only on the economic cost, but also on the "social, academic, and material needs of these students" (Carter & Robinson, 2002, p. 25).

First-generation non-traditional students. Much literature focuses on the traditional aged first-generation student; however, Koehler and Burke (1996) researched nontraditional first-generation students. Koehler and Burke (1996) investigated first-generation students who participated in an early awareness and preparation program called, The Transition Class. The Transition Class is an ungraded noncredit 12-week course provided by the college prior to full matriculation, and the students participate in (a) self-directed learning and supportive learning groups, (b) performing academic tasks under pressure, and (c) defining their own goals and career plans (Koehler & Burke, 1996). When students were allowed to "level the playing field" by participating in The Transition Class prior to entering college, the transition was easier (Koehler & Burke, 1996).

Extracurricular activity. Few studies show a connection between a first-generation student's college involvement and level of college success; however, Pascarella et al. (2004) found there was a connection between involvement in extracurricular activity and persistence to graduation. Inkelas et al. (2007) found that first-generation students who are in residence halls associate college involvement with easier academic and social transition. Thayer (2000, as cited in Conley & Hamlin, 2009) explained how the transition can be difficult for first-generation students because, "entering the university means not only that they must leave home for an unfamiliar academic setting, but that they must also enter an alien physical and social environment that they, their family, and their peers have never experienced" (p. 48). The unfamiliarity with the college environment is lessened when a student lives on campus and is part of the college environment academically and socially (Inkelas et al., 2007).

Terenzini et al. (1994) conducted a study not specific to first-generation students involving 132 students categorized by race and gender (Terenzini et al., 1994). Data were collected through group interviews and found that first-generation students typically focused on academics when entering college and deferred non-academic involvement until they knew their academic situation could be managed successfully (Terenzini et al., 1994). Students related feeling connected by making new friends (Terenzini et al., 1994. According to Terenzini and Pascarella (1994), "while intellectual growth may be primarily a function of the student's academic involvement and effort, the content and focus of that same student's interpersonal and extracurricular involvements can have a mediating influence on that growth, either

promoting or inhibiting it" (p. 7). Students who are involved academically and also interact socially with school friends outside of class are more likely to persist to graduation (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Asrat (2007) explored the differences between first-generation students and non-first-generation students using results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The survey measures engagement practices and academic participation (Asrat, 2007). First-generation students were found to typically be transfer students who were older, living off-campus, working, and earning lower grades (Asrat, 2007). First-generation students reported a higher participation in community-based projects when compared to non-first-generation students (Asrat, 2007). Asrat (2007) recommended that postsecondary institutions understand the importance of student engagement outside the classroom and develop programs linking first-generation students to activities that will enhance non-academic experiences and social skills.

Self-appraisal. Self-appraisal is to realistically assess weaknesses and strengths and to allow self-development to take place (Sedlacek, 2004). In spite of barriers, students who are at greater risk for academic success but are able to make realistic self-assessments do better in school situations (Sedlacek, 2004). The ability to realistically assess one's weaknesses and strengths is the definition of self-appraisal and can be paired with knowing what is needed and how to prepare for the college experience.

Self- efficacy. Self-efficacy is a person's perceived ability to be successful and possess the appropriate behavior to achieve a specific outcome (Bandura, 1997).

First-generation students may feel like they do not belong or that college is not for them causing them to associate unfamiliar feelings with some sort of deficiency (Terenzini et al., 1996). If a student has low self-efficacy, he or she may choose not to engage in a situation (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Colleges may benefit from understanding first-generation student self-efficacy that are due to a lack of social support in the college environment (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). Sharing potentially stressful college experiences with first-generation students and letting them know that all students, first-generation and non-first-generation students, have similar insecurities may help them to put things into proper perspective (Barry et al., 2009). Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) understood the power of self-efficacy among first-generation students,, "one class of cognitive processes, self-efficacy, influences behavior and subsequently influences outcomes" (p. 8). It is the social transition that could possibly counteract the lack of support from home and improve academic performance. Inkelas et al. (2007) explained that because of this need for social transition and the need for first-generation students to engage in their postsecondary environment, institutions of higher education have developed programs to increase student involvement and build stronger connections to their schools.

Retention

Lenning et al. (1980) defined student retention as, "keeping students enrolled until they complete their degree or certificate programs" (p. 6). There are several terms used when referring to student retention. Persistence is used when identifying a student's enrollment over time while striving to achieve his or her goal but it does not necessarily mean the student will achieve a degree or have continuous enrollment

(Tinto, 2006). Tinto (1975) described a student leaving college and not returning on his or her own terms as drop out. Students who stop out are those who re-enroll in college after quitting college for a period of time (Tinto, 1993). These terms are important in understanding how each action of persistence, dropping out, and stopping out has an impact on retention (Tinto, 2006).

CollegeMerriam-Webster defined retention as, "the act of retaining" (Retention, 2012). Guillory and Wolverton (2008) explained student retention as students who complete a term successfully and return for the next semester, thus the college retains the student. By examining student retention, colleges can identify trends that effect student enrollment and determine why students choose to leave (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Colleges are concerned with retention rates because they are required to publish retention reports and are held accountable by their governing boards (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 1999). This public awareness and accountability strongly encourages colleges to know why students depart and explore retention trends that may help identify student intentions, behaviors, and circumstances (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

To better understand student retention, theories were explored that included variables contributing to student integration, attrition, predicting dropout, and resiliency (Bean, 1981; Tinto, 1975). Much information explored was based on existing (grounded) theory and comparisons were made as additional data were collected and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The purpose of this section on retention is to explain the variables of these theories and understand how student retention was affected.

Integration. Spady (1970) was a sociologist who studied student integration and used Durkheim's (1951) theoretical model of suicide and applied it to student behavior replacing the likelihood of committing suicide with the likelihood of dropping out of school. Spady (1970) described integration in college to be when a student shares values with a group and has friendship support. He also believed that a student is more likely to stay enrolled in school if integrated in the school culture (Spady, 1970). Spady (1970) believed students who are successfully integrated in both social and academic systems of college will reap rewards. Grades and intellectual development are the academic rewards and having interests and attitudes compatible to the college environment are the social rewards (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

In 1971, Spady expanded his work by developing a theory which identified integration variables: satisfaction, social integration, normative congruence, friendship support, intellectual development, grade performance, family background, academic potential, and prior educational background. In addition to the integration variables, Spady (1971) found the quality of relationship with the family and the values shared with the family also affected student retention. Through his research, Spady (1971) found integration is related to the socioeconomic status of the student's family. The more affluent, supportive, and open the parents are, the greater the chance the student will be of higher aptitude and integrate successfully in college (Spady, 1971).

In assessing personality disposition, students who drop out are considered to be less mature and less likely to integrate than students who persist (Spady, 1971). Factors that help identify maturity are, "motivation, independence, flexibility,

involvement, impulse control, self-confidence, responsibility, and rationality" (Spady, 1970, p. 73). Spady (1971) concluded that maturity as it relates to intellectual development also relates to personal development dictated by the level of integration into the college culture. Successful integration was explained as having the right attitude, personality disposition, and interest in the environment (Spady, 1971). Attitude, along with establishing relationships, is called social integration and improves student retention (Spady, 1971).

Tinto (1975), based on Spady's (1970, 1971) grounded theory, explored academic and social integration and the effects on student retention. The more the student became socially and academically integrated into his or her environment, the less likely the student would discontinue his or her education (Tinto, 1975). In addition to the variables discussed in Spady's (1971) research, Tinto (1975) included the expectation of the student and his or her desire to graduate, as well as intended level of degree earned. It is this commitment to the institution and the desire to complete the degree that strengthens student retention.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) conducted a longitudinal study, which investigated Spady (1970) and Tinto's (1975) findings on the effects social and academic integration have on college retention. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) used the theories of Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) to see if interactive influences of social and academic integration could be determined in persistence to identify interactions between social and academic integration; and to identify if student relationships with faculty had an effect on social and academic integration. The participants were 773 freshmen students who were entering a large residential university located in New

York (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Variables in the study included the student's desires and attitudes toward degree completion, background information, pre-college experience, gender, race, academic aptitude, parental income, and degree expectations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Their findings, "firmly underscore Spady's (1970) and Tinto's (1975) theories of the sociological complexity of the influences on student persistence/withdrawal decisions" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 208). The findings also suggest that student experiences during the freshman year may impact student retention more than a student's background, desires, or aptitudes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The third finding found faculty-to-student interaction to be a significant predictor of retention for both males and females (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The researchers of this study also wanted it noted that even with these findings, background and family relations still had an effect on the results (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Attrition. Tinto (1988), in addition to his work on integration, studied attrition reflecting on reasons why students leave. Attrition is the reduction of students as a result of students dropping out or transferring to another institution (Tinto, 1988). Similar to the findings of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) on freshmen students, Tinto (1988) believed the reasons for attrition in the first year were very different from reasons for attrition in later years. Tinto (1988) believed it to be important to understand the departure process as opposed to constructing a new theory. This process model is known as the Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1988). Incorporating his previous research and combining it with Van Gennep's (1960) social anthropology study on tribal societies, Tinto (1988) found attrition to be impacted by

an individual moving his or her membership in one group to membership in another group. The relationships were identified as three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1988).

The separation stage requires students to disaffiliate from past community relationships which may also involve rejecting past relationships (Tinto, 1988). This separation often takes place when students leave families and old high school relationships behind to enter into a new environment of a distant university and establish a new community (Tinto, 1988). If a student decides to stay at home or close to home while in college, he or she may jeopardize the separation stage because the former relationships/community may continue to demand the student to stay engaged instead of moving toward building relations with the new college community (Tinto, 1988).

Transition to college is the second stage and is considered a time when the student is moving away from the associations of the past toward the new college community (Tinto, 1988). This stage can pose serious anguish and a sense of loss, which can interfere with the desire to persist (Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1998) believed that many students withdraw early in the academic year not because they failed to integrate into their new social and academic communities, but because of the stress from the transition (Tinto, 1988).

The incorporation stage is when a student will adapt and adopt new behaviors to fit into his or her new social and academic community (Tinto, 1998). This stage could include orientation programs, involvement in Greek life or student organizations, participation in athletics, or development of relationships in the dorm

(Tinto, 1998). Tinto (1998) noted that all students do not have the ability to maneuver their way through this process alone and may need the assistance of the new college community to complete this stage successfully. For those students struggling with this stage without college community assistance, attrition may occur (Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1998) concluded, that "some of the most effective educational settings reinterpret the concept of orientation from that of social membership, common in many institutions, to that of intellectual foundations and see that beginning period of college as a time of passage to serious intellectual inquiry" (p. 453).

Bean (1980) acknowledged Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto's (1975) theories of attrition; however, he also believed there was still insufficient evidence to be certain of the correlation between all variables. Bean (1980) felt The Student Integration Model lacked a specific cause of the identified variables. Bean (1980) used Spady's (1970, 1971) study as an example and said the group of variables discussed in this theory could not allow the researcher to identify which variable in the group produced a significant correlation. In other words, when exploring the theories of attrition, Bean (1980) believed there was no way of determining which specific variable caused a student to leave, if a variety of variables contributed to attrition, or if some variables had more correlation to attrition than others.

Just as Spady (1970) used Durkheim's (1951) grounded theory of suicide as a guide for reasons for departure, Bean (1980) used The Student Attrition Model which was adapted from a theory initially created for turnover in work organizations created by Price (1975). Price's (1975) theory found the correlation of variables that Bean (1980) was looking for and could identify the dependent variable which was dropout

and intervening variables which were institutional commitment, satisfaction, organizational determinants, and background. Bean (1980) illustrated how The Student Attrition Model reflected causal relationships between the variables to understand the nature of a student's interaction with the university. The model was also used in determining student satisfaction.

Bean (1980) believed the students' reasons for leaving were similar to those reasons that cause workplace attrition. Variables used as causal effects on student attrition were institutional commitment, grades, satisfaction, routinization, practical value, and opportunity (Bean, 1980). Other variables were overall participation, involvement in student organizations, choice of courses, intent to leave, and marriage (Bean, 1980). Bean (1980) tested this theory with a group of freshman at one higher education institution including in the sample only those less than 22 years of age, first-time freshman, white/non-Hispanics, and U.S. citizens. Bean (1980) admitted this sample was biased and could not be generalized for all students. The study explored variables for both men and women. Institutional commitment was the variable most correlated with student attrition (Bean, 1980). Findings identified females more likely to withdraw or transfer if they were not committed to the institution, performed poorly in high school, did not get involved in student organizations, did not believe their college education would lead to employment, did not feel their college experience contributed to self-development, did not find routine in daily college life, felt there was an opportunity to transfer, and did not develop an informal relationship with the faculty (Bean, 1980). Findings from the study identified males more likely to withdraw or transfer if they were not committed to the institution, did not have a high

university grade point average, did not know the academic and social rules of the institution, did not believe his education at the college was leading to self-development, and lived with his parents (Bean, 1980).

Bean's (1980) initial study was biased and limited to traditional students under the age of 22. Bean and Metzner (1985) expanded on Bean's (1980) grounded theory and studied attrition of the nontraditional undergraduate student. The researchers believed studying this student group was important because nontraditional students are more affected by external influences than social integration variables which influenced the traditional aged student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Nontraditional students have a higher rate of attrition than traditional aged students (Astin, 1975). The researchers chose to study this student group because at the time of the study in 1985, economic factors were influencing enrollment of nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner (1985) believed that with the social shift to the acceptability of a two-income household, both women and men were seeking out higher education for personal and financial reasons.

Bean and Metzner (1985) identified the nontraditional student as one who was over 24, did not reside in campus housing, did not attend college to be more mature, had a strong concern for the university's academic offerings, and was not influenced socially by students or faculty. The Student Integration Model illustrates traditional student attrition and its relation to socialization. Bean and Metzner (1985) felt that even though the model focuses on the traditional student, the socialization cannot be ignored when exploring nontraditional student attrition. Age, enrollment status, and residences were used as defining variables (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Educational

goals, gender, ethnicity, and high school performance were also included as four background variables in which they expected a relationship to attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner (1985) did not include the parent's education as a variable for this study; however, they believed it was an important variable because nontraditional students are more likely to be first-generation than traditional students (Kimball & Sedlacek, 1971).

Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler (1992) studied the works of Tinto's (1988) Student Integration Model and Bean's (1983) Student Attrition Model. The researchers explored variables, which were independent of each other between the two models and found correlations in other variables (Cabrera, Castandea et al., 1992). They discovered college courses and institutional commitment in the Student Attrition Model and academic integration, academic fit, and quality in the Student Integration Model to be similar in their impact on attrition (Cabrera, Castaneda et al., 1992).

Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1993) expanded the grounded theory of Cabrera, Castaneda et al. (1992) to see if both the Student Integration Model and the Student Attrition Model could be merged to better understand student attrition. The researchers first identified the overlapping variables of the two theoretical models and then tested the non-overlapping variables of both models (Cabrera et al., 1993). Cabrera et al. (1993) used a longitudinal design with a sample of freshman at a large southern institution. Only freshman that were U.S. citizens and under the age of 24 were selected to stay consistent with population samples used by Bean (1980) and Tinto (1988). Initial and follow-up surveys were used to assess student attitudes. Student college transcripts were used to determine academic status (Cabrera et al.,

1993). Cabrera et al. (1993) found, "the structural relations among academic and social integration factors, as well as those among commitment factors, are consistent with both Tinto's and Bean's theoretical frameworks" (p. 132). The study results suggest that institutions should (a) focus on those variables that have been determined to be highly predictive of students' re-enrollment and development and (b) implement strategies that can manipulate the variables, to improve attrition (Cabrera et al., 1993).

Predicting dropout. Many students begin the college process with the intent to complete a degree. There are benefits to explaining college success to first-generation students while also continuing to explore the variables which encourage retention (Bean, 1980; Ishitani, 2006; Tinto, 2006). Understanding theories on retention predictability and effects on attrition is crucial for college administrators (Bean, 1980; Cabrera et al., 1993; Tinto, 2006). Researchers such as Willett and Singer (1991), DesJardins et al. (1999), and Ishitani (2006) varied in their approach to retention research and developed event history models, which identified variables that could predict if and when a student will drop out or stop out.

Willett and Singer (1991) determined that traditional methods of analyzing data have disadvantages and could result in misleading findings. They were concerned how some retention data do not represent why the student actually leaves the university before degree completion, nor indicate the type of student who decided to leave (Willet & Singer, 1991). Leaving out certain factors, or excluding results because an action did not take place prior to a time of completion set by the researcher, is considered censoring (Willet & Singer, 1991). Willet and Singer (1991)

explored censored factors detailing the risk of drop out and how the risk changed as time went by.

One major difficulty in analyzing retention data was how to represent the observations, which were considered censored (Willet & Singer, 1991). Willet and Singer (1991) explored both censored observation and traditional analysis to collect subject data and separate it by those who experienced the event and those who had not experienced the event. Using traditional data analysis methods, along with the results of censored data, limited the study to only the individuals who had experienced the event (Willet & Singer, 1991). Because of this exclusion of individuals who did not experience the event, the researchers questioned what to do with the censored data and if inclusion could occur through survival analysis (Willet & Singer, 1991). A student's ability to function is the predictor of survival. Willet and Singer (1991) used survivability of a sample population to estimate the probability that a participant would remain in a certain event or situation for a certain period of time. For survival analysis, time was the significant variable (Willet & Singer, 1991). With survival analysis, an occurrence time period could be used to determine when an event or situation of interest would take place. This determination of when an event or situation would take place could also be applied to determining when a student may choose to drop out or stop out (Willet & Singer, 1991).

