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A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT EXPERIENCES
AT A LARGE DIVERSE RESEARCH INSTITUTION

by

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ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT EXPERIENCES
AT A LARGE DIVERSE RESEARCH INSTITUTION

College enrollment among first-generation students is on the rise (Choy, 2001) at both two-year and four-year institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Stayhorn, 2006). As this student population continues to grow, it is important to learn more about them and the factors that contribute to their success or failure. Through the use of focus groups, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students that impact their academic and nonacademic success. The research questions that guided this study were: What experiences do first-generation college students perceive impact their academic success? What experiences do first-generation college students perceive impact their nonacademic success? What challenges do first-generation students perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students? What personal factors do first-generation students perceive impact their college success?

The results revealed several themes that impact the experiences of first-generation students. Financial issues, support services, the role of families/parents, self-determination and campus involvement were among the top issues impacting their experience.

Keywords: First-generation college student, engagement, involvement

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Students who are the first in their family to attend college are known as first-generation college students (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). There are several characteristics that distinguish first-generation students from their non-first-generation peers. For example, first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families and to have work responsibilities in addition to those resulting from their education (Garcia, 2010a). First-generation students are more likely to encounter problems such as academic difficulty, financial hardships, cultural and emotional difficulties in comparison with those difficulties experienced by their peers whose parents attended college (Housel, 2012). First-generation students are more likely to drop out and not participate in campus activities (M. Smith, 2012). Other characteristics of first-generation college students include being non-White, less academic preparation for college, and lower aspirations for degree completion (Garcia, 2010b).

As the first in their family to attend college, these students face challenges that their peers do not encounter, including the decision to attend college versus seeking full-time employment. Students whose parents are highly educated are more likely to apply to college than those whose parents are not (Manski & Wise, 1983). First-generation students and their parents are often skeptical of postsecondary education and question the true benefits and opportunities that are created by a college degree (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). First-generation students often come from communities and backgrounds that have a relatively limited knowledge of the college experience, and are told stories about the college experience that can heighten anxiety and reduce confidence levels in being successful. This anxiety is often higher among non-White students (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

It is estimated that approximately that 26 to 28 % of the undergraduate enrollment is represented by first-generation college students (Chen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). First-generation students represent roughly one-third of the student population at public four year institutions and about half of the student population at two year and community colleges (Choy, 2001). In 2008, the Pell Institute found there were approximately 24 percent, or 4.5 million low-income first-generation students matriculating at postsecondary institutions in the United States (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Numerous other studies have reported similar numbers of first-generation college students enrolling in higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Due to the fact that many of these first-generation students are unprepared to succeed academically, they often have lower persistence and graduation rates when compared to their non-first-generation peers. First-generation students are at a significantly greater risk of dropping out of college after their first year than their peers (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Ishantli, 2006). Many campuses do not have the campus programs and resources needed to help first-generation students' progress (Housel, 2012). However, first-generation college student enrollments are on the rise and more are predicted to be coming to campus (Housel, 2012). A large number of first-generation students begin their college career at public two-year institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Despite high enrollment of this population, these students are struggling to succeed. First-generation college students are often overlooked and misunderstood on the college campus (Housel, 2012).

Although it appears that a lot is known about first-generation college students and their academic journey, there remains many unanswered questions about their experience (Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2004). Until recently, few studies focused exclusively on the first year of the college experience for first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Pascarella et al. (2004) were among the first researchers to make the distinction between academic and nonacademic experiences for first-generation students and concluded that first-generation students have different college experiences than their peers. For example, when compared with their peers, non-first-generation students took less time to complete their degrees. Also, many first-generation college students enter their college careers without the proper academic preparation, and as a result of the lack of preparedness to successfully navigate the college experience. Furthermore, higher education officials have also recognized that the retention and graduation of these students must be a top priority and focus (Pascarella et al., 2004). In an effort to address these concerns and to enhance the support needed in these areas, campuses are developing support and intervention programs such as tutoring, mentoring and other resources (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Unfortunately, first-generation students are less likely to use the services provided to support them (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). The research surrounding this population of students is starting to expand to include research beyond their pre-college experiences. The impact of variables such as gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status and how they impacted first-generation students' experiences are being explored (Jacobs, 1996; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Additional research related to first-generation students has focused on the level of parental education and the impact it may have on the students' decision making. Justiz and Rendon (1989) found that many parents who did not attend college were fearful that college could threaten their culture and family values. Additionally, the level of parental education has

been shown to influence educational choices such as type of institution, size of institution and location of institution (Brown, 1997; Zemsky & Oedel, 1973).

Another category of research that exists focuses on the interaction between students and their high school counselors (Justiz & Rendon, 1989). Olson and Rosenfield (1984) determined that the relationship between the student and the counselor is important, but, often did not focus on the information and resources needed as they prepared to explore and attend college.

Terenzini et al. (1996) recommended that more research needs to be completed on first-generation college students and support must be provided for them.

During the past several years, increased research has focused on the issue of access to higher education and improving retention rates for first-generation students (Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Despite the interest and concern for improving the retention rates of first-generation students, the problem of degree completion remains higher among first-generation students (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Lewin (2011) reported that although enrollment of students may be increasing, the percentage of students that complete college degrees is not increasing at the same rate. First-generation students and their peers appear to gain different benefits from many of their college experiences such as athletics, work experience and volunteering (Terenzini et al., 1996). For first-generation students, working and volunteer work while attending school negatively impacts their internal drive for academic success while having less effect on their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The problem of persistence and graduation of first-generation students is a concern for institutions of higher education (Bui, 2002; Davis, 2010b). This has caused higher education administrators to conclude that in order to provide effective support and retention programs;

they must better understand the first-generation student population and the factors that impact their success once they arrive on campus (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study explored the experiences of first-generation college students and the factors they believe impact their academic and nonacademic success. Focus groups were used to engage first-generation students in facilitated semi-structured discussions about their academic and nonacademic experiences. This understanding will assist institutions in developing support services for first-generation students and improving their retention and graduation rates.

Research Questions

1. What experiences do first-generation college students perceive impact their academic success?
2. What experiences do first-generation college students perceive impact their nonacademic success?
3. What challenges do first-generation students perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students?
4. What personal factors do first-generation students perceive impact their college success?

This study will fill a gap in the literature by providing a qualitative exploration of the factors that positively and negatively impact the success of a first-generation college students enrolled at a large, diverse research university located in Southeastern United States. Insights gleaned from this study can inform institutional policies, programs and practices towards enhancing the success of first-generation college students.

Theoretical Framework

Pascarella et al. (2004) concluded that the experiences of first-generation students could be categorized into two components: academic and nonacademic experiences. Academic experiences are defined as time spent studying, course load, credit hours, grades, social interactions with peers, computer use, interaction and reading and writing experiences. Nonacademic experiences are defined as: work, athletics, and location of living space, co-curricular involvement, volunteering and nonacademic interactions with peers.

Research from many researchers such as Alexander Astin and Vincent Tinto have reported on student persistence and this topic is one of the most widely researched areas in higher education. Astin's involvement theory and the related Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) model were also used as part of theoretical framework for this study. The Input-Environment-Output model was developed by Alexander Astin (1993) as a guiding framework for assessments in higher education, and it was based upon his 1984 involvement theory. The model examines the interdependence of inputs, environments and outputs. The basis of the model is that the educational experience cannot be evaluated and completed without student inputs (I), the educational environment (E), and the student outcomes (O) included (Astin, 1993). "Input refers to the characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the institution..." (Astin, 1993, p. 7). Input variables can be classified into two subgroups: fixed student attributes and characteristics that change over time. Fixed attributes include characteristics such as race/ethnicity and gender. The second subgroup refers to characteristics such as values, attitudes, educational background characteristics, and level of cognitive functioning. Environmental characteristics, in the broadest sense, include anything that happens to a student during their college experience that could impact their outcome. Environmental factors may

include people, facilities, co-curricular activities, organizations, teams, and social and living groups. Environments can also include the support systems or services utilized during their college experience. Outcomes are desired aims and objectives of the educational program (Astin, 1993). Outcomes include the student's characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and behaviors as the leave college (Astin, 1993).

Vincent Tinto (1993) identifies three major reasons for student departure: academic difficulties, the inability to resolve educational and occupational goals, and failure to become or remain involved with the institution. Tinto suggests that students are more likely to remain enrolled if they become connected to the social and academic life of their institution. Students who become involved on campus, make connections to individuals, and participate in their academic experience are more likely to persist. Tinto points out that integration can occur in two dimensions, academic and social. Academic integration happens when students become engaged and connected to the intellectual part of the college experience, while social integration occurs when relationships and connections are made outside of the classroom.

Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993) theorized that a students' social integration with the university is a critical component of their development and ultimately impacts their persistence to graduation. Both researchers focused on involvement and engagement and serves as additional theoretical framework for this study.

Definition of Terminology

First-generation student

For the purpose of this study, first-generation students are defined as students whose parents did not continue their education beyond high school.

Engagement

“The amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities and how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2011, p. 1).

Academic experiences

The amount of time spent studying, course load, number of credit hours, grades, social interactions with peers, computer use, interaction, and reading and writing experiences (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Nonacademic experiences

Nonacademic is defined as work, athletics, location of living space, co-curricular involvement, volunteering, and nonacademic interactions with peers (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Significance of Study

The study contributes to the existing literature related to first-generation students to provide an account of their experiences and possible insight into what impacts their college success. In 2011, the National Center for Education Statistics reported statistics for individuals who graduated with a bachelor’s degree during the 2007-2008 academic years and found that the degree completion rate for first-generation, low-income students was significantly lower than traditional students (Cataldi, Green, Henke, Lew, & Woo, 2011).