Desjardins et al. (1999) believed the relevant connection of the variables discussed in earlier studies related to student retention but also believed those variables have different effects over time. DesJardins et al. (1999) acknowledged how the Student Integration Model (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975) and the Student

Attrition Model (Bean, 1980; Price, 1975) predicted validity in variables before and during a student's college experience. DesJardins et al. (1999) explained how colleges could improve their understanding of student departure through a statistical model approach called event history modeling. Event history modeling superseded deficiencies in previous models because it allowed insight into the process of timing a student's departure (DesJardins et al., 1999). Event history modeling allowed a college to predict an exact time of student departure by using demographics, pre-college experience, and academic achievement along with financial and institutional variables (DeJardins et al., 1999). Independent variables used in the study included gender, race, high school rank, major chosen in college, college grade point average each term, ACT score, age, location of home, and financial aid (DesJardins et al., 1999). DesJardins et al. (1999) were able to improve on Willett and Singer's (1991) research and explored factors that occurred at the same time and incorporated factors that varied in time.

Tinto (1993) explored factors that impacted student retention but data was insufficient to understand the actual process of departure. DesJardins et al. (1999) explored factors that contributed to a student stop out and correlated these factors with years of persistence toward graduation. Much attention has been given to retention of freshmen students; however, this study showed relevance in not only assessing the first year, but also looking at what factors explain higher risk of dropping or stopping out after the freshman year. For example, results of DesJardins et al. (1999) illustrated white students were more likely to stop out in the first year when compared to black students who were more likely to stop out in year three. The results also found the

offering of financial aid to first-generation students decreased the risk of stop out (DesJardins et al., 1999). Students who participated in a campus work program were less likely to stop out, but the most significant piece to this finding was how loans did not decrease the dropout rate in the first year; instead, a work study program helped students engage in the college environment and strengthened persistence (DesJardins et al., 1999). However, a correlation was found between loans and grants and first-generation student persistence (DesJardins et al., 1999). Different financial aid affected the likelihood of student departure during different points of attendance and suggested that financial aid contributed to student retention (DesJardins et al., 1999).

Ishitani (2006) explored reasons for attrition in first-generation students and conducted a longitudinal student to research persistence behavior over time. Ishitani (2006) acknowledged the importance of knowing when a first-generation student chose to drop out or stop out from college using event history modeling similar to DesJardins et al. (1999). Ishitani (2006) believed there was significance in understanding the behavior relating to continual enrollment, the time it takes to complete a degree, or the time at which the student chose to drop or stop out. Ishitani (2006) found that, “being a first-generation student reduced the odds of graduating in 4 and 5 years by 51% and 32%” (p. 880). Even with other variables encouraging enrollment to completion within six years, he also found that staying continuously enrolled affected the completion of the degree in a timely matter (Ishitani, 2006). Students who avoid stopping out are more likely to graduate than students who sit out a semester (Ishitani, 2006).

Resiliency. Gofen (2009) took a different approach than Ishitani (2006) when discussing continuous enrollment and first-generation students. Gofen (2009) explained how research strongly showed that children inherit the educational level of their parents. This is called the Intergenerational Inheritance of Education (Gofen, 2009). This study explored first-generation college students and how the intergenerational education cycle was broken through family capital (Gofen, 2009). Gofen (2009) defines family capital as the family's investment through support, behaviors, resources, and values that influence their child's future. Gofen (2009) acknowledged research explaining why first-generation students did not persist to graduation and but made the point that very little is known about why other first-generation students become the first in their families to complete a degree. Research explored persistence and attrition, but not much is known about breaking the cycle for this student group (Gofen, 2009). Resilience is the ability to adjust to change (Resilience, 2013) and a first-generation student who breaks this cycle shows resiliency (Gofen, 2009).

Gofen (2009) took a qualitative approach and interviewed a sample size of 50 students and attempted to discover what enabled this group of first-generation students to break the cycle of intergenerational education inheritance. The research findings indicated that first-generation students who broke the cycle had parents who made sure that even though they were without material things, they were able to provide their children with the support needed for a better future (Gofen, 2009). When a family overcomes adverse or extenuating circumstances by using nonmaterial resources such as relational, emotional, and behavioral support, this is referred to as

family resiliency and these families emerge from these situations feeling more empowered and confident (Gofen, 2009). Children from resilient families are capable of accomplishing high levels of social-psychological and academic achievements even with the lack of resources available to them (Gofen, 2009). Resilient families also have very set and specific expectations of their children and strongly encourage the same core values that focus more on the function and well-being of the family than expecting their child to attend college and earn a degree (Gofen, 2009). Finally, (Gofen, 2009) concluded that the participants, "consistently affirmed that what enabled them to break the intergenerational cycle and pave the way to social mobility lay in family day-to-day life during their upbringing" (p. 109). Even though their parents did not attend college, the participants perceived their ability to succeed academically and break the cycle was because of their families (Gofen, 2009).

Greene, Galambos, and Lee (2003) researched children living in disadvantaged situations and showed that people who were able to overcome certain risk factors had proven resiliency. Researchers have continued to explore these factors to understand how resilience can be used to promote competence (Greene et al., 2003). Fraser, Richman, and Galinsky (1999) stated, "If we can understand what helps some people to function well in the context of high adversity, we may be able to incorporate this knowledge into new practice strategies" (p. 136). Greene et al. (2003) constructed an operational definition of resilience as the ability to overcome adversity, have competence under pressure, and capacity to recover from trauma.

Sterling (2010) researched sustainable education and discussed the discourse of the resilient learning. The integration of intrinsic views and instruments that nurtured

resilient learners also caused a resilient social behavior in natural environments even when faced with uncertainty and threat (Sterling, 2010). Sterling (2010) reviewed the nurturing quality within a learner and the attainment of an external outcome. In relation to resilience, Sterling (2010) believed sustainability implied survival, security, and well-being. Resilience alone absorbed disturbance and maintained basic function (Sterling, 2010). Sterling (2010) identified two approaches to sustainability of education: instrumental (resilience and sustainability in learning) and intrinsic (the resilient learner). When both instrumental and intrinsic approaches were used together, students were more likely to be resilient and persist (Sterling, 2010). When the instrumental and intrinsic approaches were separated, resilience was less likely to occur and persistence was negatively affected (Sterling, 2010).

Krasny and Roth (2010) explored environmental education for resilience. Krasny and Roth (2010) like Sterling (2010) discussed resilience as it applied to environmental education programs and the impact on ecosystems and communities (Krasny & Roth, 2010). In their study, Krasny and Roth (2010) questioned how environmental education contributed to adaptive capacity despite resilience. Adaptive capacity allowed social relations, productivity, governance, and learning to continue even when disturbance was faced (Krasny & Rother, 2010). It was believed that, "one way to build adaptive capacity in social systems and thus foster resilience would be to build capacity among many individuals" (Krasny & Roth, 2010, p. 546). Students learn through social interaction and engagement (Krasny & Roth, 2010). Learning takes place and a person becomes more skilled through community process (Krasny & Roth, 2010).

Summary

First-generation students have unique characteristics that can lead to barriers to education and impact persistence to graduation (Ishitani, 2006; Murphy & Hicks, 2006). First generation students are more likely to receive less guidance from home, more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic status, and are less likely to be prepared for college when compared to non-first-generation students (Nunez & Cuccara-Alamin, 1998; Sedlacek, 2004). Integration, attrition, and resiliency affect retention of first-generation students (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Inkelas et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1994). Identifying and understanding first-generation student variables can allow colleges to predict if and when a first-generation student will stop out or drop out through event history modeling (DesJardins et al., 1999). With much research addressing reasons why first-generation students have not persisted to graduation, it is equally important to explore why some first-generation students are able to persist to graduation (Bean, 1980; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975).

Chapter Three: Methodology

First-generation students encounter more obstacles and do not persist to graduation at the same rate as non-first-generation students (Choy, 1998; Ishitani, 2006). Adding to existing research, this study explored the perceptions of first-generation students at MWU examining why they believed they persisted to graduation.

Study Participants

Participants of this study were chosen from a pool of students enrolled at MWU in the winter and spring terms of 2012. The two selection criteria were

(a) enrollment in the final two terms of their degree program, and

(b) submission of a degree application for May 2012 graduation.

This criterion was chosen because students in these final stages of degree completion, for the purpose of this study, had persisted to graduation and were believed to graduate. The study group was first-generation students and a comparison group of non-first-generation student was used to validate the data from the study group.

This study included only undergraduate students who attend MWU and included both domestic and international students. International students represent 10% of the overall student body and come from 60 different countries (Lindenwood University, 2010). The remaining domestic student population represents students from 46 states outside of Missouri within the United States (Lindenwood University, 2010). According to the 2010-2011 University Ledger report, 2,739 males and 3,414 females attend MWU. Out of the 6,153 students represented in the University Ledger, 55% were identified as white/Caucasian, 10% black/African-American, 3% Hispanic,

1% Asian, 10% international, with the remainder unidentified (Lindenwood University, 2010).

MWU offers educational opportunity to students from various backgrounds. Research shows first-generation student enrollment is on the rise for institutions of higher education. As a greater number of first-generation students are accessing higher education, Sedlacek (2004) explained how universities rely heavily on quantitative measures such as the American College Testing (ACT) or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) to measure future success and admission to the university. MWU has a full admission standard for students scoring 20 or higher on the ACT with a minimum cumulative grade point average of 2.5 on a 4.0 scale (Lindenwood University, 2011). Based on how ACT describes college admissions standards, MWU is considered an institution with a traditional admissions policy (ACT, 2012). MWU is committed to educational opportunity and also makes admission decisions on a case-by-case basis. Students earning below a cumulative 2.5 grade point average or below a 20 composite ACT score may be considered for conditional admission (Lindenwood University, 2011).

College Board (2007) reported complicated efforts for first-generation students trying to enter institutions relying heavily on quantitative measures. The case-by-case consideration and flexible reliance on quantitative measures, such as the ACT, allow opportunity for first-generation students at MWU. This understanding of access paired with the unequal graduation rates between first-generation and non-first-generation-students explained by Choy (2001) and Ishitani (2006), prompts

questioning of what characteristics contribute to the successful degree completion of first-generation students.

To better serve first-generation students, MWU began asking questions in the fall semester, 2010 relating to parents' educational level. As part of the application process, these questions were optional and did not allow a true reflection of the total number of first-generation students admitted or enrolled. To establish a stronger account of first-generation students enrolled, MWU began identifying first-generation students through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) based on the results of two questions relating to each parent's educational level. This information was obtained for the first time in October 2012.

The identified MWU first-generation student population included traditional and nontraditional undergraduate students. Because the definition of educational level varies from country to country, and because international students do not qualify for federal student aid, MWU did not include first-generation information for the international student population. From compiled FAFSA information, MWU was able to obtain data from the Institutional Student Information Record (ISIR). Beginning with 2009, MWU was able to identify first-generation students in attendance with some challenge because during that time, there was still a considerable amount of data unaccounted for with 53% of students showing no data. As information was compiled each year, the percentage of no data decreased from 53% in 2009 to 17% in 2012 and allowed me to identify first-generation students attending the University more accurately (see Table 2). The Table 2 illustrates data for both the traditional and nontraditional undergraduate programs offered at MWU.

Table 2

Midwestern University Total Student Population on all Campuses of Undergraduate First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Comparison Year-to-Year

Year	% First-Gen	% Non-First-Gen	% No Data
2009	20.02	26.66	53.31
2010	28.1	37.82	34.08
2011	34.38	48.54	17.08
2012	32.97	49.83	17.2

Consistent with research of increasing numbers of full-time first-generation students accessing higher education, MWU St. Charles also experienced a gradual increase of identified first-generation students and a decrease in the percentage of students with no data (see Table 3).

Table 3

Midwestern University St. Charles Full-Time Undergraduate First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Comparison

Year	% First-Gen	%Non-First-Gen	% No Data
2009	16.08	28.86	55.06
2010	22.46	40.69	36.86
2011	27.87	51.82	20.31
2012	26.16	53.96	19.89

Demographic survey. The decision to use the demographic survey was to collect background information on participants of the study and to also identify first-generation students. Statistical comparison or analysis was not a part of the initial intent. Once survey information was gathered, each interview was reviewed and the decision was made to take a quantitative approach to the population sample to explore significant differences between first-generation and non-first-generation students in the study population. Results were tabulated based on answers to questions relating to individuals living in the home with the student, attendance at another college, gender,

race, income level, age, marital status, living situation while enrolled in college, employment situation while enrolled in college, major, and extracurricular activities (see Appendix A).

Siblings. Details defining the first-generation student relate to the educational level of the parent. Parents who never attended college cannot pass on to the student their experiences of college. However, siblings could contribute to a first-generation student's knowledge of college if they attended college or have friends who attended college. I wanted to not only ask the educational level of parents to identify first-generation students; I also wanted to explore the educational level of siblings as well. Out of 220 eligible surveys collected, 37 self-identified as first-generation. Only one of those 37 students indicated not having a sibling. Of the first-generation students surveyed, 15 of the 36 indicated having siblings who never attended college. When comparing sibling results of first-generation students to that of non-first-generation students in the sample, there appeared to be a slightly higher percentage of non-first-generation students without siblings when compared to first-generation; however, the difference in percentage is not significant enough to explore for this study at this time (see Table 4).

Table 4

Sibling Comparison between First-Generation and Non-First-Generation MWU Students

Non-First-Generation		**First-Generation**	
Siblings	94.50%	Siblings	97%
No Siblings	5.50%	No Siblings	3%

In addition to siblings, participants were asked about other individuals living in the home. Only 30 participants indicated having other individuals other than siblings

and parents in the home with approximately 5% of those individuals reported as having attended college. There was no significant difference between first-generation and non-first-generation students having other individuals living in the home.

College experience. To better understand the participant's college experience, I wanted to know if participants had experienced college life at another institution other than MWU in addition to wanting to explore the characteristics of their college engagement. Participants were asked about attendance at another college other than MWU. Results of the survey indicated 53.2% of participants were transfer students, which means this group of students did not persist to graduation at their previous schools, but had transferred and persisted to graduation at MWU. The survey also described the participants as engaged during college with 70.9% reported as involved in extracurricular activities while enrolled in college.

The survey described the living situation of participants while in college with 64% of participants reported living in campus housing and 31.4% of participants self-reported as commuters (see Table 5). When comparing the living situation of first-generation participants to non-first-generation, there was no significant difference found.

Table 5

Living Situation for MWU Participants

Living Situation	Percent
Commuter living at home with parent	11.4%
Commuter living independent of parent	20.0%
Resident living in campus housing	64.0%
Other	4.1%
Did not answer question	0.5%

Other demographic information. Participants described themselves as mostly single, under 24 years of age with a self-identified middle-income. The genders of participants were balanced with 51.8 male and 48.2 female. Participants represented various races with white/Caucasian reported as 78.2%, black/African American as 6.8% and Latino/Hispanic as 8.2% (see Table 6).

Table 6

Ethnic Identifications for MWU Study Participants

Race	Percent
White/Caucasian	78.1%
Black/African American	6.8%
Latino/Hispanic	8.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.2%
Other	3.2%
Did not answer question	0.5%

In 2011, MWU participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This national survey assesses the student perception of first-year and senior level students in a variety of college related areas. Midwestern University's senior level students reported 78% working off campus compared to the Carnegie Class where 60% of senior level students reported working off campus. Midwestern University's senior level students reported working on campus 36% compared to the Carnegie Class where 23% of senior level students reported working on campus (NSSE, 2011). Participants of the study were asked about their employment status while in college and 30% reported working on campus only, 28.2% reported working off campus only, 36.8% reported working both on and off campus. Over 50% of the

participants in this study reported working 16 hours or more while attending MWU (see Table 7).

Table 7

Hours Worked Per Week for MWU Participant

Hours worked per week	Percent
0-15	34.7%
16-30	32.3%
31-40+	28.0%
Did not work	5.0%

When comparing other demographic areas of first-generation participants to non-first-generation, there was no significant difference found. Simply stated, MWU students work more compared to students at other like higher education institutions as reported in the NSSE (2011). The results of the demographic survey show only 5% among participants not employed while attending MWU. Study participants varied by age, ethnicity, income level, gender, and living situations. Participants also included both domestic and international students and both resident students and commuters.

Research Setting

The selected site for this study was Midwestern University (MWU). Demographic surveys were distributed and completed in various classroom settings. Individual interviews were conducted by me, the primary investigator, in a private office setting to ensure confidentiality and reduce interfering noise and interruption during audio-recording.

MWU is located in a suburb approximately 24 miles from downtown St. Louis in St. Charles, Missouri with approximately 6,153 full-time undergraduate students enrolled as reported in the 2010-2011 University Ledger (Lindenwood University,

2010). Surrounded by single-family residences, MWU houses 57% of its full-time undergraduate students in university dormitories, campus houses, university rented apartments, and a University owned hotel (Lindenwood University, 2010). The remaining 43% commuter students also attend the St. Charles campus—the main campus (Lindenwood University, 2010). MWU has several satellite locations and one other full-functioning campus in Belleville, Illinois. This study included only students who attend the St. Charles campus. MWU is a private, liberal arts university and offers 71 undergraduate majors as well as a variety of graduate and doctoral degrees (Lindenwood University, 2011).