Tinto (2006-2007) has suggested that more research is needed to address the experiences of low income students and how those experiences influence their college experience and what institutional actions will enhance their success in higher education. Pascarella et al. (2004)

suggested that higher education needs to move beyond access for first-generation students, and increase its understanding of what experiences students have that either accelerate or impede the path toward degree completion.

This research can provide higher education faculty and administrators with a better understanding of the factors that impact the first-generation student's success. With this knowledge, institutions of higher education can better design support mechanisms for first-generation students with a goal of increasing the persistence and graduation rates for this population of students. The research will help to inform institutional leaders' decisions about programs and resources that are needed to support the engagement, persistence and graduation of first-generation students.

Assumptions and Delimitations

Several assumptions and delimitations are inherent in this study. First, it is assumed that all information provided by focus group participants was truthful and accurate. Second, the researcher relied on the data that was gathered during the focus group facilitation and had no control of variables that could have impacted or biased the results. Although the researcher had no ability to influence the respondents, they may have responded as they believed the facilitators desired. Third, due to the self-selection of the participants in the study, students could be from any race, gender, age. These findings may not be as relevant to students that attend a different type of institution or are located in different geographical setting. Fourth, focus groups are dependent on the interactions of the participants of the group. Also, focus groups are not natural settings and the members often do not know each other and there may be "uncertainty about the accuracy of what the participants say" (Morgan, 1988, p. 2). Fifth, qualitative research is subject

to interpretations. The processing of the information is often subjective, depending on the listener.

These studies utilized several facilitators and rely on their interpretation of the same story, which may slightly vary based upon their background of experiences, filters and biases. Sixth, the researcher is a first-generation college student and as a member of the population studied, the researcher may have added insight to the study due to the ability to relate to the participants experience.

The themes that were identified were based upon collective responses rather than individual participant responses. The first delimitation for this study is the fact that, the respondents were selected based upon meeting pre-established criteria of first-generation, thus limiting the pool of potential focus group participants. Secondly, the study excluded transfer and International students from the invited pool. Third, only sophomore and senior ranked first-generation students were invited to participate. For the purpose of this study, first-generation students were defined as students whose parents did not continue their education beyond high school.

The results of the study are based upon data from a particular large, diverse research university located in the Southeastern United States.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I provides an overview of the first-generation college student, the purpose of the study, a discussion of the study including terms, assumptions and delimitations, the research questions, and the significance of the study. Chapter II provides a review of the literature related to first-generation college students. Chapter III describes the methodology that was used for collecting and analyzing data related to the research

questions. Chapter IV contains the results of the research, and Chapter V discusses the results and implications for future research.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students and the factors they believe to impact their academic and nonacademic success. Knowledge from this study will contribute to existing literature related to the experiences of first-generation students and offer insight into their college experience. While most of the research related to first-generation students has focused on quantitative data, this study focused on qualitative data by exploring the first-generation student's perception of the factors that impact their academic and nonacademic experience to add to the ongoing discussions and research related to first-generation students.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

First-generation college students are a growing population within higher education and have been the topic of much research in recent years (Pascarella et al., 2004). Distinct characteristics help define this population. Researchers have found that that first-generation students are more likely to be older, female, non-native English speaking and come from non-White backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation college students were generally found to have more dependents than students whose parents had attained higher levels of education and tended to be more financially independent than their non-first-generation peers (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996). One of the primary characteristics of first-generation college students is that they typically come from minority groups or low-income homes (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001). The literature related to first-generation students is continuing to grow as their enrollment also grows.

This chapter reviews the literature related to first-generation students and their college experience. First, this chapter will explore the unique characteristics that define a first-generation student and the role of parents. Second, it will review available research regarding the academic experience of first-generation students. Third, an examination of nonacademic experiences of first-generation students and literature related to engagement and the impact it has on student success will be presented. The literature provides the framework to better understand the collegiate experience for first-generation students and the factors that impact their success.

There are many definitions for the term *first-generation college students*. Definitions range from those that are very broad to those that are quite limited. For example, one of the broadest definitions used by researchers is simply the fact that neither parent has completed a college degree (McConnell, 2000). One of the more narrow ways to describe this population

according to McConnell (2000) is that to qualify as first-generation, a student must be the first member of their family to attend college. One of the most common definitions describes “first-generation” college students as those whose parents have no college experience (McConnell, 2000). For the purpose of this study, first-generation students are defined as students whose parents did not continue their education beyond high school.

First-generation college students are still somewhat undefined and underserved (Housel, 2012). The research surrounding this population contains areas of deficiencies and gaps. Only recently has this population of students started to gain the attention of higher-education administrators and researchers (Housel, 2012). Still, many administrators and faculty appear to be unfamiliar with this population (Davis, 2010b). As colleges and universities are struggling with retention and graduation rates, they can no longer afford to wait to make an impact on this population of students (Davis, 2010a). In *The First-Generation Student Experience*, Davis (2010b) concluded that first-generation students are more likely to drop out and to take longer to graduate, and likely to get less out of a college experience than traditional students. Additionally, these students often experience isolation and low levels of self-confidence during their college experience (Davis, 2010b).

Enrollment of first-generation students continues to increase, yet they are a student population that campuses are trying to better understand (Davis, 2010b). Researchers have found that first-generation students differ from their peers in terms of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. First-generation students tend to be more non-White, female, and have a lower socioeconomic status. They also face more challenges than their peers (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). As the demographics of college students continue to change, first-generation students have emerged as a demographic that is less likely to be White, more

financially independent than their non-first-generation peers, and typically coming from low income families (Bui, 2002; Davis, 2010b; Terenzini et al., 1996; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

First-generation students tend to lack an accurate understanding of post-secondary education, the family income and support needed to attend college, academic expectations for college-level study and what constitutes proper preparation during their high school years (Pascarella et al., 2004). These factors and others set the first-generation student apart from their college-going peers. For example, first-generation students tend to lack preparation for basic Math and English and have less involvement with their peers and teachers in high school (Terenzini et al., 1996). They enter into college less prepared with lower GPA's, lower standardized admission test scores and less confidence that they will experience academic success, persist and graduate (Jehangir, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996). Jenkins, Miyazaki, and Janosik (2009), compared a cohort of first year first-generation students and non-first-generation students who were enrolled at a Midwest urban university and found that the average household income was equivalent among all participants, with no significant variation based upon race or ethnicity. However, meeting financial obligations and experiencing financial hardships were found to be the most important factors that distinguished the two groups. The first-generation students indicated a higher number of hours spent working. This is an important factor for higher education administrators, especially members of the student activities staff and the financial aid staff, to recognize the lack of time to get involved and the financial burdens of first-generation students. Jenkins et al. (2009) also found that first-generation college students often are not aware of the various campus services available to them and are thus less likely to seek help from faculty or service providers (Jenkins et al., 2009). The researchers suggest that

campus administrations should consider increasing the number of summer bridge programs to assist first-generation college students to develop a comfort level for asking for help when needed. A similar study recommended implementing summer programs and connecting first-generation students to academic support services. An increase in retention for first-generation students who attend these programs is often the result (Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003). A surprising finding from Jenkins et al. (2009) concluded that first-generation students read more for pleasure than learning. This information can be useful for faculty and student affairs staff to better plan programming such as book clubs to gain their interest and to assist them with connecting to the campus (Jenkins et al., 2009).

In 1999, the research team of Inman and Mayes studied a sample of community college students and obtained results that supported research findings that had been done with four year institutions. Similar to previous research, this study found that the majority of community college first-generation students were older females and came from families with lower income (Inman & Mayes, 1999). The researchers found no difference in the rate of academic success between first-generation community college students and their peers. The authors suggested that the community college may be a better fit for the start of the first-generation students' college experience because of the similarities among the student body (Inman & Mayes, 1999).

Role of Parents

First-generation students and their parents often lack the important knowledge about the process of preparing for college, applying, and financing their post-secondary education (Choy, 2001; Vargas, 2004). According to Ward et al. (2012), students whose parents did not attend college are generally less academically prepared than their peers. It also appears that the parents' educational level influences the students' decision to attend college (Choy, 2001). First-

generation students receive little guidance and intervention from their parents. Their parents do not possess the information and experience necessary to assist the first-generation student as they navigate the college environment (Ward et al., 2012). This may be a factor that contributes to the type of institution a first-generation student selects. Parental involvement in the college decision making process and the level of support is lower for first-generation students than it is for their peers. Collectively, first-generation students attended less selective institutions than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). These risks lead to a difficult academic and nonacademic experience for first-generation students. Stieha (2010) concluded that first-generation students' experiences are similar to the historical experiences of minority students'.

At some point during high school, the college exploration process begins which includes researching, visiting, and applying to possible college options. In 2010, researcher Vicki Stieha conducted a case study with the goal of identifying the voice of a first-generation student. Stieha's research helps to underscore the need for family support as it relates to the college selection process and, ultimately, to a successful college experience. For example, non-first-generation students went on significantly more college visits and requested more help on their applications from the high school counselors than their first-generation peers (Stieha, 2010). First-generation students could be at a disadvantage due to the lack of parental knowledge and lack of understanding of the process. The study also found that parents could benefit from programs being offered during the high school years (Stieha, 2010). The college exploration journey can be enhanced by offering increased education to students and their parents by the high school counseling staff.

Several research studies have been conducted to explore whether first-generation college students underperform because family norms are mismatched with those of the university

culture. For example, one of the studies found that the independence of the college culture negatively impacted first-generations students' ability to be successful (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Conversely, interdependence (being part of a community) was positively related to success (Stephens et al., 2012).

Research related to parents of first-generation students reveals that parents can impact the decision to attend college, the type of institution and academic performance. To better serve first-generation students, higher education administrators must understand the role the family plays in guiding students and their ability to persist. Stieha (2010) further identified this lack of understanding as a void in current persistence theories.

First-Generation College Students, Persistence and Attrition

The work of Alexander Astin and Vincent Tinto are most frequently cited when examining student persistence. Astin's research in 1975 about access and persistence provided a framework for future research related to this topic (Astin, 1975). The research of Tinto is most often cited and associated with student persistence. Tinto's theory of departure suggests that student's interaction with the institutions academic and social environment determines whether a student will persist to degree completion (Tinto, 1987). Focusing on a typical four-year college student, Tinto's theory suggests that students arrive at college with certain expectations and aspirations (Tinto, 1975). The integration or lack of, into the college environment affects the student's outcomes. The impact of institutional variables such as faculty interaction, peer group interaction and extracurricular involvement help shape the student's progression through college (Tinto, 1975). Tinto acknowledged there is research that suggests that factors beyond integration and involvement, such as cultural, economic, social and institutional influences, also impact persistence (Tinto, 2006).

Astin's early work presented the input-process-output model of student involvement theory (Astin, 1970). In this theory, inputs are represented by entry characteristics that a student has prior to college such as academic preparation, generation status and family income. Environment includes what the student is exposed to at the institution such as faculty, peers and campus policy (Astin, 1993). Outputs are the characteristics a student adopts after interacting with the college environment such as their commitment to their institution and graduation (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) contended that the more a student is involved on their campus and in their environment, the more likely they are to succeed. Additional work by Astin focused on other variables that influence student persistence such as financial aid, and campus involvement (Astin, 1985).

Previous research has shown that first-generation college students are at a higher risk of dropping out when compared to their peers (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Choy (2001) found that employment, less support from parents and limited involvement in campus activities contributed negatively to students' experience and reasons for leaving campus. Garcia (2010a) concluded that students' involvement in co-curricular activities positively impacts their ability to achieve success.

Using the data from the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Pike, Kuh, and Massa-McKinley (2009) examined first-generation students and the relationship between engagement, employment and academic achievement. They concluded that first-generation students were less engaged overall and less likely to participate in diverse college experiences. First-generation students also perceived the college environment as less supportive and reported making less progress in their learning and intellectual development. Additionally, first-generation college students experienced more difficulty with their transition to college than

their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). These findings are consistent with much of the previous research in this area. However, the researchers found that most of these differences that existed among first-generation students were due to their educational aspirations and their residence. The level of parental education was also indirectly related to student responses and outcomes (Pike et al., 2009). Research on how college affects students indicated that living on campus can positively impact retention and graduation (Pascarella et al., 2004).

To better understand first-generation student retention and persistence, the work of Astin and Tinto are most frequently cited. Factors such as engagement, employment, and the transition to college were among the top factors identified.

Academic Experiences

It is estimated that more than 60 % of the first-generation students who enter postsecondary education in the U.S. will leave the institution they first enter before completing the requirements needed for graduation (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Several institutions have initiated research and programs designed to better understand and support first-generation students (Ward et al., 2012).

One institution that elected to focus efforts on participation in a service learning course as a means of assisting first-generation students with academic and social integration found that interaction with faculty appeared to be a significant factor for realizing academic and social integration for first-generation students. Faculty interaction had a positive impact on the first-generation students' perceptions of their ability to achieve their educational goals. Service learning served as a positive link for faculty and students (McKay & Estrella, 2008). After a review of various programs and benchmarks, the University of Kentucky proposed the following to enhance the graduation rate of first-generation students: identify and track first-generation

students; develop a centralized, one stop office or resource center for first-generation students; and expand summer bridge programs. The team responsible for this program concluded that without the implementation of support programs for first-generation students, the University of Kentucky would not have the key components necessary to increase their success (Peabody, Hutchens, Lewis, & Deffendall, 2011). This supports the work of Astin who contended that faculty-student involvement in and out of the classroom is the most influential factor for student satisfaction and success (Astin, 1993). Other studies have found differences in academic performance between first- generation and non-first-generation undergraduate students. However, Bryant and Nicolas (2011) did not find a significant difference between first-generation students and their peers with their research.

The first year of a student's college experience lays the foundation for academic success and is one of the most important transitional periods of the students' academic careers (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2004). This is a critical time when students need resources to assist them with their transition as they develop the skills they will need to be successful.

Self-efficacy. Sanchez and Nichols (2007) used a representative sample of 192 entering first year students at a private liberal arts west coast university to investigate the relationship between generational statuses and found that college adjustment was not impacted by the student's generation status. However, their findings did support previous findings that non-first-generation students performed better academically than their first generation peers. The level of self-efficacy a student has at the beginning of the year was found to be a predictor for later college adjustment. This is useful for counselors to identify at risk students at an early stage. Sanchez and Nichols (2007) also suggested that first-generation students have a higher level of self-efficacy at the beginning of the year as compared to their peers and is related to better

adjustment to college. Non-first-generation students are more confident with their abilities and have not experienced the same challenges as their first-generation peers (Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). The researchers also found that over the span of several years the level of confidence for first-generation students does not necessarily increase significantly (Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). The research suggests that even though first-generation students believe they have the ability to succeed academically, they still underperform when compared with their peers.

Motivation. Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) sought to understand the factors that impact first-generation students by evaluating the integration and motivation dimensions that influence academic achievement. Subjects in this convenience sample were community college students enrolled in several sections of a psychology class. Prospero and Gupta found that high motivation and integration contributed to academic achievement for first-generation students, but did not correlate with academic achievement of their non-first-generation peers. Prospero and Gupta's conclusions and those of others were that professionals working with first-generation students should focus on the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate students to increase their study skills (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Early intervention programs. In 2007 and 2008 the University of LaVerne created a three week business camp that was held for 118 first-generation high school juniors to introduce them to business education. The sessions were designed to assist these high school students with their college aspirations. The participants in the program were tracked and the researchers found that approximately 96% of the students who indicated that they intended to attend college after graduation were actually enrolled. The authors concluded that attending the summer program motivated college attendance; however, there was no correlation between attending the program and majoring in business (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011). Another program known as the

Freshman Empowerment Program was designed to support at risk, first-generation students as they moved from high school to college. The Housing staff administered the College Student Inventory (CSI) and based upon their responses, students were selected to participate in the program. Scores on the CSI used to select or exclude students included: academic motivation, social motivation, and general coping. Students receiving low scores in the areas of sociability, ease of transition, or who had low commitment to finishing college/low self academic confidence, were invited to participate. The program met weekly for six weeks. Each session lasted 90 minutes and focused on topics and skills that tend to correlate with academic success. Students were also introduced to the various campus resources. The results indicated that the participants had a significantly higher GPA as compared to those in the control group during their first and second semester (Carter, Chase, & Folger, 2004).

A longitudinal study examined participation in the federally funded Talent Search program. Talent Search provides career exploration and counseling services to low income, pre-college students who may also be first-generation college students. The results showed that students who had participated in the program were more likely to enroll in post secondary education than their non-attending peers (Brewer & Landers, 2005).

There are many formats for summer transition programs. Participants in these programs showed positive results such as a higher likelihood to enroll in post secondary education and higher academic performance.

Faculty. Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) investigated the motivation and integration of 197 community college first-generation students and 80 non-first-generation college students. Based upon their findings they recommended changes to promote the extrinsic (financial) and intrinsic (enjoying themselves) integration of first-generation college students. The changes

suggested included programs specifically for first-generation students, and faculty training in the use of teaching methods that promote autonomous learning. Using data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella (2012) determined that first-generation college students were at a significant non-cognitive and psychosocial disadvantage compared to their peers. Although most research has found that interacting with faculty has a positive impact on a student's cognitive and psychosocial development, this study found that this was not true for first-generation college students included in this study. First-generation students who reported good relationships with faculty reported lower performance on cognitive and psychological well-being (Padgett et al., 2012). This suggests that first-generation students are not prepared to interact with faculty when they enter college. A high level of discomfort and intimidation can exist. The study also found that learning from peers was positive for first-generation students; this supports the prior research done on the impact of peer to peer education, (Padgett et al., 2012).

Faculty can play a key role in the experiences of first-generation students. Faculty and faculty interactions have shown a positive impact on first-generation student's cognitive and psychological well-being.

Living-learning environments. A sample of more than 1300 first-generation students from 33 different universities participated in the National Study of Living Learning Programs in the spring 2004. The study found that first-generation students residing in a living learning community had a more successful academic and social transition to college than their non-first-generation peers who lived in a traditional residence hall. The study found that the use of structured activities and interactions with faculty are positive influences on the success of first-generation students (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007).

Nonacademic Experiences

Research has shown that becoming involved and engaged on the college campus contributes to a student's feeling of connectedness and they are more likely to succeed (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). Being fully integrated into college life, inside and outside the classroom, leads to higher levels of achievement, higher GPA's, and can affect the well-being of a student (Martinez et al., 2009).

First-generation students often do not have an immediate role model to assist with questions about career choices and professional development. They must look outward for this support. First-generation families are typically working class families, whereas the majority of students pursuing higher education come from traditionally middle and upper class families (Davis, 2010b). First-generation college students have often identified mentors from their high school and these educators play an important role in the college decision making process. This relationship is vital to high school students and should be continued once they enroll on the college campus. A student organization advisor may play this role (Capriccioso, 2006).

One of the most important relationships a student can establish is with faculty members on the college campus. Students can also benefit greatly by developing personal relationship with any professional staff member that is willing to take on a mentoring role for first-generation students. Similar to the high school counselor, research has shown that the relationships with academic advisors are especially important to the academic development and success of a student. It could be concluded that this same type of relationship could be created with the students' co-curricular involvement and contribute to their success outside of the classroom (Davis, 2010a).