Research Design

Qualitative methodology was used for this study using data gained from individual interviews and analyzed to identify emerging themes. The data were analyzed separately and together, which allowed an exploratory design with mild comparison. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) explained how exploratory design is used when a researcher explores important themes by taking qualitative results and validating or extending the findings though quantitative results.

After completing approximately 13 interviews of first-generation students, I made a second request to those who did not respond to my first request. Additionally, I decided to also open the invitation to interview non-first-generation students who completed the survey and indicated they would be willing to be interviewed. The participants were selected from the completed demographic surveys of non-first-generation students. After hearing the responses from the first-generation students, I made the decision to interview non-first-generation students to explore and mildly

compare answers for validity. The reason to interview non-first generation students was to determine if the answers given by first-generation students were associated with first-generation students only or if their answers were associated with students who had persisted to graduation (both first-generation and non-first-generation). My basis for making this change was to increase the validity of the results of first-generation students only. I wanted to make sure the interview answers were related to first-generation students and not just answers of students ready to graduate.

Instrumentation and Method

Qualitative research methodology with descriptive statistics was the best fit to answer the research questions. A demographic survey was given to both first-generation and non-first-generation graduating senior students as a screening tool and to better understand personal characteristics of the convenience sample. The qualitative portion involved transcriptions of personal interviews. The survey was constructed to identify first-generation students and both the survey and interviews were designed to explore why some first-generation students persist to graduation.

Demographic survey. The instrument used to identify first-generation and non-first-generation students was a demographic survey. The survey was designed using typical questions asked on inquiry applications at the higher education level such as the FAFSA and admissions applications. The questions asked referred to general background information. The survey was also used to better describe the characteristics of the participant population, which included both first-generation and non-first-generation students as self-reported by the students. The demographic survey for this study included 13 close-ended questions and six open-ended questions

from which participants had the opportunity to write in answers. The first two questions were on the topic of parent's educational level to identify the first-generation students from those who are not first-generation. Questions three, four, and five asked about other individuals living in the home other than parents. Additional questions probed participant characteristics relating to gender, race, age, income level, and marital status. The purpose of this survey was to allow the researcher to separate first-generation students from non-first-generation. Additionally, it provided background information important to the characteristics and themes being investigated as part of this study.

Individual interviews. Individual one-on-one interviews were the primary method in the collection of data. This study explored the perceptions and viewpoints of the participants within a structured interview process while still allowing the researcher flexibility to ask probing questions for more in-depth answers. According to Patton (2008), interviews are used to learn what others think and feel about things we want to know and cannot observe directly. A standardized open-ended interview was developed utilizing behavioral based questions where each participant was asked the same questions in the same order. This sequence in questioning and exact wording allows the researcher to stay focused during the interview and also provides comparability of answers to explore emerging themes and characteristics (Patton, 2002).

The participants were selected based on answers given on the demographic survey and those who self-identified as first-generation. Interviews were allotted 30 minutes with each participant in a private office setting. As the researcher and

employee of the university, I had access to the student's real name and contact information; however, it was explained to all participants engaged in the individual interviews how a pseudonym would be assigned and used from the conclusion of the interview and beyond to keep identification confidential.

The order of the interview, according to Patton (2002), can be arranged by a random list of questions or by topic. For this study, the interview objective was to present questions representing common characteristics of first-generation students found in the literature review relating to pre-college and experiences during college and how those, based on student perception, affected persistence to college graduation. Four categories of first-generation student characteristics were derived from the literature review as follows: academic preparedness, college integration, financial impact, and college connectedness. Then, roughly equal numbers of interviews questions were written to explore each category. For example, there were six questions written for the category academic preparedness, five questions written for the category college integration, four questions written for the category financial impact, and six questions written for the category college connectedness. The standardized open-ended approach to the interviews allowed participants to explain their own perceptions and elaborate on their answers with limited interjection from me; however, probing was occasionally used to gain greater depth and understanding of a statement made by the participant.

With the help of my departmental staff, I audio recorded and transcribed the interviews I conducted. All transcribed interviews were reviewed to make sure all questions were accounted for and the appropriated pseudonyms were applied to each

transcription. The researcher then reviewed the transcriptions to the survey recording for each student to check for accuracy and to investigate discrepancies in which none were found. The content of the transcriptions was then analyzed to establish categories relating to the research questions presented through two processes of coding.

Survey reliability and validity. Prior to survey distribution and interview engagement, each tool used in this study was reviewed by professional experts within the university setting who are knowledgeable in the development of appropriate research tools for measurement. The verbiage of each tool was reviewed and minor adjustments made to word structure. This was done to increase the validity in the tools themselves. The survey was designed for this study and used for the first time; therefore, the reliability has not been determined.

Data Analysis

The demographic information described the participant population of the student. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to tabulate the data. An expert MWU professor in the area of statistics and SPSS was asked to review the tabulated data. She and I both concluded there were no statistical differences in the participant population when comparing first-generation to non-first-generation participants. Based on no significant difference between the groups, it was decided to continue the study using only qualitative methodology.

Relying heavily on the participants' perceptions, the transcribed interviews were analyzed through the process of coding. The words from the participants are the data and the importance of the qualitative analysis is in understanding the large

amount of data found in the interviews (Patton, 2002). Two processes of coding took place in the analysis of qualitative data, open coding and axial coding. Coding resulted in emerging themes and support for categories identified in the literature review. Open coding begins with the qualitative data and allows analysis by conceptualizing, comparing, and categorizing the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial coding allows connection between set categories, "involving conditional, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). Because I was exploring open questions as opposed to testing a theoretically derived hypothesis, my process of analysis was inductive (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Categories were derived from the literature review in preparation for axial coding. Interview data were analyzed for alignment with the categories. With knowledge of categories represented through literature, and interview questions to address those pre-set categories, I personally conducted the axial coding for alignment and commonalities. Interview data were coded again using open coding to discover emerging themes unrelated to categories from the literature review. University professors, unaware of categories based from literature and interview structure, conducted open coding to avoid biases and to strengthen the findings.

Threats to Validity

The process of validation occurs when evidence is analyzed and collected to support an inference for, "appropriateness, correctness, meaningfulness, and usefulness" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The ability to match reality to the research findings defines internal validity (Merriam, 1998). The internal validity also relates to

the trustworthiness of the findings and whether I captured and/or measured what I intended to measure (Merriam, 1998). Threats to internal validity are categorized along with efforts to control the threat in order to strengthen validity.

- Selection Bias – Participants were chosen from a convenience sample. The threat was partially controlled by allowing members of the sample group to volunteer to participate without coercion or penalty.
- Researcher Bias - Having my own opinions and perceptions as a first-generation student in addition to my work in assisting students to persist to graduation, I was aware of my own bias and asked university and research professionals to review the survey and interviews in an effort to avoid persuasion or leading while interviewing. I also used other university professsors to conduct the open coding analysis of the interview data.
- History - unplanned or unanticipated events may have occurred during the course of the study, which may have affected the responses given by one or more participants (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Although unable to control events outside of the study, events disclosed by participants during the research process were acknowledged and allowed to be a part of the interview process for disclosure.
- Location - Alternate explanations may be the result of a particular location where data collection takes place (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). To control location threat, the interview environment remained constant by conducting most interviews in the same office setting.

- Instrumentation - Instrument decay occurs when different interpretation of the results is permitted (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). To reduce threat to instrumentation, two other research experts coded the interviews transcriptions for reliability.
- Implementation - To reduce the threat to implementation, interview administration was constant by conducting the interviews myself and by asking the same questions each time.

External validity. External validity occurs when the results of one specific study can be generalized to appropriate populations outside the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). This study was conducted at one institution with one group of participants who were graduating the same year. This limited population and perception of experiences does not allow for easy generalization; however, the intent to research this population was to explore student perceptions in depth and their experiences relating to persistence to degree completion. Merriam (1998) explained how in qualitative research, samples are chosen by the researcher to understand in depth, not necessarily to learn what is generally true of many. This research was conducted to understand the perceptions of graduating first-generation students at MWU on why they persisted to graduation and to use the discoveries to improve MWU's approach to first-generation students to increase their degree completion.

Procedure

A number of steps were taken to identify the first-generation students among the pool of students preparing to graduate. All research took place during the 2012

spring semester. After obtaining IRB approval on February 24, 2012, a list was obtained through Academic Services listing all senior level courses. First, senior level courses were identified representing all colleges of the university; humanities, education, sciences, communications, business, and the department of MWU's individualized education accelerated program. E-mails were sent to faculty of the courses from the list requesting permission to attend class and to make a personal request to complete the survey. Knowing there was a limited amount of time, and also knowing MWU senior students experience electronic survey saturation, I made the decision to conduct the demographic surveys in person to try and achieve the best return rate possible. Out of 23 e-mails sent to faculty requesting class time for survey distribution and completion, 17 gave their permission to participate.

Second, classroom visits took place March 14 through March 30, 2012. Each visit took approximately 15 minutes or less which involved the presentation from script explaining the nature of the survey and study, the distribution of the survey, student completion, and collection. The script shown in Appendix B explained to students how their participation was optional and not required. Confidentiality was also explained to the students prior to distribution of the survey. To ensure confidentiality, names were not asked as a part of the survey and contact information was only requested of the participants who were willing to be contacted for an interview. Additionally, after the distribution of the survey, an envelope was left at the front of the class and the students were asked to deposit the interviews in the envelope after I stepped out of the room during the survey completion process. A student volunteer was asked to bring the envelope with completed surveys to the door

of the classroom once all willing participants had the opportunity to complete them. A brief introduction and explanation of the study required disclosure of my title and relationship with the research institution. As a dean and a person of authority, the decision was made to leave the room to allow students to participate freely based on their participation by choice and not by obligation. After visiting 17 classes, 229 surveys were completed and collected.

Next, a review of the surveys took place to identify which participants met the set criteria for being first-generation. Even though the script specifically requested students who had applied for graduation, nine students who completed the surveys had not applied for graduation and therefore did not meet the criteria. A total of 229 demographic surveys were completed with 9 removed, which left a total of 220 who met the criteria.

Out of 220 participants, 37 self-identified as first-generation based on the definition specified for this study and 183 participants self-identified as non-first generation students. It is at this juncture I would like to call attention to a small category of students. Based on the definition of this study, a first-generation student was defined as a student whose mother and father did not attend college with high school being their highest level of education attained (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). There were 10 students who were included in the category of first-generation even though the education level of their parents went beyond high school while attending a technical or trade school. As a college administrator with over 22 years of higher education experience, and a former technical school employee, I used my professional judgment in determining that the experiences at a technical or trade

school do not equate to those at a college or university. This determination was made based on entrance requirements, engagement and academic opportunities, and length of time to complete a program when compared to a degree completion institution of higher education.

The next phase of the research involved the one-on-one interview. The interviewing process began the week of April 3, 2012. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to read and sign the Informed Consent form (see Appendix C). All participants were at least 18 years of age and all interview participants completed the Informed Consent form.

After consent to interview was received, each completed surveys were again reviewed to confirm first-generation student interviewees had completed an application for graduation. Out of the 220 surveys collected meeting the set criterion, 37 were identified as first-generation students—eight were removed from the study because according to their survey, they had not completed a graduation application.. From the surveys of first-generation participants, a list of e-mail addresses and/or phone numbers was created from those who gave permission for future interview. During the last week of March 2012, an e-mail (see Appendix D) was sent to students listing an e-mail address and a phone call was made to those only listing a telephone number. Out of 29 e-mail and phone requests, 13 students responded by scheduling a time to be interviewed.

Upon completion of the initial 13 responsive participants, a second request was made to first-generation students the week of April 11, 2012, and two additional first-generation participants agreed to be interviewed. During the same week, I requested

permission to interview non-first-generation students and seven agreed. In total, 22 interviews were completed—15 first-generation students and seven non-first-generation students. The final interview was conducted April 24, 2012. A second request was not made of the non-first-generation students as the semester came to a close and MWU entered finals week.

Participants were given the option to interview in person or by phone (see Appendix E). Face-to-face interviews took place in a private office setting to reduce interruptions. The interviewing process began the week of April 3, 2012. Students who chose to be interviewed by phone were e-mailed the Informed Consent form and were asked to complete, sign, and return it via fax or e-mail. Upon consent to participate, students were given an explanation of the study, how the study pertains to me personally as a first-generation student, and how the topic and purpose of the study relates to my current professional position with MWU. After the study and purpose were explained, the recording was started. While recording, I explained to each participant that his or her participation was completely voluntary and could choose to stop at any time during the interview. It was also explained that they were not obligated to answer every question and could choose to pass a question and move on to the next.

Each interview conducted took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. A total of 20 open-ended questions were asked. At the end of each interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions or to add something not asked, addressed, or discussed during the interview. Once participants indicated there was nothing more to say, the recorder was stopped. Because each participant had

applied to graduate, it was my decision to offer alumni window clings as a small token of appreciation for their participation.

Twenty-two interviews were recorded. The recordings were individually transcribed and reviewed for accuracy and preciseness to the actual recording. I used axial coding to analyze the interview transcripts starting with predetermined categories of first-generation student characteristics I derived from the literature. Transcriptions were given to two course colleagues who completed the doctoral program and a graduate assistant who was currently enrolled in the doctoral program and had completed the Qualitative Methods in Educational Research course. I asked university professors not involved with the study and not aware of the categories derived from the axial coding to analyze the interview data using open coding. Results from the axial coding and open coding were compared to strengthen the validity.

The purpose of this study was not to be able to generalize the results of the small sample to a larger population. The purpose of the study was to explore MWU's first-generation students' perceptions of why they persisted to graduation. Survey data identified those who met the study group criteria and descriptive statistics helped described them. Interview data were analyzed to answer the research questions and improve the first-generation student experience and rate of graduation.

Chapter Four: Results

Results from the interviews are reported in this chapter. Axial and open coding allowed themes to emerge and findings are reported in this chapter for discussion. The discussion focuses on first-generation college students' perceptions. The process of axial coding included preset categories that identified variables found in literature specific to first-generation college students and their persistence to graduation. I derived the categories of first-generation student characteristics from the literature review and they are as follows: academic preparedness, college integration, financial impact, and college connectedness. I analyzed the interview data using axial coding to find data that aligned with each category. Then, I used open coding with the help of unbiased others to discover the following emerging themes: encouragement, adjustment, choice of major, financial aid, employment, and personal awareness. The findings were the results from one-on-one interviews with MWU students who had applied for graduation. First-generation students were the primary focus of this study but data collected from non-first-generation students were used to validate the exclusivity of the data collected from first-generation students.

Responses to Interview Questions

I used axial coding to find interview data that aligned with each of the four categories derived from the literature review on the characteristics of first-generation students. Each preset category was assigned an acronym and interview questions were divided and reported within the following categories as represented below:

- Academic Preparedness (AP),
- College Integration (CI),
- Financial Impact (FI),
- College Connectedness (CC).

Data were further divided between first-generation student responses and non-first-generation student responses. Student names are pseudonyms.

First-Generation Responses

Interview question #1 (AP): *Explain why you decided to pursue a degree.* Participants explained how pursuing a degree was a way to make life change for the "better." Referencing "better" involved "better" marketability, "better" life once a degree and career were obtained, and to "better" perform in their abilities upon degree completion. Ralph said, "I guess basically, in a simple answer, to better my life." Participants described wanting improvement over what they had at the time the decision was made to attend college.

Interview question #2 (AP): *Explain how your education prior to college prepared you for college.* The responses to this question were mixed. Participants explained how they felt prepared for college, but not always by the high school in which they attended. One participant referenced being home-schooled and felt prepared because he knew how to complete work independently and be self-directed. Others responded by explaining their attendance in college preparatory or private school programs, which focused on college entrance. Lindsey explained how she attended a private girl's school, "It was a prep school so it was kind of like being in college from seventh grade to senior." While the question asked about how education prepared them, several answered how they were not prepared by their high school but instead were self-prepared. A few responses indicated they were not properly prepared. Bob said, "I reentered college after 32 years, so high school didn't have

much to do with my preparation for college at all." Bob thought too much time had lapsed between high school and college to feel prepared.

Interview question # 3 (AP): *Now that you are about to graduate, what would you like to have known when you started?* Many of the responses indicated they would have liked to have a clearer picture or understanding of the college process relating to courses needed for degree completion, and choice of majors. Reggie said he would have liked to, "know beforehand what I really wanted to do." He felt he was continually exploring degree options while attending instead of exploring those options prior to starting his degree program. Some participants responded that they would have liked to know more about student organizations and involvement. Emily said, "[I] didn't know anything about financial aid, didn't know anything about where to find scholarships or how to get them" and she and others would have liked to know more about the financial aid process. In reference to financial aid, some participants elaborated by specifying how the loan process works and what additional grants were available.

Interview question #4 (AP): *Was there a person or persons who encouraged you to attend college?* Many participants described how family was the main source of encouragement to attend college. Family was described as parents, grandparents, siblings, children of the student, and spouse. Participants also explained how they encouraged themselves and were self-driven to attend college. When asked who encouraged Nathan to attend college, he replied, "No person in particular, it was my own choice." Very few first-generation participants indicated encouragement from high school resources.