First-generation students are often not fully engaged in either curricular or co-curricular campus activities (Terenzini et al., 1996). These students can feel like outsiders; it is imperative that college campuses recognize the needs of first-generation students and ensure that all activities, events and programs remove barriers that could contribute to their feeling of isolation. Another struggle for many first-generation students is finances. Often faced with a need for money to subsidize the cost of their education, students must work and this too can be an impediment to fully engaging in the college experience (Terenzini et al., 1996). Outside work requirements, less parental involvement, and the unlikelihood of participation in internships/career fairs are factors that differ for this population in comparison to their peers who are not the first to attend college in their families (Terenzini et al., 1996). According to a team of researchers from Northwestern University, academic institutions expect students to have a high level of independence during their college experience. However, this is often uncomfortable for first-generation students who are more likely to come from poorer backgrounds that focus on collaboration and interdependence (M. Smith, 2012).

First-generation college students tend to hold full or part time employment to assist with financing their education (Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). They often lack important study and time management skills and can experience challenges when attempting to navigate the curricular process due in part to the lack of the college experience in their families (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Along with the normal anxieties and adjustment issues of college, first-generation students are also challenged by cultural, social and academic transitions (Pascarella et al., 2004). Additionally, first-generation students work more hours than their peers and are more likely to be employed off campus (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2003). First-generation student are more challenged than non-first-generation students when it comes to

balancing academic and employment demands. In addition to balancing the requirements of work and their demanding academic responsibilities, first-generation college students are less likely to live on campus and more likely to perceive the college environment as less supportive (Pike et al., 2009). Both of these factors can negatively impact learning outcomes for first-generation students. Involvement in extracurricular activities is another factor that influences academic student success, usually positively (Strap & Farr, 2010). First-generation students tend to become less engaged overall in the out of classroom collegiate experience (Pascarella et al., 2003). Working and living off-campus contribute to first-generation students' inability to be actively involved in extracurricular activities.

There are several nonacademic factors that impact the success of first-generation students. Among the most common are employment, living environment and extracurricular activities.

Summary

First-generation students have unique characteristics and barriers that can impact their college experience and ability to graduate (Ishanti, 2006). The literature selected for this review was presented to provide the reader with the framework to understand this study. This chapter conveys the characteristics and factors that impact first-generation students. The academic and nonacademic factors impacting first-generation students serve as reference points that were combined with the data obtained from co-facilitated focus groups to study the experiences of first-generation students and the impact of engagement related to their experiences. Chapter III will describe the methodology used to guide the study on first-generation students and the factors they believe are impacting their academic and non-academic experiences.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Problem Statement

First-generation students encounter more obstacles and do not persist to graduation at the same rate as their non-first-generation peers (Choy, 2001; Ishantli, 2006). Additionally, the number of first-generation college students continues to increase (Davis, 2010b). There is a pressing need to understand the experiences (academic and nonacademic) that allow these students to overcome the barriers inherent to being a first-generation student.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study focused on identifying and exploring the experiences first-generation students enrolled at a large, diverse research university located in Southeastern United States believe to impact their perceptions of academic and nonacademic college success. Focus groups were used to inform the research as it relates to the current literature. This understanding will assist institutions to develop support services and to assist with improving their retention and graduation rates.

Research Questions

1. What experiences do first-generation college students perceive impact their academic success?
2. What experiences do first-generation college students perceive impact their nonacademic success?
3. What challenges do first-generation students perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students?
4. What personal factors do first-generation students perceive impacts their college success?

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

Utilizing a focus group research design allowed the researcher to record the experiences that first-generation students perceive impact their success. This study employed a qualitative research approach that addressed the identified research questions. “Focus groups can be used alone, independent of other procedures. They are helpful when insights, perceptions, and explanations are more important than the actual numbers” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 40). Data gained from the use of focus groups was analyzed to identify emerging themes. Focus groups are beneficial for attempting to gain insights into complex problems. Data is produced through the use of group interactions (Morgan, 1988). The focus group discussions allowed the researcher to hear first-hand the experiences of the first-generation students. “The main advantage focus groups offer is the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time” (Morgan, 1988, p. 15). Morgan (1988) stated that, “Focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating *what* participants think, but they excel at uncovering *why* participants think as they do” (p. 23).

An examination of the literature related to first-generation students indicated that the studies conducted to date are primarily quantitative, which provides generalities about students' experiences. Due to the limited number of qualitative research studies focused on first-generation college students, it is appropriate to engage in qualitative design study to better understand this understudied group of students (Hays & Singh, 2012). This study used a phenomenological approach. According to Patton (2002), phenomenology attempts to address how people experience certain phenomena. In addition, this approach was selected because it was best suited to examine first-generation college students and their academic and co-curricular experiences because “phenomenological analysis seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning,

structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (Patton, 2002, p. 482). The researcher considered each experience of students’ uniquely while looking for commonalities among the participants. These findings can help the reader understand the experiences and challenges that first-generation students face.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher or investigator is the primary instrument for gathering and interpreting data (Merriam, 1988). Unlike quantitative data which is gathered through inventories or questionnaires, qualitative data is gathered through human interaction (Creswell, 2009). Merriam (1988) emphasized that human beings are not perfect and are subject to mistakes, biases and missed opportunities. (Morgan, 1988) describes the role of the researcher in a focus group is to act more as a facilitator than an interviewer; a successful focus group involves discussion among the participants. The personal significance for the researcher is that the researcher is a first-generation college student. Similarly, the researcher’s personal college journey assisted with the selection of research interest.

Sample

The research participants for this study were a sample of first-generation sophomore and senior students at a public, metropolitan, research institution located in the Southeastern United States. The study only included undergraduate students who attended this university and did not include transfer or international students. Prospective participants were initially contacted via email to ensure they met the criteria necessary for inclusion in the study and to invite them to participate. Criteria for participation were as follows: participants must have attained the age of 18 or older and must meet the definition of first-generation college student (i.e., neither parent may have continued their education beyond high school). Due to the nature of this study, focus

groups were most appropriate for this inquiry since the voices of participants can be maximized in this format (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Participants were enrolled first-generation students as identified on a biographical questionnaire of all entering first year students which asked them directly if they are the first in their family to go to college. To invite them to participate in the study, the researcher sent email invitations to 293 selected participants that met the criteria of sophomore or senior status and not transfer or international. See Appendix A to review the selection criteria. Sophomore and senior ranked first-generation students were further divided into groups based upon the number of credit hours completed. A goal of 7 to 10 participants in each focus group was desired. Qualified participants were invited to participate in scheduled focus groups and asked to respond via email with their willingness to participate and availability to assist with scheduling of the focus groups (see Appendix B). If the target numbers of participants were not reached, a second email and a personal phone call from the researcher were used to invite participation in the focus groups. Two days prior to the scheduled focus group a reminder email was sent confirming the time and location of the focus group. Included in the email were the details of the focus group and a copy of the informed consent form for the participants to review (see Appendix C). On the day of the scheduled focus group, each participant received a phone call to thank them for their willingness to participate and remind them of the scheduled focus group.

The focus group sessions included an incentive program. During each session, the names of all participants were entered into a drawing for gift cards to local restaurants and business. The drawing was held at the end of their respective focus group. Each focus group session included a drawing for a minimum of two prizes. The names of all focus group participants were entered into an additional raffle for a \$100.00 VISA gift card. Additionally, the names of senior

participants were entered into a drawing to receive additional tickets to the May commencement ceremony.

Site of the Study

The setting for this study was a large, diverse, research institution located in the Southeast United States. The institution has a total enrollment of more than 25,000 students with approximately 20 to 25 % first-generation students.

Data Collection and Measures

To gain a better understanding of first-generation college students' academic and co-curricular experiences, a team of researchers conducted the focus groups. "Focus groups can be used alone, independent of other procedures. They are helpful when insights, perceptions, and explanations are more important than actual numbers" (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 40). Focus groups are beneficial to use when trying to gain insight into complex problems. "The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1988, p. 12). Focus groups allow for participants to share their experiences as they perceive it as first-generation college students. Morgan (1988) suggested that an advantage of focus groups is the ability to observe and gather a large amount of information on a topic in a limited period of time. Morgan (1988) also suggested that, "The simplest test of whether focus groups are appropriate for a research project is to ask how actively and easily participants would discuss the topic of interest" (p. 23). Morgan (1988) continued, "Focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating what participants think, but they excel at uncovering why participants think as they do" (p. 23).

Focus groups. Focus group sessions were conducted utilizing the approved focus group protocol developed by the researcher and dissertation methodologist. During the focus groups,

each participant was provided with opportunity to ask for clarification or further explanation of the question as needed. On the day of the focus group, the information contained on the informed consent form was reviewed and each participant was given a copy of the informed consent to review and sign prior to the focus group beginning. Krueger and Casey (2009) identified that data collection begins during the beginning of the session, often referred to as pre-session small talk. During the focus group sessions, participants' interactions were noted by the focus group facilitators.

Moderators. Focus group moderators were solicited from a current pool of trained university focus group moderators, graduate students in the Higher Education program, and members of the Student Engagement and Enrollment Services administrative staff. Each moderator must have been previously trained through the Office of Assessment or have attended a scheduled training facilitated by the researcher and dissertation methodologist prior to serving as a moderator. As an additional training step, prior to the beginning of the focus groups, the moderators were invited to attend a focus group conducted by the researcher and a co-moderator with first-generation student leaders selected by the researcher. The results of this focus group served as a training tool and allowed for feedback from the selected participants about the process and clarification of any items prior to the start of the scheduled focus groups.

Each focus group was led by trained co-moderators. The moderators were paired to reflect racial and gender diversity. The focus groups were conducted by a team of moderators. Due to the diversity of the researchers' backgrounds and experience with the first-generation students, it was important for the researchers to acknowledge any biases or assumptions that may follow from past personal experiences as a first-generation student. In an effort to address these possible biases and assumptions, the researchers spent time prior to the start of each interview

participating in a reflective journaling activity. This was also done prior to the beginning the analysis of the data collected (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Following each focus group, each moderator was provided with a blank copy of the moderators guide and asked to independently summarize the major themes shared during the focus group. After both moderators completed their summaries independently they met together and reviewed their findings. A final summary reflective of the moderator's summaries was presented in writing and in person to the researcher.

Moderators guide. The moderators guide can be found in Appendix E. The moderators guide was based on a model that has been developed and implemented by the university's Office of Assessment. The guide was developed by the researcher in collaboration with the methodologist. Prior to the start of the focus group process, the guide was revised to reflect feedback from the methodologist, moderator's feedback, and practice focus group participants to ensure clarity. Each question was reviewed independently and modified accordingly to ensure alignment with the identified research questions. The guide contained the instructions, materials needed, and details for the format of the focus group. The guide included the warm up questions, 10 discussion prompts, probing questions, and two written questions.

Analytic Strategy

"Data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recoding the evidence to address the initial propositions of the study" (Yin, 1994, p. 103). The data from the focus groups was reviewed and analyzed for meanings as described by Hycner (1985). In addition, immediately following the focus groups, the research team was asked to quickly jot down additional thoughts related to the group discussion. Additional field notes following the focus group were used to serve as context for the researchers and provide additional information

regarding the focus group. Once the focus group results had been summarized, they were then reviewed and bracketed with an openness to allow whatever meanings may emerge (Hycner, 1985). After the general meanings were identified, the research team then identified units of general meaning and the redundancies were eliminated. Once the redundancies were eliminated, the researcher tried to determine if any of the units could be clustered together as a theme. This process was repeated for each focus group (Hycner, 1985).

The coding stage of the findings requires judgment on the part of the researchers as to what has meaning and what data is not significant (Seidman, 2005). Validation of the findings occurred by using the follow up emails and member checking to ensure accurate representation of the participants. The participants were given the opportunity to review the summary statements from their focus group and offer edits as appropriate. When members complete the member check, they are assisting the researcher triangulate the observations and interpretations (Hays & Singh, 2012). To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, all copies of the electronic recordings and notes were destroyed following member checking. As a final step to validate the findings, a town hall was held for first-generation students. The town hall included a presentation of the findings and recommendations from the study.

Limitations

The results of the study are based upon data from a large, diverse research institution in the Southeastern United States. The researcher relied on the data that was gathered during the focus groups and had no control of variables that could have impacted the results. However, it should be noted that efforts were implemented to ensure the best possible environment for participants to share their thoughts. Data obtained from focus groups must be analyzed in

relation to the group and the group discussions. The composition and results of the focus groups may vary considerably thus impacting the final data (Carnaghi, 1992).

Summary

This chapter described the methods used to conduct this study. The purpose of the study, description of population, instrumentation, data collection, and discussion of the data analysis was reviewed. Chapter IV will report the the results of the focus groups from the data analysis.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Review of Study

Many first-generation students encounter significant obstacles during their college journey and do not persist to graduation at the same rate as non-first-generation students (Choy (1998); Ishitani, 2006). This study explored the experiences of first-generation students and the factors they believe impact their academic and nonacademic college success at a large, metropolitan, public university with a diverse student body. Results from the focus groups are reported in this chapter and focus on first-generation sophomores and senior's student perceptions.

Characteristics of the Sample

A total of 138 sophomores and 162 seniors were invited to participate in the scheduled focus groups. Participants of this study were invited from a pool of students enrolled at a large diverse research university located in Southeastern United States in the spring and summer terms of 2014. The selection criteria were

- (a) native students (entered the institution as a first year student)
- (b) sophomores and seniors were identified by the number of credit hours completed
- (c) completed the First Year Biographical Questionnaire
- (d) still enrolled at as of the third week of spring semester, 2014 or still enrolled in summer school as of the third week of summer session, 2014.

These criteria were chosen so that both groups would have successfully completed the first year and successfully completed the required number of course hours for classification for the next academic level. International and transfer students were excluded from the sample population. Participants included a total of 16 males (seven sophomores, nine seniors) and 15

females (eight sophomores, seven seniors). Sophomore participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 years, with the majority of the sophomores having attained the age of 20 years old ($n=6$) and identifying their ethnicity as either Black ($n=6$) or White ($n=8$). The seniors ranged in age from 21 to 24 years old with the majority being equally distributed between 21 and 22 years of age ($n=6$) and identifying their ethnicity as either Black ($n=7$) or White ($n=6$).

The following tables illustrate the characteristics of focus group participants. Table 1 illustrates the participant's self-reported combined family income which ranged from under \$10,000.00 to \$50,000.00, with the majority of the participants having a combined family income of under \$30,000.00.

Table 1

Combined Family Income of Focus Group Participants

Income Level	Sophomores			Seniors		
	<i>n</i>	%	Cumulative %	<i>n</i>	%	Cumulative %
< \$10,000	2	13	13	3	19	19
\$10,000 to < \$15,000	3	20	33	2	12	31
\$15,000 to < \$20,000	3	20	53	2	12	43
\$20,000 to < \$30,000	3	20	73	3	19	62
\$30,000 to < \$40,000	4	27	100	6	38	100
\$50,000 to < \$100,000	0	0	0	0	0	0
> \$100,000	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unreported	0	0	0	0	0	0

The majority of the seniors who participated ($n=8$) were enrolled in the College of Arts and Letters, while the sophomore participants were enrolled in various colleges within the university. See Table 2 for a breakdown of the colleges in which participants were enrolled.

Table 2

Academic College of Focus Group Participants

	<u>Sophomores</u>		<u>Seniors</u>	
<u>Academic College</u>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Arts & Letters	4	27	8	50
Business & Public Administration	4	27	0	0
Education	1	6	3	19
Engineering & Technology	0	0	2	13
Health Sciences	2	13	1	6
Sciences	4	27	2	13

Table 3 displays the variety of occupations held by the parents of the first-generation students who participated in this study. The most frequent occupations for participants' fathers were Skilled Manual (n=9), Officer/Enlisted (n=7), and Semiskilled Manual (n=4) whereas the highest ranked occupations for mothers were Administrative Staff and Manager (n=6) and Semiskilled Manual (n=5).

Table 3

Parent Occupations of Focus Group Participants

Occupation	Sophomores		Seniors	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Father's Occupation				
Administrative Staff	1	7	0	0
Clerical	1	7	2	13
Executive	0	0	0	0
Homemaker	0	0	0	0
Manager	1	7	1	6
Not Applicable	0	0	2	13
Officer/Enlisted	2	13	5	31
Retired/Disabled	2	13	1	6
Semiskilled Manual	3	20	1	6
Skilled Manual	5	33	4	25
Mother's Occupation				
Administrative Staff	3	21	3	19
Clerical	2	13	1	6
Executive	0	0	0	0
Homemaker	2	13	1	6
Manager	2	13	4	25
Not Applicable	0	0	0	0
Officer/Enlisted	2	13	2	13
Retired/Disabled	0	0	1	6
Semiskilled Manual	2	13	3	19
Skilled Manual	2	13	1	6

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the experiences of first-generation college students and the factors they believe to impact their academic and nonacademic college success. Focus groups were used to engage first-generation students in semi-structured discussions about their academic and nonacademic experiences. The focus group discussions were utilized to answer the following research questions:

1. What experiences do first-generation college students perceive to impact their academic success?
2. What experiences do first-generation college students perceive to impact their nonacademic success?
3. What challenges do first-generation students perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students?
4. What personal factors do first-generation students perceive impact their college success?

A review of the moderator's written summaries, taped sessions, and a moderator's group debriefing informed this study. In an effort to seek additional feedback and understanding of the first-generation student, a summary of themes was shared electronically with all participants. Additionally, a town hall with invited first-generation students was held to review the findings and recommendations for this study.

Analysis related to research question one. The first question explored "What experiences do first-generation college students perceive to impact their academic success?"

Support services. Participants expressed how they wished they would have known more about career choices, scholarships, options of majors, and more details pertaining to the courses

required for specific majors. There was a high level of frustration related to course scheduling and references were made to making the wrong class choices as they determined their career path. One student shared, “they do not tell you what you need to know and we do not know the requirements.”

In contrast, others found college to be more manageable than they expected since there are resources available. Tutoring, the Writing Center and the Student Success Center were highlighted as services available to make the transition easier. It should be noted that many of the first-generation students were unaware of the available resources and how to access them. “Institution tells you they have resources but they do not tell you how to use the resources,” explained one student. First generation students are less likely to use student support systems on campus (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al, 1996). This research finding was supported by the participants of this study.

Coursework. The perceptions of these participants, the classes (examples were given such as Biology lab or Chemistry lab) – were not challenging based on conversations that participants reported with friends at other institutions. It was their belief that their peers were doing more concrete experiments and getting a more meaningful experience than the experience provided to them. Participants suggested creating an option for students to test out of classes by proving their skill. According to them, this would be advantageous for students and would create a better system for class sequencing and scheduling and would benefit students by allowing them to save time and money. In addition, some students felt they would like to have the option to take classes in related fields outside of their major to fulfill their personal interest and general education requirements, rather than taking random classes to meet the general education requirements. In addition, the students were very critical of the purpose of the general

education requirements and questioned their value and contribution to their educational experience. “I wish we could test out of general education classes and save money. Then I could take more classes that I wanted to take versus being required to take classes that are irrelevant,” explained one student.