Interview question # 5 (AP): *Was there a person or persons who discouraged you from attending college?* The majority of first-generation participants explained how there was no one who discouraged them from attending college. Some participants indicated a hesitation or a slight resistance from a parent or parents. Darren was one of those participants who shared, "My mom wasn't sure that college would be the right thing. There wasn't really any benefit that she saw that going to college as compared to going to work or going into the military." One participant indicated an unsupportive teacher in high school discouraged her from attending.

Interview question #6 (AP): *Did your friends from high school attend college?* It was common in this participant group to have high school friends who went on to attend college. Out of 18 of the first-generation participants, 13 explained how many or all of their friends went to college just as they did. Doug's response was similar to many others when he said, "I think pretty much all my friends went to college. A great majority did." The remainder of the group experienced many friends not going to school and suggested the main reasons for not going to college was to work or to get married.

Interview question #7 (CI): *Describe your most positive experience in college, in or outside the classroom.* The majority of participants specified their majors and classroom experiences in major courses as their most positive experience. Many elaborated by discussing the real life experience the faculty brought to the classroom and allowed the students to associate textbook information with "real world" situations. Additionally, first-generation students reported their associations with the variety of people on campus as their most positive experience. Drake

indicated, “I like getting different points of views on things. You’re going to get that in college.” The variety of people was explained to be faculty, staff, and students including the diverse population and people who were, “not like me.”

Interview question #8 (CI): *Describe your most negative experience in college, in or outside the classroom.* The responses to this question show variety in the results. The negative experiences of the first-generation participants seem to offer answers which were quite different and unique to the individual. Some participants explained how they had negative experiences living on campus with housing, roommates, parking, and rules. Other participants described how they felt uncomfortable or inadequate based on classroom experiences due to speaking in front of a group or being the oldest one in the class. Mandy explained how she was the oldest in one of her classes and had to work in a group for an assigned project. She shared how her ideas were discounted and said, “It’s like they resented the fact that I was put in there.” Having a teacher who did not teach well which caused difficulty in retaining the information needed was also stated as a negative experience.

Interview question #9 (CI): *Where did you receive most of your academic support?* The MWU community receives most of the credit in the participant responses as giving the most academic support. Many participants felt graduation would not have been possible without the encouragement and interaction with the MWU community involving friends, faculty, and staff. Donna’s respond best reflected the majority when she said, “It’s just being able to allot my resources to put all my eggs in one basket taking the good from each of my professors and then, of course, my peers because we’re all basically have the same life. So it really helps to

be very well-rounded in that aspect." Only a couple participants indicated academic support coming from home and an equal amount explained how most of their academic support came from within themselves.

Interview question # 10 (CI): *What were your biggest challenges in adjusting to college?* Many answered this question indicating adjustment to the college environment as the biggest challenge. This included being away from home, being around different people, learning new processes. Jenna said her biggest challenge was being in a new environment and college was a, "totally different experience" from where she came from. Secondary to college environment, participants indicated self-induced adjustments such as time management and motivation as the biggest challenges.

Interview question #11 (CI): *How did your relationships with college friends, faculty, and/or staff impacted your college experience?* Almost all first-generation participant indicated relationships as being positively impactful toward the college experience. Equally mentioned, friends and faculty played a big part in the lives of these participants and were credited in keeping them involved and engaged in college. Martin said, "Friends on campus are always interested in what you're doing, how you're doing, if you need help." Only two participants did not believe relationships were positively or negatively impactful to their college success and credited their own self determination as their reason for completing.

Interview question #12 (FI): *Describe how your financial situation impacted your college experience.* Only two participants indicated having parents who assisted them in paying for college and they felt that there was no negative financial impact to

their college experience. All other participants explained how finances negatively impacted their experience and claimed funds received outside the household allowed them to complete a college degree. Jade was an example of this situation and stated, "I do work full-time and didn't have a lot of extra money, so if it wouldn't have been for student loans I would have been in trouble." In addition to loans, outside funds included institutional grants and scholarships, federal grants, and funds provided to them by the military. Other first-generation participants described the need to work on and off campus as negatively impactful to their experience. One student specifically explained how in the beginning of his college experience he did not work and maintained a 4.0 grade point average but then began working his second year in college and his grade point average declined.

Interview question # 13 (FI): *Why did you work while in college?* Only a few responses indicated the reason for working as self-fulfillment or working because he or she wanted to. All other first-generation students indicated working as a need. Many responses indicated it was their responsibility to pay for school and working allowed them to take care of that financial responsibility in order to continue. Darren shared, "I chose to do work and learn because it would help with the financial aid costs. I could lessen that financial burden on my mom because she has other financial priorities that she needs to attend to." Other participants had financial responsibilities beyond their educational expenses.

Interview question #14 (FI*):* *What expenses, other than those related to college expenses, did you have while attending college?* Responses to this question describe a variety of expenses in addition to education. Many participants indicated

they support themselves completing by paying their own mortgage or rent, insurance, car, and cell phone. Asha had expenses shared by other participants and explained her expenses as the, "car payment, my insurance for my car, my phone, gas, food, and that sort of thing in addition to school expenses." Other expenses included personal items and toiletries, credit card, social, and travel expenses. All first-generation participants indicated having some additional expenses other than college.

Interview question #15 (CC): *Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree?* Only one first-generation participant stated the reason for persisting to graduation was to break the family cycle. Personal satisfaction was the primary reason for most participants. Jenna said, "Because I would probably regret my whole life if I started something and I didn't finish it." Others also explained how they persisted in order to have a better opportunity for a job or acceptance into graduate school. A few candidates gave credit to having friend, family, or university support which also contributed to persistence to degree completion.

Interview question #16 (CC): *What has engaged you the most in your college experience?* The primary acknowledgement of engagement for first-generation participants had a MWU focus relating to the environment, student community, and courses within major. In explaining what kept him engaged, Martin said, "I'd say two of the very first friends that I made on campus." He explained how he met the two friends through a student organization on campus. Other participants felt engaged in their college experience because of relationships with friends, family, and God. Three participants felt their self-drive is what kept them engaged.

Interview question #17 (CC): *Describe your confidence while attending college?* Out of 18 first-generation participant responses, only one individual indicated having low confidence. This one response was referring to personal life experiences taking place at the time of the interview and not necessarily directed toward academics. All other participants described themselves as having high confidence using words such as, "very," "pretty," "high," and "overly." Some described themselves as always having this level of confidence while others like Jade explained her level of confidence as, "Pretty low at first, but after I started to get into the swing of things, it increased." Some participants shared how their confidence level was low at the beginning of their college experience and improved as they completed courses and neared graduation.

Interview question #18 CC: If you were giving advice to future first-generation college students, what would you tell them? Most of the responses to this question referred to self-directedness and achieving goals. A majority of answers given suggested," "setting priorities," and keeping the "focus" on school. Participants also advised future first-generation students to "just go" to college and "finish." Melvin said, "It's an option and it can be done." Other advice given mentioned seeking out help when needed, getting involved on campus, and acknowledgement that completing a degree "can be done."

Interview question #19 (CC): *What was your biggest challenge in college?* Similar to how participants responded to question #8, answers relating to the biggest challenge in college seemed unique to each participant. There was an area of challenges mentioned which showed a trend in balancing academics with other areas

of their lives while attending college. Other challenges were adjusting to the college environment, learning the academic process, dealing with money, and learning to be an adult. Ralph said the biggest challenge was "knowing someone who knows the requirements [on campus] because I had to do it on my own." Only one participant felt there were no big challenges faced while in college.

Interview question #20 (CC): *Was there a point when you considered dropping out of college? If yes, what motivated you to stay and complete your degree?* Responses to this question were mixed. Four of the participants did more than just consider dropping out; they actually stopped out and returned at a later date. The reasons stated for stopping out at the time included finances, medical, and to work for the family business. The remainder of the responses was split with half of the responses stating they never considered dropping out. The last few responses were like Jade's response who indicated they considered dropping out because of illness, injury to themselves or someone in their family and thought, "I've gone so far already, I don't want to just throw it away." One other participant explained how he was academically suspended but appealed to immediately return and the appeal was approved.

Non-First-Generation Responses

Interview question #1 (AP*):* *Explain why you decided to pursue a degree.* Non-first-generation participants pursued a degree because of family, specifically parents and grandparents. Krista said, "It's always been very strongly encouraged by my parents to continue school after high school and to have, at minimum, a bachelor's degree if not more." Many stated pursuing a degree was just expected. Other

participants wanted to "get ahead" in their careers and wanted to avoid a "blue collar" job level. These participants felt that a degree was the way to obtain this level of employment.

Interview question #2 (AP): *Explain how your education prior to college prepared you for college.* Participants felt high school prepared them for college because they attended a private high school or took advance placement courses. Carrie explained how she took advanced placement courses and how it, "was nice knowing that I already had an advantage coming into college." Others explained how the high school was capable of preparing them, but they didn't take school at the time seriously enough to get the most from it. A smaller portion of participants in this group explained how they self-prepared for college more than high school prepared them.

Interview question # 3 (AP): *Now that you are about to graduate, what would you like to have known when you started?* A majority of the non-first-generation participants would have liked to know more about requirements to fulfill their degrees. Self-awareness was also mentioned when participants explained how they wish they would have known how to focus more on academic instead of social life and aware of their own ability to complete the degree program. Annissa stated, "You have to learn how to balance your educational life and the stuff you're doing on the side because college is a step up from high school, you realize it's more of a sacrifice." Only one participant indicated wanting to know more about financial aid.

Interview question #4 (AP): *Was there a person or persons who encouraged you to attend college?* Non-first-generation participants explained how family played

the bigger role in encouraging college attendance. Family members specifically mentioned were parents, grandparents, spouse, and siblings. Self-encouragement was also significant in attending college. When Krista was asked this question, she replied, “Everyone in my family. All of my close friends were going to college, everyone in my high school, lots and lots of support!” Other participants, in addition to including family, also included close friends or family friends who encouraged college attendance.

Interview question #5 (AP): *Was there a person or persons who discouraged you from attending college?* This group of participants did not feel there was a person or persons who discouraged them from attending college. A few described how their parent did not encourage college attendance; however, they did not discourage them from attending either. Benjamin said no one really discouraged him from attending but said, “I did have a little bit of naysayers.” Benjamin was older and responsible for his own life and friends initially discouraged him from attending when he mentioned he wanted to go back to school to complete his degree.

Interview question #6 (AP): *Did your friends from high school attend college?* A majority of the friends of non-first-generation participants attended college. Some indicated it was just common practice to move on to the next phase of education after high school. Jake explained that his high school friends, “a lot of them are in St. Louis, a lot of them graduated, and a majority attended college.” No one indicated it was common for friends not to go to college and only one individual elaborated on college attendance by stating how friends attended but not many finished.

Interview question #7 (CI): *Describe your most positive experience in college, in or outside the classroom.* There was a variety of responses to this question but more answers appear to be very specific to the individual and his or her experience. A couple participants explained how their involvement with athletic teams felt most positive. Others specified involvement with the campus community, specifically faculty, other students, and campus activities made their college experience positive. When Marge was asked about her most positive experience, she quickly replied, "I got published! That made me feel really good." Only one individual chose a positive experience that was unrelated to college activity and discussed "feeling like an adult when purchasing a home" as a "college student".

Interview question #8 (CI): *Describe your most negative experience in college, in or outside the classroom.* Negative experiences discussed also varied and were specific to the individual. Many addressed processes in college as negative which included dealing with the Business Office, working out housing issues, discussing majors and course options, and how courses from other institutions transferred into MWU. An example of this type of negative experience was shared by Maggie when she said, "I've been a little frustrated with some of the business office stuff." A few participants indicated negative experiences outside of campus involving health issues and criticism from a spouse. Only one participant stated there were no negative experiences in college.

Interview question #9 (CI): *Where did you receive most of your academic support?* Most non-first-generation participants credited MWU faculty with giving the most academic support. Family was also supportive academically with parents and

grandparents being the primary family members to support. Krista explained, "My family, outside of campus, would be the biggest support for sure. On campus, I would say all the teachers involved with the criminal justice area have been really supportive." One participant specified her fiancé as giving her the most academic support. No one in this participant group stated academic support came from friends.

Interview question #10 (CI*):* *What were your biggest challenges in adjusting to college?* This question also presented a variety of answers. The only answer duplicated by non-first-generation participants indicated the biggest challenge as being responsible and doing things themselves. Carrie explained her biggest challenge as being responsible for herself and "how much control I had over what I did." Other participants mentioned balancing work, school, and time. One individual felt learning the college process was the most challenging and one other individual specified finances as the biggest challenge in adjusting to college.

Interview question #11 (CI): *How have your relationships with college friends, faculty, and/or staff impacted your college experience?* There were commonalities in the responses to this question. Non-first-generation participants equally mentioned relationships with friends and faculty on campus as positively impacting their college experiences. Annissa explained, "My professors, especially within my degree, have always been so supportive." Annissa also went on to share how she would have never imagined meeting such a diverse group of friends as she has at MWU who will be long lasting friends. Only one participant stated how a relationship on campus with a roommate negatively impacted the college experience.

Interview question #12 (FI): *Describe how your financial situation impacted your college experience.* Negative impact from financial situations was minimal with this group. Most felt they were adequately able to manage their financial situation while in college because of financial assistance through MWU or other federal funds such as grants or military benefits. Some participants indicated full financial support from their parents and one specified there was no impact on their college experience. Mare explained how her parents paid for her college expenses and shared, "If I don't have to worry about [paying for college], I can worry about other things." Only one participant specified employment as a negatively impactful part of the college experience.

Interview question #13 (FI): *Why did you work while in college?* Non-first-generation participants worked while in college to help pay for tuition and school expenses. Maggie was an athlete and explained how most of her teammates coached like she did to make extra money, "It's a way to earn extra money without having an actual part-time or full-time job." Maggie's money from coaching was earned for spending money. Other participants also indicated they worked in order to support themselves or to earn additional spending money. One individual worked to stay connected and contribute to the family business.

Interview question #14 (FI): *What expenses, other than those related to college expenses, did you have while attending college?* Responses from non-first-generation participants indicated the car was the primary expense other than those related to college. Participants who were no longer being supported by parents explained how household expenses and insurance were also necessary expenses.

Benjamin was one of those self-supporting participants who when asked about expenses unrelated to college expenses, he said, “Oh gosh, I’ve got all kinds of stuff. Rent, food, car payment, car insurance, health insurance premiums, stuff like that.” Other expenses mentioned included phone, personal items, clothing, and miscellaneous.

Interview question #15 (CC): *Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree?* Personal drive and expectation was the most common answer to why this group believed they persisted to degree completion. Many stated that not finishing was not even a consideration. Wanting to continue on and begin an advanced degree was also mentioned as the reason why degree completion was necessary. Krista explained, “I didn’t know what I was going to do with my life if I didn’t have at least my undergraduate degree.” One individual mentioned belief in a higher power as the reason he persisted to graduation.

Interview question #16 (CC): *What has engaged you the most in your college experience?* All answers to this question were directed specifically to the MWU community. Some non-first-generation gave credit to their professors for engaging them the most. Carrie said, “My professors. It’s really all about them.” Many mentioned their majors and the “real life experience” brought to the classroom on a daily basis through lecture kept them most engaged. Some participants mentioned their relationships with friends on campus and their involvement with a sports team as the top reasons for engagement.

Interview question #17 (CC): *Describe your confidence while attending college?* All non-first-generation participants reported having high confidence. Level

of confidence was described as “fairly,” “more,” “high,” and “always.” Annissa stated, “For the most part, I had a lot of confidence that I was going to get through this and I did it.” A small amount of participants indicated having lower confidence in the beginning but claimed a significant improvement in confidence as they approached graduation.

Interview question #18 (CC): *If you were giving advice to future first-generation college students, what would you tell them?* Non-first-generation students gave helpful tips when asked to give advice to future first-generation students. Participants like Maggie highlighted process and programs by saying, “There are programs and people to talk to and tutors and take advantage of what would make the transition easier.” Some suggested having good study habits and staying focused on graduating. Others suggested making friends and taking advantage of programs and services on campus. One participant wanted future first-generation students to know that “school can be interesting.”

Interview question #19 (CC): *What was your biggest challenge in college?* A variety of answers were given by non-first-generation participants when asked about their biggest challenge in college. Maintaining family relationships was mentioned as a challenge because of the time committed to school and less time available to be with family. Adjusting to the demands of college life also showed challenges in the areas of time management, procrastination, and keeping focused on what needed to be accomplished. Marge explained how her biggest challenge, “goes back to the whole time management and organizing myself.” The requirement of taking courses not included in the major was also mentioned as a biggest challenge.

Interview question #20 (CC): *Was there a point when you considered dropping out of college?* If yes, what motivated you to stay and complete your degree? No one in the non-first-generation group stopped out at any point and time during his or her college career. Most did not even consider dropping out or stopping out as an option. Jake shared, "I had a lot of concerns about whether I could make it or not. I knew that I have to finish." A few participants in this group stated they thought about it because of problems with parents or they were getting tired of going to school, but they also indicated the consideration to drop out was not a serious one.

I used axial coding to find interview data that aligned with each of the four categories derived from the literature review on the characteristics of first-generation students. Each preset category was assigned an acronym and interview questions were reported within the following categories: Academic Preparedness (AP), College Integration (CI), Financial Impact (FI), and College Connectedness (CC). The following is a summary of the results of the interview data that aligned with the four first-generation characteristic categories:

1. Academic Preparedness (AP) - first-generation students reported preparing for college as a way of improving their life to a level better than what they had when they started college
2. College Integration (CI) - the relationship with faculty was important for college integration and their biggest adjustment was being away from home and learning new processes
3. Financial Impact (FI) - first-generation students would have liked to be better prepared for the college and financial aid processes

4. College Connectedness (CC) - employment and finances had a negative impact on the college experience

Emerging Themes

Open coding was the method used to explore emerging themes from the responses given during one-on-one interviews. Open coding was done without previous knowledge of the preset categories involved in the axial coding. University professors were asked to use open coding to validate the results from the axial coding and to explore potentially missed themes outside of the preset categories established through axial coding. Seven themes emerged among first-generation participants related to first-generation students' persistence to graduation: college preparedness, encouragement, adjustment, choice of major, faculty interaction, financial impact, and personal awareness. These themes are related to academic and non-academic activities.

Emerging theme: College preparedness. Experiences prior to college proved to be significant in the completion of a degree. A parent's education level and socio-economic status can positively impact the student's completion rate, but the student's academic preparedness prior to college also has a positive impact on degree completion (Ishitani, 2006). Students experiencing a stringent level of academic preparedness and a stringent level of high school coursework are more likely to persist to completion (Chen, 2005).

First-generation students. Several participants described a rigorous high school experience. Donna stated, "I've been in the Catholic schooling system from 3-year-old preschool till I was a senior in high school so 15 years within the Catholic

school. A very stringent and very disciplined schooling so I believe it did prepare me as what to expect." Reggie and Lindsey also indicated their attendance at a private high school and Lindsey stated, "It was a prep school so it was kind of like being in college." Angela did not attend a private school but said, "I took as many honors classes as possible." Rigorous coursework was not the only preparation for college mentioned by participants. Other influences such as specific programs and guidance counselors were also mentioned as guiding factors to preparedness.

Darren explained how his high school curriculum was fair, but he shared how his experience with a college assistance program helped prepare him for college. Darren stated:

> I went through a program called College Summit that helped me with the paperwork as far as FASFA, submitting school applications, writing a personal statement and stuff like that and was probably the most beneficial thing for me because it got me a leg up compared to other high school seniors who didn't know anything about the whole application thing.

While Darren utilized the services of College Summit, Ralph specified his guidance counselor as the reason for his preparedness. Ralph recalled:

> There was a guidance counselor that was really a great help to me. She provided all the information that I needed to apply and gave me the requirements and suggestions for many of the schools that I would be eligible to go to.

Darren's experience is consistent with McDonough's (1997) findings related to first-generation students who were encouraged by their high school counselors to attend college and viewed as the primary and most effective resources in college preparation.

Doug recalled how the process of his pre-college experience helped prepare him for college. Doug was home schooled from the fourth grade through the 12th grade and explained, "So I think the independent studying kind of the same format was not a big transition at all coming to a college class where you have a hour lecture then you do all the work." His response shows how familiarity with an approach similar to the college approach to academics can help a student persist.

Not all participants indicated proper high school preparation for college preparedness. The first-generation participants who felt as though high school preparation for college was not a factor toward degree completion were students who did not start and finish college directly out of high school. Bob explained how in high school he was an "average" student and, "From 1981 until I reentered college was 32 years. So high school didn't have much to do with my preparation for college at all."

Like Bob, Mandy and Jade did not attend college directly after high school. Mandy chose to get married and start a family and explained, "I had attempted back in the 80's, before I became a single parent to go back to college and my husband didn't want me to." Jade also found herself deciding to marriage instead of pursuing a college degree. When asked if she thought her education prior to college helped prepare her for college she responded, "I don't know that it really did. It was too long of a time in between there from the time I graduated to the time I decided to go back to college." When asked if she felt like she lost some information between that time-

frame, she added, “I felt like I did. I felt like I had lost a lot of it actually, but I found out I really didn’t lose as much as I thought I did.”

Melvin described himself as a “non-traditional student.” He explained how he “graduated high school in ’96 and then didn’t really do anything for a number of years.” He added how he believed his preparedness came from, “just getting over the fear of not really knowing all the academic stuff that was going to be taught, and that was okay.” It was this exact fear found in non-traditional students that lead Koehler and Burke (1996) to study this student group and implement a transitional program to reduce the anxieties and guide students to be more self-directed learners.

Non-first-generation students. Experiences prior to college also proved to be significant in the completion of a degree for non-first-generation students. Like their first-generation counterparts, non-first-generation participants shared how rigorous academic curriculum helped prepare them for college. Carrie stated:

> I took all advanced placement classes in high school, as well as college school credit classes so that was nice knowing that I already had an advantage coming into college, plus I felt like I kind of knew what college would maybe expect from me.

Krista also felt prepared stating, “I went to a college preparatory school. A private catholic school and the main focus, again, it was assumed that almost everyone was going on to college.” Marge described her school in Argentina as, “very strict so it always taught me to work really hard so I think that when I came here, I didn’t have a problem working hard because that’s just how I had been doing it.” Maggie also

described her high school as very “disciplined” in their approach to academic curriculum.

In comparison to first-generation participant responses, non-first-generation participants also identified sources other than curriculum which helped prepare for college. Jake spoke about how his, “high school had amazing teachers” and how it was those teachers who prepared him. Annissa identified the high school community, teachers, classmates, and school groups, gave her the support she needed to proceed to college. Annissa shared, “My teachers were really great at making references for me to colleges and helping me prepare to get into a college because I hadn’t a clue how to get into college or where I wanted to go.” Although not curriculum based, it was the support McDonough (1997) mentioned in his findings that made the students feel like they were ready for the college experience.

One non-first-generation participant did not believe high school prepared him for college. Similar to the first-generation participants, this student did not go directly into college after high school and spent some time in the military before deciding to pursue his degree. Benjamin shared how high school did not prepare him because, “I didn’t take it seriously, I didn’t care.” When asked if the school itself did not prepare him or if he felt he just did not allow it to prepare him, he answered by saying he felt like he just did not allow it to prepare him.

When comparing the responses relating to academic preparedness from first-generation and non-first-generation participants, both groups share similar experiences. Students who felt prepared identified appropriate curriculum as the reason. Other participants shared programs or people assisted in their preparedness.

Participants who felt less prepared were students who did not enter college directly after high school.

Emerging theme: Family encouragement. Ishitani (2006) explained how family support and encouragement positively affects persistence to graduation in first-generation students. The findings from this study support the results in Ishitani's (2006) study. Almost all first-generation participants mentioned family encouragement as the most important contributor to the college experience.

First-generation students. Only two first-generation participants mentioned a parent as being the most encouraging person or people. Martin recalled how his parents encouraged him by talking about, "all the long grueling hours and the tough work that they had to do for low pay and how they didn't want me to have to work my way up like that." He continued by sharing how that situation worked out for them but they wanted him to, "be better off." Melvin came from the foster care system and explained that, "Even though I aged out of the foster care system, she [foster mom] was still a very intricate part of my life."

Siblings played a strong role in encouraging the college experience for the first-generation participants. Many participants indicated being a self-motivator but then also discussed a family member who played an encouraging role. Abner shared how he encouraged himself but also explained, "My sister would pay for my fees [instead of] my parents because [my siblings] were the ones that studied like me." Jenna also described how she knew her parents wanted her to study hard and get a degree but when asked who encouraged her the most, she answered, "Probably my sister." Jenna explained that her sister was older and studied medicine.

In addition to siblings, grandparents were also a contributor of encouragement. Drake described how his grandmother constantly reminded him to finish his degree by stating, “She was really the one on my shoulder telling me to go back and finish.” Donna was also encouraged by her grandmother and said, “So she’s really helped me, she’s motivated me, telling me I’m a great worker and I’m a very smart student, so she’s really been the push.” Angela indicated it was her grandpa and “grandpa-like” family friend who were her biggest supporters. “If even I was questioning what I should do, those were the people that I turned to because I felt like they had the most honest [opinion and] they wanted the best for me personally,” Angela stated.

Other first-generation participants identified “family” as being supportive and mentioned even a supportive husband or an adult son or daughter, but many of those participants really gave themselves credit for their own encouragement. Darren was very clear when he stated, “At the start there really wasn’t someone there, it was my own personal drive to go to school just to do better for myself.” Ralph also credited himself for his own encouragement when he said, “It was more of self-discipline” as opposed to someone else encouraging him. He went on to say, “So it was more of a personal decision than anything.”

Non-first-generation students. Encouragement for non-first-generation participants was similar but slightly different. Most participants responded how “family” encouraged them with little specification of family members such as a parent, siblings, or grandparent. Two participants explained how encouragement came from within but one participant, Annissa, explained how a non-family member was the greatest encourager by stating

> When there were times that I felt I was being held back and it might be impossible for me to get where I want to be, she was always in the background pushing me and encouraging me not to give up.

Emerging theme: Adjustment. Ishitani (2006) explained in his research how staying enrolled term-to-term was important in terms of persistence to graduation. Students who did not stop out were more likely to complete their degrees (Ishitani, 2006). To be comfortable enough to persist from term-to-term, students must learn how to maneuver through and adjust to the college environment and literature explains how this adjustment can be more difficult for first-generation students (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Adjustment emerged as a theme from this study.

First-generation students. First-generation students identified their biggest adjustment challenges as being away from home, being self-sufficient, and balancing school life and life outside of school. Participants explained how they came to realize their success depended on their own abilities and accountability for their own actions.

Some first-generation participants indicated they did not live a great distance from the university; however, the environment was very different than that of the environment from home. Darren explained how home was only 40 minutes from the university and how the university environment seemed, "much more quieter and cleaner. Every day is just different here, the people, just everything. It was kind of a shock to me." Mandy also shared how home was, "only 40 miles away," but that a big challenge was "being away from family." Martin said his home was "only 15 to 20 minutes away" but he comes from a big family who are very close and, "it's hard not being around all that." Nathan explained how home was outside of the United States

and MWU was, “a bit different than what I was used to at home” in reference to classroom size and lecture style. Jenna described herself as coming from a small country to MWU. She explained how she did not struggle with adjusting to her studies or to a new social life, but there were challenges in adjusting to a new environment away from home. She explained, “My biggest challenge has been just adapting, living with three more people, completely different than me, totally alone. I don’t know where the streets are; I don’t know where I can get something.” This adjustment to being away from home and in a new environment also led to the realization of the need for self-reliance.

The first-generation participants explained how self-directedness and drive allowed them to overcome adjustment obstacles by confronting them. Emily recalled having difficulty with finding good help through her advisor or tutors, but said, “I’m a good student and I’m a perfectionist and I’m really driven. I think challenges are what you make of them.” Angela explained how she felt she took care of her own stuff but indicated her biggest adjustment to be, “Probably just being on my own and taking on responsibility. And I’ve always liked controlling my own things, but I guess it just became more real.” Donna explained how she realized she was accountable for herself as an adult and, “like the real world is quick to come.” In addition to the accountability, Drake explained how self-sufficiency in structure was an adjustment for him by stating:

> In the military there was always somebody telling you just want to do and very structured. If you didn’t do something, you know, someone else would make

> sure you did it. Biggest adjustment was having to be accountable and doing everything I was supposed to because no one was going to make sure I did it.

Self-reliance and accountability were not the only challenge mentioned; first-generation students also shared how they had to adjust their time management to integrate into college.

Many first-generation participants mentioned the adjustment to time as the biggest challenge. Mandy thought her greatest adjustment was, "trying to balance work and school." Melvin had a similar response describing his biggest adjustment was

> Trying to balance work and school and coming to the realization that I needed, like I switched jobs about halfway through the program. But in the same token, you adapt and evolve with it and the way the program is structured, you learn how to do that.

Lindsey also shared how she had to make a work adjustment in order to accommodate her work and school balance and stated her biggest adjustment was, "going to school full-time and not working full-time. I'm used to having my own financial income so that's been tough in some ways for me." In addition to adjusting to balancing work time with school, first-generation students also struggled with overall time-management. Ralph explained how he felt his biggest adjustment was time-management and how the learning environment in college was different than high school because in college, faculty present the material and they, "expect you to draw up your own studying and time management skills." Joy felt the same by stating her biggest adjustment was, "The discipline of making myself sit down and do my

homework. There were always other things going on and a lot of family functions I did miss, at least part of, because I was doing homework." Reggie explained how he sacrificed social interaction to focus specifically on time for academics. He stated

> Loneliness played a big part during my junior year. The semester that I did the best in school was the semester that I neglected everyone. And even though in the end it was very well worth it, I learned that separating myself socially and including myself in everything academically wasn't the key, even though it resulted in very good grades.

Non-first-generation students. Adjustment struggles were shared between first-generation and non-first-generation participants in this study. Annissa explained how the MWU environment differed from home by saying, "it's a lot faster here." She went on to explain that moving from home was a big step for her and it was difficult to adjust to a different environment. Krista also discussed how MWU differed from home because of the differences in people it was, "a big adjustment coming here."

Similar to first-generation, non-first-generation participants explained an adjustment in time management. Marge explained how it was important for her to understand the system in college and when things needed to be done. This was difficult for her because as she stated, "I'm really awful of managing my time and I have a really hard time telling myself you need to sit down and do this." She shared how she had to learn to adjust her tendency to procrastinate if she wanted to do well.

Procrastination did not seem to be the issue with Benjamin but balancing work to life time was an issue. Benjamin explained, "the biggest challenge was just sleep."

He shared how he would work twelve hour shifts and then have to find time for class and studying. He felt that he was experiencing this adjustment struggle because he considered himself to be a non-traditional student attending during the day with traditional classmates. Study results indicate his adjustment struggle with time-management was shared with other students.

Also like their first-generation counterparts, non-first-generation participants had to adjust to self-sufficiency and accountability. Carrie discussed her adjustment struggle by explaining, "The amount of . . . how much control I had over what I did, kind of like my free will, I had so much I could do." Maggie also explained:

> I guess doing things on my own and kind of, you don't have somebody with you all the time to tell you need to do this and that, so it's kind of you have to learn how to self-motivate.

Maggie went on to explain how this was different than her home life.

In comparing first-generation with non-first-generation participants, there were no differences in the trends which emerged from their responses relating to adjustments. Both groups answered similarly as they were prepared to graduate. Outside of adjustments, other emerging themes among first-generation and non-first-generation students were mentioned as a part of college integration.

Emerging theme: Choice in major. Choice in academic major and interaction with faculty strongly emerged as themes in the interview transcripts. Choice of major is significantly influential in student persistence (Chen, 2005). This study found similar results in relation to choice of majors.

First-generation students. First-generation participants expressed how they wish they would have known more about career choices, options of majors, and more details pertaining to the courses required for specific majors. Drake explained how he wishes he would have, "researched different majors a little more." He explained that he is currently a police officer and he just assumed criminal justice would be most appropriate but later found out that most places just want you to have a degree, not necessarily in only criminal justice. He said had he known that, he would have, "maybe looked into a few different options." He did, however, add that even though he would have liked to explore other options, he still liked how he is able to use his current professional experience in the classroom and the field he is studying.

Lindsey shared how she wanted to work in a "helping profession." Several years ago she worked in a helping profession where most positions require a degree. Since she was already in the working environment, she was guided into her current major based on what she knew from her employer. She shares how there may have been other choices in which she was unaware, but completed her current program because of familiarity.

Doug had a different situation where he knew what career he wanted to pursue, but he wasn't sure of the appropriate major or what the courses involved. He stated:

> I didn't know a whole bunch about the subject and there are similar subjects for degree programs for a major and I almost got into the wrong one because I didn't know much about the topic and maybe that was just me, if I would have spent more time researching it I would have known.

He went on to explain how it was not until he started to look at complete degree programs in the university catalog that he realized he almost chose the wrong major but caught his mistake based on the required courses listed.

Non-first-generation students. Non-first-generation participants did not discuss as the first-generation participants had about the importance of choice of major. Non-first generation students also did not indicate learning about additional options of majors as an important part of the college experience. Findings associated with major for non-first-generation students involved faculty as an important part of the college experience.

Emerging theme: Faculty interaction. Participants shared how faculty interaction had a positive impact. Faculty was discussed as keeping the participants engaged and motivated. Faculty interaction emerged as an important part of the college integration process.

First-generation students. Jasmine described her faculty as, "encouraging, helpful, and uplifting." Lindsey stated how important her faculty were to her and how she appreciated their accessibility. She also explained how, "they offer this wealth of different kinds of experiences, so it's been fun to work with all of them; each one brings something special and different."

Jade and Mandy were both non-traditional first-generation students who liked the positive feedback and encouragement they received from their faculty. Jade explained how her faculty, "kept me encouraged." She recalled, "She kept talking to me and telling me I was doing a good job. It just kept me going." Mandy stated, "At first when I started back, I didn't think of my age, but now that I'm getting close to

retirement I'm thinking, but none of the professors ever made me feel like I didn't belong here."

Emily was a business owner at an early age and wanted more than encouragement from her faculty:

> I like how the teachers here have more experience in the real world. Like Mr. Hardman, a lot of people don't like Hardman because he's so hard. But that's how I am, so it is like perfect for me. And he was CEO; I'd love to be CEO. So I like that I can talk to him about things like that, because he has first-hand experience.