Academic advising. Participants reported receiving little academic advisement and a high level of frustration related to this topic. Many of the participants indicated that they would have liked a better guide and understanding of the college processes. Specifically, they felt they needed a better understanding of course scheduling, courses needed for degree completion and choice of majors that were aligned with their career choices. The participants shared examples of inconsistencies of advice and guidance from their general advisor and their major advisor. They also expressed their displeasure with the advisors’ inability to offer guidance for what to do after graduation. One participant noted:

If you come to college with an idea for a career path, i.e. medical school, then there should be someone to refer to...[who] knows the correct information, what you need to do, who you need to talk to, the internships you need to get, the proper roadmap, especially for a first-generation student to be successful especially since there is no “blue-print” for success.

Another student shared, “there is no road-map for people that want to go above and beyond, and go to get their master’s or doctorate degrees and advisors should be tasked with providing students the necessary information to be successful.” Finally, a third student shared, “they just tell you, you need to do all these things but they don’t tell you where to get it, they don’t help!” The effectiveness of advising and counseling is enhanced when these functions are a required, integral, and positive part of the educational experience (Tinto, 1993). Effective academic

advisement can help remedy some of the root causes of attrition. Tinto (1993) found that interaction with staff, professors, and other students can lead to greater success for students.

Interactions. Participants shared that, generally, their interactions with their peers, faculty, and staff were positive. Each subgroup was recognized for showing care and support and was noted as having a positive impact on their experience. In contrast, as discussed previously, participants specifically raised concerns about their interaction with support services such as financial aid, and the office of finance and were critical of these services and their perception of a lack of caring and understanding of the first-generation student experience. It should be noted that senior participants were much more vocal in their concerns about the lack of care from various support services throughout the institution. Overall, the participants noted having very limited contact with faculty members. However, when they did interact with their faculty it was noted as a positive experience. A senior student asserted, “One of my highlights from [Institution] is having Professors that take the time with you.”

Analysis related to research question two. In addition to exploring factors contributing to the academic success of first-generation students, the study also explored “Which experiences do first-generation college students perceive to impact their nonacademic success?”

Parents and families. Parents and family were consistently mentioned as having an impact on their experience and were noted as supporters and motivators for the participants. Since 1971, the number of first-generation college students who report that the reason they attend college is because their parents want them to go has doubled (Saenz, Pryor, Hurtado, Santos, & Korn, 2007). Ishitani (2006) also reported that family support and encouragement positively impact the student’s ability to be successful during their college journey. The findings from this study support the results in the Ishitani (2006) study. A sophomore shared, “my

parents have always supported me. They are blindly supporting me now. They trust me to do what's right, but, they do not know what I am going through." Although the family, mostly defined as parents, was consistently identified as playing an important role for first-generation students, they (parents and families) were often lacking the knowledge and understanding of the college experience of first-generation students. One student shared, "It's hard to do this on your own. There is no one to tell you the little secrets or loop holes." Another student expressed, "they (parents) have no idea what I am doing, so I have to figure it out on my own." The majority of the participants did not seek help or advice from anyone such as a parent, teacher or guidance counselor in dealing with the issues that arose for them during the application process or once enrolled. This is also supported in research showing that first-generation college students are less likely to receive assistance from their parents in applying to college (Choy, 2001). The participants did identify a high need and often pressure as a first-generation student to make their families proud. All of the focus groups consistently had a theme of family encouragement and support as an important contributor to the college experience. A senior excitedly shared her story of going home for breaks, "whenever I go home, I tell my story and brag about everything I have learned. They don't fully understand, but it makes them proud." A sense of pride and accomplishment as the first in the family to graduate emerged as a reason for the students' drive for graduation.

Although many of the participants felt a deep sense of pride in being first in the family to attend college, many of them perceived themselves as normal college students and had not thought about being a first-generation student. In fact, their participation in the focus group process was noted as the first time for many of the participants to take the time to think about their experiences as a first-generation student. Throughout the discussions, they identified more

similarities than differences with their peers and were challenged to identify differences in their experiences.

Self-efficacy. Many participants described themselves as having a high sense of independence and a self-motivation. They identified their adjustment to college as being similar to their high school experience. The participants were used to the challenges of being self-sufficient, working, and balancing school with other commitments. Participants explained how their success depended on their own abilities and they held themselves accountable for their own actions. Participants also explained how they encouraged themselves to be successful and were self-driven to attend college and complete a degree. Overall, the participants defined themselves as achievers. They acknowledged the barriers (social, economic or cultural) that they faced getting into and navigating college. “We should be proud of where we are. Others are not here. Just being here makes us successful,” shared one participant.

Involvement. Many of the students were involved in activities outside of the classroom including: volunteering, football, fraternity, clubs/organizations, club sports, partying and just relaxing. One participant shared “I am paying for it so I want to take advantage of everything. I live my life. ” Another participant shared, “life outside of work and school is boring unless you get involved.” Many participants agreed, “finding clubs to join is very easy.” Campus involvement and social networking/“connectivity” were a great means for some and led to jobs and social opportunities on and off campus. A senior participant identified his biggest regret about his experience was related to his involvement, “my biggest regret is not getting fully involved.” Their campus involvement also allowed them to get advice and support from their peers for academic and personal issues.

On campus living. Many of the participants had lived in campus housing or were currently living in campus housing. They described the importance of living on campus and shared many positive examples of how living on campus had helped them meet new friends, get involved, and feel connected to the university. One resident student shared, “being part of a Living Learning Community and living on campus was a great experience and is key for first year students to connect.” The Resident Assistants (RAs) were also identified as a great resource for students, one resident shared “RAs want to help students and they know a ton about the campus resources.”

Analysis related to research question three. The third research question asked “What challenges do first-generation students perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students?”

Financial. As noted earlier, it was difficult for first-generation students to identify specific differences between their experiences as a first-generation student and those of their non-first-generation students. However, all participants agreed that finances were a significant concern for them. “I didn’t know anything about the financial aid process and how to get available scholarships.” Another student expressed a significant level of financial concern by stating, “It is crippling when you think about the level of debt you have.” They also noted that many of their families were unable to provide financial assistance. “It’s hard to see my parents struggle, but, it motivates me more to get a good job and pay off my loans. I do not want to put anything else on them,” shared one participant. They also noted the challenge of completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms and the application process with very little guidance from their family. Many participants identified the importance of financial aid and the stress of financial concerns as a significant challenge related to their college experience

and degree completion. One participant offered the following advice, “get financially literate and save!” This is supported in the literature which highlights the impact that a student’s financial situation can have on their ability to persist and to be successful (Choy, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Employment. All but one of the participants had jobs on campus such as a residence hall desk receptionist, resident assistant, office assistant, or they worked off campus. Some of the participants held multiple jobs on and off campus. The one student who identified herself as not having a job shared that she had taken the maximum amount of loans each year to fund her education. All but one of the participants disclosed that they were receiving some type of financial assistance. There was consensus among all of the focus groups that working as part of their college experience was a necessity. One sophomore who held three jobs explained, “I work fifty to sixty hours a week to pay for school. I don’t have an option.” The majority of them were receiving very little financial guidance and assistance from their families

Analysis related to research question four. The fourth research question addressed “What personal factors do first-generation students perceive impact their college success?”

Personal factors. For many of the first-generation students participating in this study, their level of perseverance and determination was a continuation from their high school experience. Similar to their responses for research question two, participants described themselves as independent, self-reliant, motivated, and resilient and used other terms that focused on confidence and perseverance. A profile of personal awareness and independence emerged in all of the groups and was supported as a major descriptor of a first-generation student. Several times, participants reported a sense of pride and excitement for being the first in their family to attend college. One participant said,

I want to be the light at the end of the tunnel. We did this on our own. We should feel so empowered...I learned everything on my own. I didn't even think I was going come to college. I did this all on my own. We should all feel so proud of ourselves...

Another shared "having the ability to affect the lives of other people with what you've accomplished...that's so dope, that's so cool!"

Parents and family. For some of the participants, there was also a sense of guilt with the fact that others in their family were not able to experience college and its benefits and the sacrifices that were being made for their attendance. This was demonstrated when a senior shared, "if you fail everyone in your family fails." Another student expressed a similar thought, "I am appreciative because I know where I came from and how hard everyone has worked for me to be here." Once these comments were shared, other members of the focus group expressed agreement. In an effort to assist their parents/families with understanding the college experience they expressed a need for programs specifically designed for first-generation students such as a living community or peer mentoring program.

Involvement. First-generation students who participated in this study were involved in numerous clubs and organizations on and off campus. They identified involvement with community service, academic programs, and their major courses among their most positive college experiences. Many elaborated on the positive connections and relationships that were formed with their peers and faculty by their involvement. This was identified as an important part of their college experience. Involvement allowed them to meet new people, discuss "real life" issues and to connect to the campus. "I like connecting with people that are not like me. You are going to get a different viewpoint, that is part of college," shared one participant. It was

also important for them, from a future financial perspective, to get the most out of their experience-as they viewed it as important to get the most out of their investment.

As the wrap up of the focus groups, participants were given the opportunity to offer advice in writing to other first-generation students and campus administrators. The themes that emerged from these responses supported the comments that had been shared during the focus groups. Most of the responses given as advice to other first-generation students referenced setting goals, being driven, using resources, managing time and finances, and to be actively engaged in the college experience. One student noted,

The best advice I can give a first-generation student would be to immerse yourself in the college life experience. Just throw yourself into any opportunity because that's what a college life should be all about. And most importantly, everything will be o.k.!

The majority of the participants were in agreement with their advice to administration that focused on identifying resources to support the first-generation student. Suggestions included establishing a specific office focusing on first-generation students, creating on-going education opportunities, mentoring programs, family resources and programming specifically designed to address hurdles of being a first-generation student. One written response captured the first-generation student experience, "First-generation students aren't as knowledgeable as you think. Check up on them, make them aware!" Additionally, the advice given for the administrators informed the recommendations contained in chapter V. A complete list of their responses can be found in Appendices F-I.