She discussed how it was important to her that her faculty understand her line of business and had the experience to back it up.

Non-first-generation students. Non-first-generation participants shared the importance of faculty as part of the integration process in college similar to the responses given by first-generation participants. Benjamin recalled how his faculty member discussed advanced degree options with him and acknowledged his high level of academic performance. This allowed him to feel confident in his work as a student. Carrie liked how she was able to approach her faculty without feeling like she was "bothering them." She felt they challenged her and stated, "They really push you to have that higher standard that you should hold for yourself and your job." Annissa shared how her faculty, "saw potential in me. They saw this young lady who takes her academics seriously." Krista expressed how her faculty had

> The willingness to help in both class material and any life material and I feel like if I had issues with life, I could sit down with a whole group of different faculty here and they would talk to me and help me.

Just knowing she was able to ask for help made Krista feel more involved and accepted.

Emerging theme: Financial impact. All participants who were surveyed in this study were receiving some form of financial assistance. Financial impact was found to be a significant factor relating to the college experience and degree completion. This is supported through what is known from literature indicating how impactful a student's financial situation can be toward persisting to graduation (Choy, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

First-generation students. Emily recalled, "I was really worried about finances." She explained how her father died before entering college and they were in rough financial shape. Emily described how she had to be prepared by saying, "Right when I just had to go to school, I planned out what I was going to do." She worked while in high school and saved what she could to be able to pay for college. She went on to say, "I took out student loans the first year, I didn't have to, I had enough cash to pay for I think two years of college without getting hurt because that's how freaked out I am about money." Emily later realized it was foolish to take out loans she did not need. Emily was one of the few participants who were able to pay for some college herself.

Jade shared how her financial situation was impactful but shared a different experience than Emily. Jade explained, "It was difficult. I do work full-time and I

didn't have a lot of extra money, so if it wouldn't have been for student loans, I would have been in trouble. I wouldn't have been able to do it." She continued by explaining how her financial aid eligibility is what allowed her to continue and how it, "worked out and it was okay." Darren also explained how financial aid was important for him:

> My main choice for coming to MWU was the financial aid that I received so compared to all the other schools that I got accepted to and the packages they offered, MWU's was just way better. I didn't want money to be an issue when I started school.

Many first-generation participants shared the same importance of financial aid as a reason for being able to continue and finish their degree; however, not all participants relied on only self-pay or financial aid.

Drake is a first-generation participant who did not attend college directly after high school. He decided to enlist in the military first. His participation in the military allowed him to also utilize Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits which provide funding for school. Drake explained

> My parents are both about as middle class as you can get. They wanted me to go, but it was told to me a long time ago they would support me anyway they could, but financially it was going to be on me if I wanted to make it happen.

As a non-traditional student, Drake could rely on the VA benefits to ease the financial concern for his education while he worked to take care of his other expenses.

Drake was not the only student who felt they needed to work while attending college. As mentioned earlier in chapter three, MWU students have a higher

employment rate than students from comparable institutions within the Carnegie class (NSSE, 2011). First-generation participants in this study were no exceptions. Ralph shared, "Coming from a low income family, money is always a stressful idea, especially whether or not you are going to have enough just for living expenses and books." Ralph explained how financial aid covered the cost of school but how he was employed through the Work and Learn program to tackle other costs. Expenses such as medical costs were also bothersome for him and he stated

> Other finances would be right now, with the healthcare situation and the way it is, I have no insurance. That is pretty stressful on me. Paying for medication out of pocket and being a college student can set you back financially.

Abner is an International student who did not qualify for financial aid because of his International status. He explained, like Ralph, how he needed Work and Learn funds to assist him with expenses outside of college; however, he requested and received the ability to work double Work and Learn hours in order to also have funds to contribute toward his tuition.

Some first-generation participants were lucky enough to parents who were able to support them financially while attending college. Even so, those first-generation participants explained why they decided to participate in the Work and Learn program despite their parental support. Darren shared how his mother was helping with his college expense but that participated in Work and Learn so, "I could do whatever I could do to lessen that financial burden on my mom because she has other financial priorities that she needs to attend to." Martin shared a similar situation and stated, "My parents, they support me 100% with school; however, even though they do that I

don't try to take it for granted and so I've found that Work and Learn, I found I could take $2,000 off yearly tuition." He later explained how his parents didn't expect this of him because they paid tuition for his other siblings but he said, "It wasn't so much a burden for me, I just felt like I should do something to help out."

Non-first-generation. Unlike first-generation participants, first-generation participants were not as concerned about finances and their ability to pay for college. Many non-first-generation students mentioned that tuition was paid but did not express a fear or a stress related to paying. Like Drake, Benjamin was also former military. He shared

> When I was looking at it, it was great especially with my GI Bill. I think I sat down and did the math one day and I think I was making like $45.00 an hour cash just to sit in a classroom, so I was like, this is pretty good.

Carrie was not former military but she also did not worry about finances associated with college. She stated, "My dad paid for most of my college so that was nice not having to worry about tuition." Tuition costs were not a concern but she did mention working for "spending money."

Other non-first-generation students had a financial plan to complete their college education. Annissa explained how she participated in pageants and how, "That scholarship definitely helped out." Annissa's focus did not appear to be financial impact during college but more about what her financial situation will be like after graduation. She stated, "But I definitely can see why financial stability is really important, especially graduating college and trying to find a career and with the economy, trying to find stuff like that."

Maggie also relied on personal talents to assist her with her college expenses. Maggie was an athlete and believed her athletic scholarship, "made it easier." She explained how she first chose a school other than MWU to attend and where she played volleyball. She explained how she no longer wanted to play volleyball at her former school but she knew her scholarship would be discontinued if she chose not to play. Her parents told her the decision was up to her because they would manage either way. Maggie decided to transfer to MWU and she explained that she initially considered MWU as her second choice to attend and play volleyball. The coaches at MWU offered Maggie a reasonable scholarship if she played and she stated, "Then my coaches convinced me to come back and actually upped my scholarship if I stayed. I will definitely play if it helps out my parents."

Marge's account of her financial situation was very different than the others but still showed how her college experience was not negatively impacted by finances. Marge explained how her family moved from Argentina to the states because of her father's employer. His employer offered to pay for the education of Marge and her siblings and this payment for education also included college. After a few years, the employer offered Marge's father the option to return to Argentina in which he refused. Upon his refusal to return, the employer also discontinued the education funding. Marge recalled

> After that they offered my dad to be moved to some other places or stay here and we stayed here so then they had to pay for it. But my parents had savings. My parents are good at saving so they are paying for that. They are not making me pay for it.

Even though the non-first-generation participants had lesser concern with college expenses, all still chose to work.

Unlike first-generation, non-first-generation participants worked for reasons other than to pay for school. Benjamin worked to pay for expenses such as rent, food, car payment, insurance and other living expenses while his military benefits paid for his educational expenses. Annissa was asked if her employment helped pay for school, she replied, "No, not really so much school, but outside expenses. There had been times where I had to buy books and stuff, for the most part my education has gratefully been paid for." Other non-first-generation students, like Marge and Krista, worked because they liked the area in which they worked. Marge worked for the Writing Center and stated, "I'm just doing Work and Learn and paid hours here at the Writing Center, which I really like working here." When Krista was asked why she decided to work she said

> I just worked for my dad. But it was more just helping the family business. And since I am going into law and going to work for his office eventually, it just makes sense to stay connected with his office as I continue with my education.

Working for personal expenses and choosing to work for personal experience was very different from the first-generation participants who indicated their primary reasons for working was those related to college expenses.

Emerging theme: Personal awareness. Participants were asked to discuss their perception of self-awareness and advice to others. Confidence and words of support were answered as personal awareness responses given during the interviews.

Personal awareness was found to emerge in various forms by both first-generation and non-first-generation students.

First-generation students. First-generation participants self-identified as confident. Using words such as very, highly, overly, and pretty when referencing their level of confidence. Jade stated

> My confidence level is pretty good right now because I really feel like I accomplished something. I am the oldest of five kids and I am the only one who went to college. So I feel like I have really accomplished something. So I am proud of myself.

Mandy had a similar response as Jade but also added, "I've always been a confident person. I feel good about my accomplishments but I don't think college is the reason."

Other first-generation participants stated how their confidence level changed as they persisted to graduation. Nathan stated, "I am much more confident in my abilities, like in my major subjects, yeah for sure." Martin also said, "At first I was very shy, but now its way up there. I have a lot of confidence. One of my teachers even said, wow, you have really changed over the years." Self-perception of high confidence was consistent among first-generation participants.

In addition to being aware of their high confidence level, first-generation students also had advice for future first-generation students. When asked to give advice to future first-generation students, first-generation participants offered words of support and encouragement. Donna said, "Just do it! That's really all. It will help you out so much in life." Angela said she would give the advice shared by her grandparents, "You are here to make betterment in yourself." Jenna wanted to tell

them to, “Just try to do their best, don’t let their families down, and achieve their goals.” Mandy wanted future first-generation students to know, “There’s a light at the end of the tunnel.” Both Jade and Drake wanted first-generation students to know, “It’s worth it in the end.”

In addition to words of encouragement, first-generation participants offered advice to provide relief from anxieties. Drake suggested, “Finish it the first time and look for support wherever you can get it.” Melvin said, “It kind of sounds overwhelming in the beginning, but it’s doable.” Emily identified with how another first-generation may feel and stated

> I think a lot of people are just scared that going from high school to college is like this insane jump and that it’s going to be so difficult. It’s just so scary at first so I would just tell them to take a breath and it’s not so hard.

Non-first-generation students. Similar to the responses given by first-generation participants, non-first-generation participants view their confidence level as high but did not use adverbs to describe their confidence level in the same way as first-generation participants. Also in comparison, non-first-generation participants did not indicate a change in confidence level as stated by the first-generation participants.

Non-first-generation participants were also asked to give advice to future first-generation students. Non-first generation participants advised students on what to do or how to approach college experiences. Carrie suggested, “Make friends whenever you’re having a hard time in class. It’s always nice to have somebody you can study with.” Benjamin advised first-generation students to, “Not really compare and look at their parents’ situation.” He went on to explain how they can take their knowledge

and apply it in the work place. Annissa told first-generation students to, “Have your priorities straight.” Marge suggested for future first-generation students to, “Map out their lives.” Maggie explained how first-generation students should, “Take advantage of the programs and services that these places offer.” More procedural advice was given in the responses of non-first-generation participants in comparison to the more supportive words of encourage given by the first-generation participants.

Summary

Based on the findings of this study themes emerged related to college preparedness, encouragement, adjustments, choice in major, interaction with faculty, financial impact, and self-awareness. Although each theme provides valuable information, it is important to highlight major choice, financial impact, and self-awareness as persistent and significant factors to first-generation participants. Chapter 5 will provide discussion and make connections between the results and the literature, and provides recommendations for future practice and future research.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Using an exploratory design with mild comparison, this research was conducted to gain a better understanding of why first-generation students believe they persisted to graduation. The barriers and challenges faced by first-generation students are known to decrease their persistence to graduation but minimal research has been done exploring reasons why some first-generation students perceive they are able to overcome these obstacles and complete degree programs (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Ishitani, 2006; Murphy & Hicks, 2006). The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of first-generation students at MWU who completed degree programs and identify commonalities among this student group. Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the findings, a discussion of emerging themes, answers to the research questions, a discussion of implications, recommendations for practice, and for future research.

Discussion

This section is a discussion of the links between the interview results and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Interview questions were structured by preset categories taken from literature about first-generation student characteristics. The following questions are presented by category using the same acronyms given in Chapter 4. Discussion includes the characteristic category, interview results, and the connection to literature. Connection was also made between literature and results and emerging themes. The findings from this study concur and contribute to the existing research which has already been done on first-generation students and their persistence to degree completion. Contribution and connection to literature from this study

involve college preparedness, family encouragement, choice in major, faculty interaction, financial impact, and personal awareness.

Interview question #1 (**AP):** *Explain why you decided to pursue a degree.* MWU first-generation students chose to pursue a degree because of their desire to achieve something "better" in life. This student group wants improvement over what they experienced prior to college. MWU non-first-generation students pursue college to avoid a "blue collar" job rather than trying to achieve something "better." The largest determining factor for non-first-generation students to pursue a degree in this study was because it was expected by their parents and grandparents to attend college and this finding was very different from first-generation students.

Interview question #2 (AP): *Explain how your education prior to college prepared you for college.* First-generation students self-prepared for college by seeking out advanced level courses to take, participating in college assistance preparatory programs, and practicing a self-directed approach to academics. This is consistent with Warburton et al. (2001) findings which correlated academic rigor in high school to persistence to degree completion in college. Non-first-generation students were better prepared because they had the opportunity to attend a private high school or take advantage of advanced placement courses while in high school.

Interview question #3 (AP): *Now that you are about to graduate, what would you like to have known when you started?* First-generation MWU students shared how they wish they would had known more about options of majors prior to college or in the very beginning of their freshman year. The results of this question are consistent

with Chen's (2005) explanation of how choosing a major is one obstacle experienced by first-generation students that can impact degree completion.

Interview question #4 (AP): *Was there a person or persons who encouraged you to attend college?* First-generation MWU students identified family as the most encouraging. This finding aligns with research findings that described how students were more likely to persist to graduation when their parents were involved and positively motivated their students (Cabrera et al., 1992; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Ramos-Sanches & Nichols (2007) found a lack of support and involvement from the family contributes to the lack of success and persistence to graduation for the first-generation student.

Interview question # 5 (AP): *Was there a person or persons who discouraged you from attending college?* The majority of responses from MWU first-generation students indicated no one person or persons discouraged college attendance. This is not consistent with findings from the review of literature describing how parents may be hesitant about their student attending college because it will take them away from their family responsibilities and may also change who they are in relation to the cultural beliefs (Engle et al., 2006, Terenzini et al., 1994). First-generation students in this study have persisted to graduation and the inconsistency may be in part because literature typically describes first-generation students who do not persist to graduation.

Interview question #6 (AP): *Did your friends from high school attend college?* Inconsistent with Conley and Hamlin's (2009) explanation of first-generation students having peers who did not attend college and were unfamiliar with the college environment, first-generation MWU students reported having a majority of

their peers' continuing education after high school graduation. Literature describes first-generation students who do not persist to degree completion and this participant group had peers from high school that attended college which may have ultimately aided in their persistence to graduation. Some first-generation students, however, indicated having peers who attended but did not complete degree programs.

Interview question #7 (CI): *Describe your most positive experience in college, in or outside the classroom.* First-generation MWU students indicate faculty interaction and engagement within their majors as the most positive experience, which is in agreement with Tinto's (1993) findings—the ability to interact with faculty, and make the connection between class engagement and their professional future, gives validation to the first-generation student and their ability to persist to graduation.

Interview question #8 (CI): *Describe your most negative experience in college, in or outside the classroom.* MWU first-generation responses to this question revealed no consistencies or patterns. Answers to this question appeared to be unique to the individual rather than to the group of first-generation students. The question was included in the interview to compare to obstacles described in the research literature— family resistance to attending college, lack of academic preparedness, low self-efficacy, and lack of financial resources (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1994). First-generation student responses did not reflect the same obstacles. Not encountering these obstacles may indicate another reason for their ability to persist to graduation.

Interview question #9 (CI): *Where did you receive most of your academic support?* The MWU faculty was the most common response to this question and

friends within the classroom of major classes was the second most common response. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) would support these findings. These researchers found interactions such as these allow a successful transition to college and academic success of first-generation students.

Interview question #10 (CI): *What were your biggest challenges in adjusting to college?* Adjusting to the college environment and being away from home were the greatest responses from MWU first-generation students to this question. This aligns with other studies that indicate learning the college culture is one of the largest obstacles for first-generation students (Smith, 2004).

Interview question #11 (CI): *How have your relationships with college friends, faculty and/or staff impacted your college experience?* Based on Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) research, this question was asked. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) discussed the importance of social interactions with course colleagues, faculty, and involvement in campus activities to retention and persistence to graduation. First-generation MWU students also indicated their interaction with faculty and course colleagues positively impacted their college experience.

Interview question #12 (FI): *Describe how your financial situation impacted your college experience.* Literature identifies a connection between persistence to graduation and a student's perception in their ability to pay for their college education (Cabrera et al., 1992; Choy, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The results of this study indicate the same. First-generation MWU students responded that their college experience was negatively impacted because of their financial situation because funds used to pay for college most commonly came from resources outside of home. The

need for additional resources also indicated a greater need to seek employment while in college.

Interview question #13 (FI): *Why did you work while in college?* First-generation students, when compared to non-first generation students, are more likely to be employed while in college (Pascarella et al., 2004). This study supports that finding. All first-generation MWU students indicated they worked off campus, on campus, or both while attending college. Students explained that in order to continue and complete college, working was a must. Many described how it was their responsibility to pay their way through college.

Interview question #14 (FI): *What expenses, other than those related to college expenses, did you have while attending college?* Consistent with the responses received from question #13 (FI), participants indicated they support themselves not only paying for their own college education, but also paying for a mortgage or rent, insurance, car, and cell phone. Pascarella et al. (2004) findings are also related here confirming first-generation students are employed more than non-first-generation students. First-generation MWU students are responsible for not only their educational expenses, but their personal expenses as well.