Summary

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify and explore the experiences of first-generation college students and the factors they believe to impact their academic and nonacademic college success. Utilizing a focus group research design allowed the researcher to record the experiences that first-generation students perceive impact their success. The focus group discussions also allowed the moderators to hear first-hand the experiences of a representative group of first-generation students.

Based on the findings of this study, several themes emerged that impact the experiences of first-generation students. Financial issues, support services, the role of parents/families, self-determination, and campus involvement were among the top issues impacting their experience. Chapter V will offer further discussion, and provide recommendations for future practice and research to assist first-generation students.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an overview of the study including the study's purpose, research questions, methodology, summary of major findings, recommendations, and limitations.

Implications for practice and future research are also discussed.

Study Overview

This qualitative study identified and explored the experiences of first-generation college students and the factors they believe to impact their academic and nonacademic college success. Focus groups were used to engage first-generation students in semi-structured discussions about their academic and nonacademic experiences. A moderator's guide was developed and used for each focus group to collect responses related to the following research questions:

1. What experiences do first-generation college students perceive to impact their academic success?
2. What experiences do first-generation college students perceive to impact their nonacademic success?
3. What challenges do first-generation students perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students?
4. What personal factors do first-generation students perceive impact their college success?

Discussion of Major Findings

This section provides a discussion of the links between the focus groups and the literature reviewed in Chapter II. Overall, the findings from this study concur with and support existing research on the challenges and successes of first-generation college students. This study also contributes to the knowledge of the factors that impact the first-generation student's college experience. The purpose for conducting this study was to identify and explore the experiences of

first-generation college students and the factors they believe to impact their academic and nonacademic college success.

The success of first-generation students. Tinto (1993) proposed that the person-environmental fit is critical to student retention as the incompatibility between student and university is one of the primary causes of attrition. Poor fit is a mismatch between the student expectations or values with those of the college or university they attend (Levitz & Noel, 1989; Tinto, 1993). Almost all participants in this study experienced some level of poor fit during their college career. Their college experience consisted of varying degrees of successes and challenges that were related to such factors as family, social, financial, navigating university resources and support services. Tinto (2006-2007) stated, “the first lesson, the lesson of institutional action, can be broadly stated as follows: It is one thing to understand why students leave, it is another to know what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed” (p. 6).

First-generation students are less likely to use support systems on campus (Nunez, et al. 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004). This was true for the participants in this study. As one student stated, “we don’t like to ask for help. We already have to make up for not having the resources others have.” Many of them were unaware of the available services and expressed frustration with a lack of knowledge about these resources. A small majority of the students had used various campus services and expressed satisfaction with their level of support.

The involvement experience of first-generation students. Previous research stated that first-generation college students are less likely to participate in co-curricular activities on campus, socialize with faculty or friends, and less likely to develop meaningful connections (Nunez et al., 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004). Smith and Zhang (2010) also found that compared to non-first-generation, first-generation students were less likely to participate in clubs and spent

fewer hours socializing. The participants in this study did not support this research. They were involved in numerous campus and community organizations such as local church groups, intramurals, service organizations, and Greek letter groups. The participants were experiencing success on campus and have been involved in various activities on campus, thus, participating in the focus group process provided them with an additional opportunity to engage on campus. Their experience is closely related to the research of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) that discussed the importance of social interactions for students among faculty, staff and peers, and active campus involvement and the relationship to retention, persistence and graduation. Additionally, their involvement supports the environment variable used to fill in Astin's (1993) I-E-O model and Tinto's (1975, 1993) social integration.

The self-perceptions of first-generation students. Pryor (2005) found that first-generation students were more likely than non-first-generation students to cite getting an education as important for them to get better jobs. The financing of college, improving themselves, and a desire to make money were common threads throughout the focus groups and emerged in discussions about every question. Specifically related to their peers, the participants perceived themselves as having a higher need for financial support than their peers. Participants supported the belief that non-first-generation students have more access to resources to support their education and have the ability to graduate and secure a good job. The research identifies a connection between the student's ability to graduate and their ability to pay for their college education (Choy, 1998, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The results from this study support this connection. Participants shared that their college experience was impacted by their financial situation, citing examples of having to work versus attending campus events, and the stress they experienced related to paying for school. However, all of the participants described themselves

as being self-motivated and determined. They did not view being a first-generation student as a negative; rather, it gave them a sense of pride.

The role of the family for first-generation students. Numerous studies have found that parental involvement is one of the most important factors impacting a student's success (Nunez, et al 1998; Vargas 2004). Ishanti (2006) explained how family support and encouragement positively impacts the persistence and graduation rate of first-generation students. The findings in this study supports the results of Ishanti and suggests that family plays a major role in the both the successes and challenges of their academic and nonacademic college success. During the exploration and transition from high school to college, the role of family, parents in particular, is often supportive. However, parents are often unable to offer guidance about the college process, and the participants are dependent on themselves or other adults to assist them. Though this was mentioned in the various focus groups, it was not reported to be a major challenge for the participants. Almost all of the participants noted the parental role as important in regards to encouragement and support. The participants in this study experienced some challenges related to the fact that their parents of having parents did not graduate from high school and/or attended college. This became a challenge for students and parents as the participants were navigating their academic and nonacademic experiences that were beyond their parent's ability to provide guidance and advice. Parental/family encouragement, faculty interactions, peer encouragement, and self-motivation were among the major themes that combined to create the factors that lead to first-generation students' success. They also come together to create the input variable used in Astin's (1993) I-E-O model.

The role of finances for first-generation students. In the majority of studies of first-generation students, financial aid plays a major role in the student challenges or success. In this

study, the financial concerns did play a role, but it was not noted as a limitation. However, it was identified as a factor that makes them different from their non-first-generation peers. Participants recognized the reality of needing financial assistance to continue their education. Although their parents and families were supportive of them continuing their education, participants knew their parents were unable to provide significant financial support to assist with the costs associated with higher education. Additionally, they identified as self-reliant and achievers, thus, working to assist with the funding of their education was not viewed as a burden. Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal (2001) reported that: “On the other hand, a growing body of research suggests that financial aid, by itself, is not enough to explain fully why they persist” (p. 2). A limited number of the participants received financial assistance from their families, but many were on their own financially. All but one of the participants was employed on or off campus. All of them shared that they were dependent on financial aid and student loans.

Recommendations

Despite their status as first-generation students, all of the participants knew that college was the next step for them after high school. The themes from this study have implications for higher education faculty, staff and administrators. As a final step to validate the forthcoming recommendations, a town hall was held with invited first-generation students to review the study, the findings and the recommendations. Overwhelmingly, the first-generation students who attended supported the following recommendations.

Implications for student affairs professionals. Numerous studies have found that parental involvement is the most important factor affecting students’ aspirations for college, regardless of the parents’ level of education, which indicates that the rates of college preparation and enrollment for first generation students could be significantly improved by early outreach to

the students and to their parents (Hossler, Scmit, & Vesper, 1999); Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Vargas, 2004). First-generation students, along with their family members, need help in learning how to integrate their families into their college-related experiences.

The following are my recommendations:

1. Create programs that bring the students' families onto campus for an extended orientation to expose and educate them on the various aspects of the college experience. Additionally, an on-going on-line video series presented by other first-generation students and parents could be made available. Another example of this support could be hosting events that allow the family to participate in the college experience with the student. This provides the family with the opportunity to experience college and be able to understand and relate to their child.
2. Assess the services and support needed for first-generation students, and the optimal means for marketing and communication of their existence to first-generation students. Participants in this study shared different levels of knowledge and experiences of the available support services. Participants who had utilized support services expressed a great level of satisfaction with the support provided. However, many of the participants were unaware of these services and were hearing about them for the first time from the other participants. In turn, they expressed frustration and disappointment with the lack of knowledge regarding the available services. The participants wanted services from someone whom they believed would empathize and understand the experiences of a first-generation student.

For the majority of the participants, this was the first-time they had thought of themselves as a first-generation student and the first time they had been in a setting with other students who

identified specifically as first-generation. Higher education personnel need to do a better job of creating a support system for first-generation students that provides the means for them to interact with each other and connect with the various support services that are provided.

According to Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, and Terenzini (1999); (Whitt, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 1999), this will help a student feel a sense of connection to the university.

Forming peer support groups has the potential to enhance their college experience, and to increase student retention and graduation rates. The needs of these students (i.e., support programs, mentoring programs, scholarships, advising, etc.) must be addressed early and often; hence, it is important to begin during freshman or transfer orientation and continue throughout a student's career.

3. Create programs to assist first-generation student with the transition to college. There are a variety of models that currently exist on college campuses that assist with the transition to college, that focus on connecting first year students with peers, mentors, faculty and campus resources. According to Richardson and Skinner (2000), summer transition programs have proven successful in helping many first-generation college students with the transition to college. Such programs can also help first-generation students better understand the value of a college education. Summer transition programs help to create a foundation that assists students in the building of the self-confidence needed to interact with faculty and administrators. It is also possible to achieve these goals through a first year experience (FYE) and mentoring program. According to Watson et al. (2002), the mission or purpose of FYE programs is to assist incoming students in making a successful transition to college, both academically and socially.