Interview question #15 (CC): *Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree?* Fulfilling the goal of degree attainment along with personal satisfaction were the findings from first-generation MWU student responses. This aligns with Sterling's (2010) explanation of a resilient learner and how students who persist believe survival leads to security, and well-being.

Interview question #16 (CC): *What has engaged you the most in your college experience?* Findings from this question are consistent to those from question #11(CI) indicating the MWU community as the most engaging factor along with Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) correlation between college integration and persistence to graduation.

Interview question #17 (CC): *Describe your confidence while attending college?* All first-generation MWU students referred to themselves as being confident. The correlation between confidence and persistence to graduation is described in Spady's (1970) research where he found confidence to be linked to maturity and the more mature a student, the more likely he or she is to persist to graduation.

Interview question #18 (CC): *If you were giving advice to future first-generation college students, what would you tell them?* Findings from this question indicate words of encouragement focusing on the ability to attain a degree. First-generation MWU students wanted future first-generation students to know that degree attainment is possible despite the barriers indicated in research of unfamiliarity of the environment, lack of knowledge relating to college processes, and lack of financial resources (DesJardins et al., 1999; Murphy & Hicks, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Interview question #19 (CC): *What was your biggest challenge in college?* Much like the responses given to question #8 (CI), responses were unique to the student. There was a mild reference to familiarity with the college process and culture

which would again time into Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) work relating to college integration and degree completion.

Interview question #20 (CC): *Was there a point when you considered dropping out of college?* If yes, what motivated you to stay and complete your degree? This question was asked because literature indicates first-generation students drop out of college more than non-first-generation students (Tinto, 2006). Since interviews were conducted with students who did not drop out, I can conclude the first-generation MWU students in this study defied those odds. There were participants, however, who did indicate at some point they considered dropping out but those responses were not consistent enough to justify identification of a theme from this study.

This section is a discussion of the links between literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Emerging theme: College preparedness. Literature states how first-generation students are less likely to take rigorous courses than students who are not first-generation (Warburton et al., 2001). This lack of academic rigor is also known to cause first-generation students to be less academically prepared for college (Murphy & Hicks, 2006). This academic experience prior to college is used as a tool of prediction for attaining a college degree for first-generation students (Ishitani, 2006). The results of this study do not concur with the literature. First-generation student did take more academically stringent courses.

This study showed consistency in first-generation MWU students taking advanced level and college preparatory courses in preparation for the college

experience. Based on the qualitative results from the one-on-one interviews, first-generation students felt prepared because of the access they had to these courses and the knowledge obtained from the curriculum. Results also show students were prepared through personal experiences and from outside resources not associated with high school. The exposure to a higher level of academic curriculum in high school is consistent with the connection between successful college performance and the levels of courses previously taken in high school to prepare (Warburton et al., 2001).

Emerging theme: Family encouragement. Parental educational level helps define the first-generation student and literature also tells us how influential family can be during the college experience (Terenzini et al., 1996). This lack of involvement referred to in literature may be from the parent's lack of college knowledge and experience in which they are unable to assist their student in maneuvering through the college experience (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). Family can have a negative impact on college completion but family can also have a positive impact a student's persistent to graduation as the evidence from this study revealed.

The findings from this study show how the lack of college knowledge a parent had or the unfamiliarity the student had with the college process did not affect their ability to persist to graduation. To the contrary, family support appeared to bridge the gap between lack of knowledge and achieving academic goals through encouragement. Little literature has been produced describing how families can positively impact their student's success in degree completion; however, the findings of this study are consistent with literature which explains how family support can help

the student overcome obstacles and is crucial to their student persisting to degree completion (Cabrera et al., 1993).

First-generation students identified family, not just parents, as most supportive in completing their degree. MWU first-generation students felt their parents were happy about their decision to attend college and wanted them to pursue a degree. Parents were not the only part of "family" identified as supportive and a contributing factor to their success. Siblings also played a big role in college attendance and persistence of MWU first-generation students.

First-generation participants at MWU have siblings who are significant to their degree completion. Many of these siblings were in college themselves and shared those experiences with their MWU brother or sister. Some siblings not enrolled in college themselves, like their parents, offered encouragement, support and approval of their sibling's decision to pursue a degree.

The identification of "family," in addition to parents and siblings, also included grandparents. In the analysis of the interview data, grandparents were mentioned as a key component to the student's reason for persisting to graduation. MWU first-generation participants believed their grandparents wanted what was best for them and wanted the decision to be up to them; however, the grandparents made it known how a college education was a good and responsible choice.

Emerging theme: Adjustment. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that student experiences during the freshman year impacted student retention. This research was foundational for Tinto's (1988) work explaining how students must disaffiliate from past relationships and move toward the new college community. This

process takes adjustment and learning and was what Smith (2004) refers to as the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum does not necessarily refer to academics and classroom engagement, but the process of environment and procedures (Smith, 2004). If a student is able to adjust and maneuver through the new college environment and procedures, he or she is resilient and more likely to persist to graduation (Engle et al., 2006).

First-generation MWU participants described living away from home and realizing they were on their own as the biggest adjustments. These findings are consistent with Tinto's (1988) work indicating a need to adjust to and learn about the new environment. First-generation MWU participants also described experiencing the need to learn how to balance school and outside activities including work and extracurricular activities. First-generation MWU participants were able to adjust to college with the consistent support from family. Cabrera et al. (1999) explained how adjustment can occur with family support that allows the student to explore his or her new environment without conflict from home. First-generation MWU participants identified their need to adjust to balancing life and school. Many described learning the process of registering, how classes were scheduled, and how to manage time as examples of adjustment to processes while other first-generation MWU students described their biggest adjustments were to the diverse group of students attending MWU.

Emerging theme: Choice in major. Based on socio-economic status and lack of availability to resources and information relating to academics and degree options, first-generation students may experience challenges when it comes to knowing what

major options entail and which professions are associated with those degree and major options (Somers et al., 2004). The results of this study are consistent with literature based on data obtained through interviews. First-generation students from MWU described a lack of information relating to major options and courses required for certain majors. First-generation MWU students struggled with their choice of major and wished they would have had more knowledge of their choice of major earlier. The first-generation student group strongly indicated how their major kept them engaged during their college experience.

Emerging theme: Faculty interaction. Engagement not only covered topics within their major, but also included interaction within the classroom with faculty and course colleagues. This engagement with faculty relating to a profession seems to give the students an identity and allowed the MWU first-generation student to look forward to what the faculty set as expectations of them upon completion of degree. Professional expectation from interaction with faculty emerged as a significant contributor to degree completion.

Emerging theme: Financial impact. Murphy and Hicks' (2006) research helps explain how finances and socio-economic status impact persistence and academic success for first-generation students. Choy (2001) connected first-generation students with low-income and lower attrition. Kuh et al. (2006) placed great emphasis on how socio-economic status will dictate the type of high school a student will attend and what types of resources will be made available to them. Results of these studies may be true only in part relating to school options and available resources, but the findings from this study did not show how the student's

perception of financial impact created enough of a barrier to cause the student to stop or drop out of college.

Results from the demographic survey suggest MWU first-generation students view themselves as coming from a middle income level household. The qualitative data shows first-generation students were aware of their financial responsibilities to their college education; however, there is little concern related to ability to pay or using financial aid to cover the cost. This financial awareness and connection with the perception students have on their ability to pay for their college education concurs with literature, which explains a positive correlation between students' persistence to graduate and their perceived ability to manage financial obligations (Cabrera, Nora, & Castenada, 1992).

Financial impact emerged as a theme of persistence to graduation but was not directly correlated with the receipt of financial aid because both first-generation and non-first generation participants indicated receiving some sort of financial assistance while attending MWU. The financial impact that was specific to MWU first-generation students was how they viewed their financial situation and their ability to pay for their own college education. MWU first-generation students chose MWU because of the amount of financial aid they were able to receive while attending and this was important to them as they felt personally responsible for how their college education would be paid.

In addition to financial aid, employment was also a contributing factor to the persistence of MWU first-generation students. First-generation participants believed employment was necessary in making a financial contribution to their education to

lessen the burden on themselves and their families. This was especially true for students who did not qualify for federal aid. First-generation students at MWU were employed and viewed its importance as another piece of the puzzle needed to make degree completion a possibility.

Emerging theme: Personal awareness. Literature relates a first-generation student's academic intentions and actions to their own self-efficacy and confidence (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Students who are experiencing levels of inadequacy and feelings of unfamiliarity while in college will be at higher risk for drop out because they view these feelings as deficiencies (Terenzini et al., 1996). Literature also shows how supporting the first-generation student and addressing these feelings of inadequacy can contribute to student persistence. Students must have a disposition of maturity which includes motivation and self-confidence to improve social integration and attrition (Spady, 1971).

Data results from this emerging theme concur with literature. First-generation MWU students perceived themselves not only as self-motivated and self-driven, but expressed a high level of confidence. Based on interview responses, it was confidence that allowed MWU first-generation students to overcome doubts about their abilities to achieve goals or finish their degree programs. It is also significant to mention that for some, confidence level improved with each year of successfully completed coursework. In other words, as the first-generation MWU student persisted toward graduation, his or her confidence level increased.

Another aspect of personal awareness was when first-generation MWU students were asked to offer advice to future first-generation students. Based on what

they thought they needed as a first-generation student, MWU first-generation students were more likely than not to give advice that focused more on support, encouragement, and abilities to achieve their goal rather than advice related to process and procedure. This way of offering advice is an indicator of what the MWU first-generation student believed was needed to support other first-generation students in order to be successful and persist to graduation.

New First-Generation Student Program

Based from the evidence of literature, support programs and engagement opportunities offered to first-generation students positively impact the college experience and persistence to graduation (Engle et al., 2008). Encouragement is important to first-generation students both in giving and receiving. Themes emerged relating to the importance of family encouragement to their degree completion process. These results tie into programs that look at not only supporting the first-generation student, but also supporting the families. The more parents are involved and know of the college experience, the more they are able to support their student in the process (Coburn & Woodward, 2001).

First-Generation Collegians. To support the first-generation student, and to also relate to literature's discussion on first-generation students who feel inadequate because of their unfamiliar college environment (Terenzini et al., 1996), MWU began a student organization specific to first-generation students called the First-Generation Collegians (FGC). Sponsored by the SASS department, this student organization is in its beginning stages and was designed to bring first-generation students together to support one another, share experiences, and engage in university events and activities

as a group. My responsibility to MWU as Dean of SASS is to create and develop programs which help students overcome barriers and ultimately retain the student. I initially started this group as a result of literature found for this study and learning about the importance of the first-generation student's integration to the college environment (Tinton, 1975).

The purpose of FGC is to allow students to see and be around other students like themselves while providing transition to academic and social integration of the college experience. Based on findings from this study, the program will organize events and opportunities to include families of first-generation MWU students. Participants revealed how family encouragement was a big reason for their ability to persist to graduation. Family involvement in this program will hopefully allow more families to understand their student's new college environment and support their student to degree completion. Another improvement to this program will include degree planning for first-generation MWU students. First-generation MWU participants indicated the desire to know more about options of majors and details of professions earlier in the college process. This aligns with the strong connection MWU first-generation students felt with their faculty, course colleagues, and wanting to feel connected to their profession and future career. The FGC program will utilize Career Services by offering each student the opportunity to major and career opportunities by completing the FOCUS 2 program. Additionally, as a result of this study, first-generation MWU participants who persisted to graduation had a financial plan in place for their education. Their plan allowed them to persist to graduation without allowing finances to hinder degree completion. This program will provide

financial workshops and offer additional financial planning to first-generation students in helping them create a reasonable plan to limit financial barriers.

The future goal of this organization as it grows is to not only support the MWU first-generation student, but to also provide professional networking and service opportunities to the community. Faculty who were first-generation students will be invited to join FGC bringing faculty engagement and inspiration to the group. The Office of Alumni Affairs will also seek out alumni who were first-generation to interact and engage with the current first-generation student body as mentors. Last but certainly not least, it is my hope to allow current FGC members the opportunity to work with future first-generation students by offering early college awareness and mentorship to middle and high schools where a high number of first-generation students are known to attend. Informing, engaging, and supporting first-generation students will familiarize students with the process and the expectations of the college environment.

Answering the Research Questions

Research Question #1: Who are the first-generation students at Midwestern University who have persisted to graduation as measured by those who applied to graduate? Participants of the study were volunteered for a one-on-one interview and could be described using the following demographic profile.

Demographic profile. According to the findings of this study, first-generation students at MWU who persist to graduation are students whose parents did not attend college. They also have siblings still at home and are more likely to be Caucasians under the age of 24. Consistent with comparable institutions in the Carnegie Class

(NSSE, 2011), MWU first-generation students who persist to graduation are employed and work more hours than students attending other institutions. They consistently self-identified as middle income; therefore, participation in some form of scholarship or financial aid program was common among this group, which aligns with Smith's (2008) findings.

Research Question #2: When comparing first-generation students to non-first generation, what are the similarities and differences between Midwestern University students who complete degree programs? When assessing race, age, siblings, work, and identification of income level, this study resulted in no statistical difference when comparing first-generation to non-first-generation MWU students. I compared first-generation to non-first-generation MWU participants in the following categories: academic preparedness, college integration and adjustment, financial impact, connectedness, and demographics.

Academic preparedness. Both first-generation and non-first-generation MWU students felt prepared academically for the college experience; however, there is a difference between the two groups in how the preparation occurred.

College integration. Faculty gave the greatest academic support to both first-generation and non-first-generation students. Both student groups perceived this academic support encouraged persistence to graduation. This supports Inkelas' et al. (2007) study where they identified the connection between student academic success and students engaging in programs with their faculty. Non-first-generation and first-generation students also believed their relationships with faculty and college friends were positively impacted during the college experience. Both first-generation and

non-first-generation students had difficulty in adjusting to being responsible for themselves and doing things "on their own;" however, first-generation students struggle more with being away from home and family, being around different people, and learning new process than non-first-generation MWU students. This adjustment is consistent with Spady's (1971) research which stated that students who are more integrated into the college culture and receive support from home are more likely to be successful and persist to graduation.

Financial impact. Strong similarities were evident between first-generation and non-first generation MWU students in how their financial situations impacted the college experience. DesJardins et al. (1999) findings show how financial aid improved retention in first-generation students. Both student groups relied on financial assistance through federally funded programs or the military to fund their college education. First-generation college students felt more personally responsible for their financial accountability and paying for school than non-first-generation. Both student groups were employed and both suggested using the funds earned by working to pay for school and other expenses; however, first-generation students had a greater responsibility to contribute to their financial situation in order to attend and complete college.

College connectedness. Both first-generation and non-first-generation MWU students who persisted to graduation were personally driven and believed degree attainment provides personal satisfaction. This is consistent with Gibbons and Borders' (2010) study relating self-efficacy and confidence in a first-generation student to their ability to persist to graduation. Both student groups valued the

classroom experience and its relationship to their real life profession and believed this was the reason for degree completion. Both groups considered themselves confident. When exploring perception relating to term-to-term persistence, first-generation MWU students were more likely to consider dropping out at some time during their college degree when compared to non-first generation students.

Demographics. This study attempted a quantitative analysis of demographics and background information collected from a demographic survey to compare first-generation and non-first generation MWU students. The survey asked questions related to parental educational level, other individuals residing in the home other than parents, gender, race, income level, age, and marital status with the purpose of identifying characteristics specific to first-generation when compared to non-first-generation students. Results were analyzed to explore significant differences between non-first-generation and first-generation participants in the study and with the exception of parental educational, the outcome was no significant statistical difference between the two groups when tabulation and comparisons were done.

Research Question #3: Based on Midwestern University first-generation student responses to interview questions, are there patterns that emerge among first-generation students who persist to graduation? From the first-generation interview data, themes emerged related to college completion: (a) college preparedness, (b) family encouragement, (c) choice in major, (d) faculty interaction, (e) financial impact, and (f) personal awareness.

Implications

The implication of this study is that the non-completion rate among first-generation students will not change unless colleges and universities change their approach to first-generation students. Persistence to graduation rates for first-generation students will not improve if institutions of higher education do not change policy and procedure in their approach to family, campus integration, and financial awareness. Findings reveal a key determining factor for first-generation persistence to graduation that relates to the families of these students. Families should be educated on the importance of their support and how their encouragement can lead to degree completion for their student. Without this type of family programming, first-generation student persistence to graduation rates will stay the same. This implication does not only include involvement while in college but also addresses college preparedness. Parents who are consistently involved with their student before and during college are the key component to their first-generation student's persistence to graduation. Additionally, educators at the primary and the secondary level of education must develop ways to promote parental involvement by educating and promoting college services and resources so parents understand that their student has access to college and that a college degree is attainable. Based on the results of this study, without cooperation between K-12 educators, institutions of higher education, and parents, first-generation student persistence to graduation rate will not improve.

Current college procedure includes invitation and inclusion of all students to be a part of the college culture. Without proper planning and education explaining what is expected of the student socially as well as academically, students will continue to

feel as if they are inadequate or do not belong in this environment. With the inclusion and educating of families, expectations and discussions can take place early in the process so that the student understands discomfort is not specific to them because of being a first-generation student.

Waiting to prepare families and students until they have already entered the college environment is too late. This implication aligns with the findings which indicate finances were not a barrier for those first-generation students who persisted to graduation. No matter the financial situation perceived by the student, results from this study indicate first-generation students can persist to graduation if there is a plan to cover the expenses associated with the college education. College personnel and K-12 educators cannot create a plan for students without parental involvement. First-generation participants in this study indicated needing the support from family, financial or otherwise, to develop the plan for payment.

Finally, programs involving parents throughout the college experience minimally exist. Colleges currently spend a lot of time and effort discouraging parental involvement in hopes to encourage adult responsibility in the student. Based on the results of this study, this current process may be hindering the persistence of first-generation students. Hindering the persistence of first-generation students could continue if explaining the policies and procedures of the college environment to families, and providing information about academic and social integration, financial planning, and the importance of student involvement in campus programs, does not take place. This insight can be used to make an unfamiliar environment and situation

into a source of encouragement and understanding of the new environment for parents to share with their students.

Recommendations for Higher Education

Greater attention needs to be given to first-generation students and contributors which lead to degree completion. As a college educated first-generation student, I was perplexed by the volume of research relating to college dropout and wanted to explore more about why I and other first-generation students were able to overcome the obstacles and barriers to complete a degree. This study recognizes the limitation of generalizing the results based on the size of the participant sample. Even with this limitation, the study offers valuable insight on first-generation students who persist to graduation. Through additional research and application of findings, greater work still needs to be conducted to better understand what allows first-generation students to persist and what processes and programs need to be in place at institutions of higher education to increase stronger retention and degree completion rates.

I learned from the results of this study that there is not one direct approach or specific contributing factors leading to degree completion. The results suggest giving attention to family involvement, major exploration, and financial planning designed for and offered to first-generation students. Emphasis on early awareness in these areas is also recommended to offer first-generation students the same knowledgeable opportunities in preparing for the college experience prior to high school graduation.

Family. Approval and support to attend college is a contributing factor which emerged in this study as one reason for the MWU first-generation students' completion. Institutions of higher education may benefit from embracing this factor

when understanding the unique needs of the first-generation student rather than viewing family involvement as a distraction to the student's growth to adulthood. Colleges and universities are obligated to restrict information given to parents about their student. They are not, however, obligated to restrict parent education on the expectations and processes required to enter, attend, and complete a college degree program.

Early discussions and outreach should take place involving families of first-generation students. Programming for these initiatives in outreach should include greater awareness of college preparatory options while their student is in high school, and how and when to begin the college admissions process. Additionally, based on what literature says about first-generation students and the connection to lower socio-economic status, educating the parents on available financial resources to relieve the anxieties of additional financial burden or restrictions is very important. These conversations cannot wait until the student is already a freshman. Many first-generation students will miss college opportunities if information is not given to them sooner. Providing families with college expectations and preparatory suggestions in middle school and in the freshman year in high school will allow first-generation students to take advantage of what resources are available to them and allow them to take a greater role in planning what is currently known as the "unknown" for first-generation students.

One program which offers early awareness of the college experience is the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, also known as GEAR UP. This program takes the early approach by engaging seventh grade student

cohorts offering rigorous academic curriculum, academic and community engagement, and increases family and student awareness to the college experience. This program is sponsored and offered through the United States Department of Education to students in areas showing lower socio-economic status.

Financial planning. Early awareness and supporting persistence once in college must also include financial planning. Based on my professional experience, students who do not have a financial plan and do not have the financial resources available to cover college expenses through financial aid or personal contribution are at a much higher risk of dropping out based on the inability to take care of their financial obligations. Colleges and universities must offer financial workshops showing parents the scary truth of the college price tag, but also giving much needed knowledge and resources about how the cost of college can be managed with available resources. Many banks and lending institutions offer these programs as a free resource, but it is now time for institutions of higher education to also embrace and employ those services to improve retention and degree completion rates. With knowledge there is power. The participants in this study described how they had a plan in place for how they would manage the financial side to their degree completion. I believe it was the knowledge of financial plan and process which allowed the financial anxieties to not become a barrier to degree completion.

Major exploration. More work must be done in reaching students at an early age regarding professional opportunities and what education is required to achieve those professions. I have personally been responsible for and involved in such a program with a local college of pharmacy. As a coordinator of early awareness trying

to improve student diversity, I found high school students of color were unaware of the profession of pharmacy or what was needed to be a pharmacist. Students grow up and want to be like people and professions they most associate. Students typically say I want to be a teacher, doctor, nurse, fire fighter, or police officer because those are professions they commonly see or are made aware of. In my experience, it was very rare for a student to say, "I want to grow up to be a pharmacist!" unless they already had exposure through the family somehow. I developed a program where connection was made with middle school science teachers, school counselors, and nurses and visits to schools on career and health days allowed me the opportunity to share with middle school students the profession of pharmacy. As contacts were made, communication continued with interested students through high school while providing guidance on what high school curriculum they should follow to achieve the best results for college admission.

I would suggest a similar program for MWU. Midwestern University offers a variety of major options so the approach would not be as simple as it was for the school of pharmacy. The MWU Office of Career Development currently offers career and major exploration through an online program called FOCUS 2. This program allows current college students to enter their current interests, skills, and abilities through questions asked within the program and provide knowledgeable options and suggestions relating to career and major choices stemming from answers given by the student. Staying consistent with the early awareness approach, I would suggest the Office of Day Admissions join forces with the Office of Career Development in providing the same resources to high school students. The results of this study

indicated first-generation students would have liked to have known about more major options and what courses were required for different major options. An early awareness career and major exploration program will allow future first-generation students the opportunity to make knowledgeable decisions that are most appropriate for them and their needs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provides a foundation for future research on first-generation students who persist to degree completion. One difficulty experienced by MWU was first identifying first-generation students. This obstacle was overcome by investigating resources available through the ISIR in identifying the first-generation students attending MWU. I have little to no data which tells me that first-generation students at MWU persist at a lesser rate than non-first-generation students. Further research must be done to identify and monitor first-generation cohort groups entering MWU as freshman and comparing those cohort groups to non-first-generation students in retention and persistence to graduation rates.

Further research must take place relating to family inclusion. This study's results indicate family support is a contributing factor to degree completion; however, there are limitations of those results based on a limited sample size because of the limited number of participants who volunteered. Research exploring the family's role in many facets of the college experience including the precollege, college engagement process, through graduation could provide valuable information on the family's role and the significant part it plays in degree completion.

Assessment of the effectiveness of support programs designed for first-generation students, and mentioned previously, should also be part of further research. In addition to providing these programs, appropriate assessment of the effectiveness is vital to determining if students are being supported in the way needed to allow for successful completion of their degrees. This assessment should be done using the same cohort structure of monitoring as suggested when comparing retention and persistence rate with those of non-first-generation students.

Conclusion

Most of the results of this study were supported by the literature in Chapter 2 and revealed a salient finding—first-generation college students need support. Understanding and meeting the needs of first-generation students is important in their persistence to graduation. Themes emerged relating to family, college preparedness, engagement with faculty and major coursework, and financial planning. Additionally, first-generation students were personally aware of their own abilities, which allowed them to be successful in persisting to graduation.

Literature indicates how parents of first-generation students are unfamiliar with the college environment (Smith, 2008). This unfamiliarity may cause doubts and discourage their student from continuing to attend college (Coburn & Woodward, 2001). This study revealed how important positive family support is to first-generation students. With family involvement and encouragement, first-generation students can and do maneuver through the unfamiliarity and persist to graduation.

This study also revealed that the first-generation students who persisted took advantage of academic programs prior to college. Taking advantage of programs that

are above and beyond typical offerings allowed first-generation students to learn more about the college environment and to experience academic rigor during high school. This was a commonality between the MWU first-generation participants and is also consistent with how experiencing academic rigor in high school prepares the student and increases the ability to persist to graduation (Warburton et al., 2001).

Another important finding is how faculty interaction and engagement within their major positively impacted first-generation student persistence to graduation. Learning from professions, their faculties, in their fields of study while hearing those faculties describe and explain career expectations, allowed first-generation students to define career goals in which to attain. This interaction made the college process more than just coursework; it made the process a pathway to a career.

A financial plan in knowing how college was going to be paid was an additional important finding for first-generation students who persisted to graduation. First-generation MWU students did not wonder how their college education was going to be paid, but instead, had a plan and knew how their costs were going to be covered. This does not mean that those students did not have need for financial assistance. The finding indicates first-generation students had a plan in place involving financial resources to cover the cost of their education.

Finally, this study revealed that first-generation students need encouragement in achieving their goal of degree attainment and encouragement in understanding and overcoming obstacles. The first-generation MWU participants admitted to having confidence when they started, but as they achieved certain milestones, their confidence increased. A powerful indicator of this need for encouragement surfaced when first-

generation students were asked what advice they would give to future first generation students. Responses given indicated encouragement to achieve the goal of degree completion and sharing how achieving that goal is possible.

As a first-generation student, I remember having the same thoughts, fears, and anxieties expressed by the participants in this study and those stated through my investigation of literature. As the Dean of Student and Academic Support Services and a supporter of all students in persisting to graduation, I find myself continually searching for answers to the problems students' face that hinder their ability to successfully complete their degree. Utilizing the results of literature and expanding on the contributions made by this study, my hope is to continue the conversation regarding first-generation students. Through acknowledgement of barriers faced and their ability to complete degree programs at MWU, my hope is to give every student equal opportunity and provide the resources and support to help make all things equal.

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Appendix A

Demographic Survey

Please circle or indicate the answer that best reflects you and your situation.

1. What is the highest level of education of your father?

   (a) no high school diploma and no college degree (b) high school graduate
   (c) post high school professional/trade school (d) 1-2 years of college
   (e) 2-4 years of college but did not earn a degree (f) associate's degree
   (g) bachelor's degree (h) graduate degree

2. What is the highest level of education for your mother?

   (a) no high school diploma and no college degree (b) high school graduate
   (c) post high school professional/trade school (d) 1-2 years of college
   (e) 2-4 years of college but did not earn a degree (f) associate's degree
   (g) bachelor's degree (h) graduate degree

3. Do you have siblings? yes or no

4. If you have siblings, what is the highest level of education completed by one or more of your siblings?

   (a) no high school diploma and no college degree (b) high school graduate
   (c) post high school professional/trade school (d) 1-2 years of college
   (e) 2-4 years of college but did not earn a degree (f) associate's degree
   (g) bachelor's degree (h) graduate degree (i) I do not have siblings

5. Other than parents or siblings, was there any other individual living in your household? yes or no

6. If there was other individual living in your household, what is the highest level of education completed by one or more of those individuals?

   (a) no high school diploma and no college degree (b) high school graduate
   (c) post high school professional trade school (d) 1-2 years of college
   (d) 2-4 years of college but did not earn a degree (f) associate's degree
   (g) bachelor's degree (h) graduate degree (i) No other individuals live in the household.

7. Is Lindenwood University the only college you have attended? yes or no

8. Gender: Male or Female

9. What best describes your race?

   (a) Black/African American (b) White/Caucasian (c) Latino/Hispanic

   (d) Asian/Pacific Islander (e) Other: _____

10. What best describes your income level and that of the members of your family household?

    (a) low (b) middle (c) upper

11. What is your age? _____

12. What is your marital status? (a) single (b) married (c) divorced (d) widowed

13. While in college, identify your living situation.

    (a) commuter student living at home with parents

    (b) commuter student living independent of parents

    (c) resident student in dorm

    (d) resident student in campus house

    (e) resident student in Linden Lodge

    (f) resident student in Time Centre

    (g) other: _____

14. While in college, how would you describe your employment status?

    (a) worked on campus (work and learn) (b) worked off campus (c) work both on and off campus

    (d) did not work while attending college

15. How many hours per week did you work (on and off campus) while attending college?

    (a) 0-5 (b) 6-10 (c) 11-15 (d) 16-20 (e) 21-25 (f) 26-30 (g) 31-35

    (h) 36-40 (i) 40+ (j) I did not work while attending college

16. What is your major?

    _____

17. What extracurricular activities were you involved in while in college?

    (a) student academic organization (b) athletics (c) performing arts (d) community service (d) student social organization (e) student government organization

    (f)
    other_____

18. Have you applied for graduation? yes or no

19. If chosen, do we have your permission to contact you to set up a brief interview?
    yes or no

    If yes, please list your contact information below:
    phone (best number to reach
    you):_____
    e-mail
    address:_____
    best time and/or day to
    contact:_____

Thank you for your time and attention.

Appendix B

Survey Script

Hello. My name is Christie Rodgers and some of you may already know me. I am the Dean of Student and Academic Support Services, but today I am asking for your help as a fellow student. I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program and conducting research on why students persist to graduation. More specifically, I am interested in First-Generation Students to learn why they believe they persisted to graduation. If you are a student who has applied for May 2012 graduation, I would really appreciate your participation in my research.

If you have applied for May 2012 graduation, I would like to ask you to complete a brief 19 question survey. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose to stop taking the survey at any point during the process. Please know that in addition to being voluntary, your information will be kept confidential and data from the results kept anonymous in the reporting. I will also respect confidentiality by leaving the room during the survey and ask that you deposit your completed survey in this envelope which I will leave at the front of the room. If you are interested in continued participation in my study, a question at the end of the survey asks if I may contact you for further questioning and asks for your contact information. Again, I would like to reiterate that the contact information is for my use only. Any information given to me by you will remain confidential and anonymous in my paper.

I appreciate your time and participation. Thank you for allowing me to learn more about the students of Lindenwood University.

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Lindenwood University School of Education
209 S. Kingshighway, St. Charles, Missouri 63301
Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Principal Investigator: Christie Rodgers **Telephone**: (636) 949-4697

Participant_____ **Contact Info**_____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Christie Rodgers under the supervision of Dr. Susan Isenberg, Assistant Professor of Education at Lindenwood University. The purpose of this study is to explore competencies and characteristics of first-generation students who complete degree programs.

2. Your participation will involve one face-to-face interview which will be audio taped. Identifying information will be removed upon receipt and/or transcription.

3. The amount of time involved in your participation will be approximately 30 minutes for the face-to-face interview.

4. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.

5. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. Although there are no direct benefits, this research may identify patterns of competencies and characteristics in first-generation students who finished degree programs that could be used to develop a mentoring program for future first-generation Lindenwood University college students, strengthening retention and graduation rates, and allowing more Lindenwood University college graduates.

6. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will not be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

7. Confidentiality will be respected and no information that discloses your identity will be revealed in any publication or presentation without your consent. The information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.

8. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the investigator, Christie Rodgers (636) 949-4697. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at (636) 949-4846.

☐ **I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.**
☐ **I do not wish to participate in the interviews, but I agree to allow any written course assignments including dissertation drafts to be used as data in this study.**

_____ _____
Participant's Signature Date Participant's Printed Name

_____ _____
Signature of Principal Investigator Date Principal Investigator Printed Name

Appendix D

Email Correspondence Request for Participation

Dear _____,

A few weeks ago I approached your class and asked for participation in a research project I am conducting. Thank you for completing the survey and assisting me with my study. On the demographic survey, you indicated your willingness to participate in a brief interview. Based on your answers from the survey you completed, I would like to ask you a few more questions if you are still willing.

We are quickly approaching graduation and I was hoping to have the opportunity to speak with you before the big day. Please let me know a good day and/or time. We can meet in person or conduct the interview by phone, whichever you prefer. Also, as compensation for your time and effort, I have a small gift of appreciation to offer upon completion of the interview.

Please let me know your availability and how I may reach you in the future. I look forward to hearing from you!

Christie L. Rodgers

Dean of Student and Academic Support Services

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Academic Preparedness

1. Explain why you decided to pursue a degree.
2. Explain how your education prior to college prepared you for college.
3. Now that you are about to graduate, what would you like to have known when you started?
4. Was there a person or persons who encouraged you to attend college?
5. Was there a person or persons who discouraged you from attending college?
6. Did your friends from high school attend college?

College Integration

7. Describe your most positive experience in college, in or outside the classroom.
8. Describe your most negative experience in college, in or outside the classroom.
9. Where did you receive most of your academic support?
10. What were your biggest challenges in adjusting to college?
11. How have your relationships with college friends, faculty, and/or staff impacted your college experience?

Financial Impact

12. Describe how your financial situation impacted your college experience.
13. Why did you work while in college? (If student did not work, this question will be skipped)
14. What expenses, other than those related to college expenses, did you have while attending college?

College Connectedness

15. Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree?
16. What has engaged you the most in your college experience?
17. Describe your confidence while attending college?
18. If you were giving advice to future first-generation college students, what would you tell them?
19. What was your biggest challenge in college?
20. Was there a point when you considered dropping out of college? If yes, what motivated you to stay and complete your degree?

Vitae

Christie Rodgers has a thorough and diverse work history within higher education. As the current dean for the office of Student and Academic Support Services, Rodgers' primary responsibilities are to student retention and serving the student community as the university ombudsman. Rodgers has an earned Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and a Master of Science degree in corporate and industrial communications and anticipates completing her Doctor of Education degree in May 2013 from Lindenwood University.

Prior to her current administrative role, Rodgers has held key positions as registrar for student services, director of academic services, coordinator for early awareness, coordinator of placement, and admissions and financial aid advisor both in the liberal arts and proprietary settings. In addition to administrative experience, Rodgers also has proven ability in curriculum design and instruction as faculty for speech, professional presentation, business writing, intercultural communication, critical thinking and writing, and strategies for effective learning and writing. Rodgers also worked as a human resource liaison and a training specialist within the investment industry.