4. Focus on the role of mentoring and the positive impact it can have on the college experience. Course-related peer relationships are critical to student persistence and success (Attinasi, 1989); Dennis, Phinney, and Chuteco (2005); Pascarella et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). They provide first-generation students with information about the college community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). They also foster better assimilation into the academic and social communities that facilitates cognitive ability (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Mentors have the inside information on how an institution works that many first-generation students lack. According to Watson, Terrell, and Wright (2002), mentoring programs have proven to be successful in exposing first-generation college students to college and providing a welcoming and supportive environment. Despite these proven benefits, many in higher education are slow to adopt mentoring practices due to the investment of time and finances needed to make the programs successful.
5. Create early awareness and programming focused on financial planning beginning in high school. 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. Programs must be developed and offered that educate all members of the families on the resources and costs of higher education.
6. Promote and encourage the active involvement of first-generation students in the campus and local community. Yazedjian, Purshwell, Sevin, and Towes (2007) suggested that a greater sense of attachment to a specific institution was fostered once students became more involved and established social connections. Participants

identified themselves as high achievers and all of them identified some type of campus or community involvement. As they shared their involvement examples, it was evident that the involvement had a positive impact on their college experience. This recommendation connects with and supports the research of Alexander Astin's Involvement Theory and Vincent Tinto's retention theory. Astin (1984) examined student involvement as part of a student's development and believed that the most critical resource was time. Astin expressed the belief learning and personal growth were related to the amount of time students could devote to their academics. The participants in this study also identified the need to work, thus, limiting their ability to devote to their academic responsibilities and co-curricular involvement. University administrators must recognize the time constraints and other factors that impact first-generation students so that they can assist first-generation student with their academic and personal development. Tinto (1987) found that the most important retention factor is providing integrative experiences. Tinto's model (1987) also focuses students' perception of their experiences and suggests it is critical for educators to help build a sense of confidence and belonging for first-generation students. This means recognizing the unique needs of first-generation students and the possibility of them questioning belonging and possibly leaving the institution. Tinto (1987) also suggests that students should be actively engaged in activities in and outside the classroom, thus, increasing student retention. Higher education needs to provide and promote opportunities for first-generation students to become actively engaged in and out of the classroom. Participants expressed a high level of excitement and interest in creating opportunities for first-generation students to connect with each other in

settings such as a student organization for first-generation students or a living learning community in the residence halls.

Implications for student affairs leaders & decision makers.

7. Shift the paradigm that focuses on the perceived deficits of first-generation students to one that provides a focus on success. First-generation students in this study viewed themselves as achievers and successes; they were proud of their accomplishments and were determined to succeed. Most of the research on first-generation students focuses on their deficiencies ranging from low self-esteem and lack of engagement. This is important research, however, creating and imposing additional retention focused requirements for the first-generation student assists with creating an environment that that expects deficiencies.

However, it should be noted that first-generation students face many challenges and none of these programs should be done in isolation or be considered as the only solution. It is recommended that a variety of programs and support services are needed and should be created to support the success of first-generation students.

Implications for the knowledge base & future research. Results from this study have implications for practice and future research. The findings suggest the need for future researchers to further explore the unique experiences of first-generation students.

8. One difficulty with identifying first-generation students is agreeing on what criterion to use to define a first-generation student, therefore a common definition should be established.

9. Further research must be done to identify first-generation student as they enter as first year students and compare their retention, persistence, and graduation rates to non-first-generation students.
10. This study found the role of the family to be key in supporting the first-generation student. Future research should further explore the role of family related to the success of first-generation students and the significant impact they may have, if they were more knowledgeable, throughout the college experience. Participants had to learn to navigate the processes and expectations and on their own. Although the parents were supportive, they were at a loss in trying to support and understanding what their students are experiencing.
11. Assessment of the effectiveness of support services designed to support first-generation students should also be part of future research. Special attention should be focused on the advising model for first-generation students. This includes focusing on how to better educate and assist faculty and administrative staff with the understanding of the unique needs of first-generation students. Some of the participants identified a concern that faculty and staff had made general assumptions that everyone came in with the same level of knowledge and understanding. Additional training and education about the diverse make-up of an institution's student enrollment profile could prove beneficial in the development of best practices for support of all types of students.
12. This study should be replicated to include a larger sample of first-generation students and include transfer and International students to explore and compare their experiences as first-generation students. This was a qualitative study; therefore, a

quantitative analysis would be beneficial that would allow for the controlling of these variables and the ability to further understand the unique contributions of identified variables.

13. The participants in this study indicated having limited interactions with faculty. Focus should be placed on identifying opportunities for students to connect with faculty members beyond the classroom. The impact of service-learning and the level of satisfaction with faculty involvement should be further explored.
14. More research should also be done to better understand preparation that is needed in high schools to assist students with the transition to college. Programs and educational outreach should focus on financial planning, financing college education, and the college application process for students and family members.
15. Future researchers should investigate how to develop a more complete orientation and entrance process into the university. Although some of the participants in this study were aware of the various campus resources and support programs, many shared a lack of awareness and misinformation.

Limitations of the Study

It should be noted the researcher is a first-generation student and familiar with the experiences of first-generation students. I was able to relate to the responses that were shared by the participants, which could have influenced the analysis of the data based upon personal experiences. The second limitation of the study is the sample size and composition of the sample. The sample size was relatively small ($n=31$). Therefore, it is possible that a larger sample size would yield different results. Due to the voluntary nature of the study, the participants in the study were not proportionally representative of the university population.

They volunteered and were not randomly selected; it is possible the results could differ in some ways from a randomly selected group.

The focus groups occurred at the end of the semester and during the summer session which could have impacted a student's ability to participate in the focus groups. Additionally, during this time of the year students are focused on their finals and tended have a higher stress level.

A final limitation of this study was the fact that the participants could be considered first-generation students that are "successful" due to the fact that they have persisted to their sophomore and senior year as students.

Conclusion

Approximately one out of six students pursuing higher education in the United States can be classified as a first-generation student and nearly one in every five can be classified as first-generation and low income (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto 2008; Davis, 2010). The majority of the results of this study support the research that has been done on first-generation students. In spite of the research that has occurred, very little has changed to support the retention and success of first-generation students. Much of the research has focused on deficits that first-generation students have and placed the responsibility for the solution on the student.

It is clear that first-generation students have needs that are often unmet by higher education. It is important to understand and meet these needs if persistence and graduation rates are to improve. First-generation students who volunteered for this study were independent and personally aware of their own abilities, which allowed them to be successful in persisting to graduation. This study revealed that first-generation students seek understanding and need

encouragement in achieving their goal of degree attainment and encouragement in understanding and overcoming obstacles beyond the support provided by their family.

I used Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993) student integration model as part of the reviews of the focus group results and to address the identified research questions. By integrating the student into the campus community the student increases their commitment to the institution and is more likely to graduate. Tinto points out that integration can occur in two dimensions, academic and social. Academic integration (faculty, major, coursework) happens when students become connected to the intellectual part of the college experience, while social integration (co-curricular involvement) occurs when relationships and connections are made outside of the classroom.

Alexander Astin's (1993) input-environment-outcome model was also used as part of the review of the results and to addressing the research questions. By choosing inputs (such as family and self-motivation), environments (university experience), and outcomes (satisfaction with services and success) we are able to better understand first-generation students' needs and wants on their journey to success.

Summary

The results of the focus groups revealed several themes that impact the experiences of first-generation students. Financial issues, support services, the role of families/parents, self-determination and campus involvement were among the top issues impacting their experience. In an effort to assist first-generation students and their success resources and programming must be enhanced to support their unique needs.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear Monarch,

My name is Don Stansberry and I am currently completing my PhD. in Higher Education at Old Dominion University. I am conducting a research study in the area of first-generation college students. (For the purpose of this study, first-generation students are defined as students whose parents did not continue their education beyond high school.)

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of your academic and nonacademic experience at Old Dominion University. I will ask for a maximum of two hours of your time to participate in the focus group. During the focus group you and other [Institution] first-generation students will be asked a series of questions and given an opportunity to share your experience.

If you are willing to participate in the focus group, please complete the participant information form and email it back to me. I will use the information to find a time that is convenient for you to participate. Snacks will be provided at the focus group and all focus group members will be entered into a raffle drawing for local restaurant and [Institution] Bookstore gift certificates. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at dstansbe@odu.edu or give me a call at 757-537-4956. I look forward to hearing from you.

Go Monarchs!

Don Stansberry

Appendix B: Participant Information Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Name:

Address:

Cell phone number:

Email address:

Best days for participation in focus groups:

Best times for participation in focus groups:

Appendix C: Confirmation Email

Dear Monarch,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group scheduled for _____. This focus group will begin at _____ and will be held in the _____.

As I reminder, the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of your academic and nonacademic experience at Old Dominion University. I will ask for a maximum of two hours of your time to participate in the focus group. During the focus group you and other [Institution] first-generation students will be asked a series of questions and given an opportunity to share your experience. I have also attached a copy of the informed consent form that you will be asked to sign prior to the start of the focus group. This form outlines in detail the process of the focus group. We will also review this form and answer any questions prior to the start of the focus group.

Dress is casual! Snacks will be provided and your name will be entered into a raffle drawing for local restaurant and [Institution] Bookstore gift certificates. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at dstansbe@odu.edu or give me a call at 757-537-4956. I look forward to meeting you.

Go Monarchs!

Don Stansberry

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

My name is Don Stansberry. I am currently a graduate student in the Higher Education PhD. Program at Old Dominion University. I am conducting research as part of my research for my dissertation focusing on first-generation college students. The study is focused on learning more about the first-generation college student experience and their academic and co-curricular experience at Old Dominion University. Participating is completely voluntary and will involve your participation in a focus group with other first-generation students with approximately 7 questions and will last approximately 45 minutes. At no time will your name will be used in the study, and all of the information collected will remain confidential. If at any time you are uncomfortable answering a question, you will not have to answer and you may stop or withdraw your participation at any time without consequence.

Recordings and any notes from the focus group will be maintained by the researchers for subsequent transcription by the researchers, and your participation in the focus group and signature on this form will grant me permission to make a recording of the focus group.

Once the focus group has been completed and major themes summarized, you will be provided with a summary copy of the group's comments for your review and approval. Following your review and approval of the summary, all audio recordings and notes will be destroyed in an effort to preserve your confidentiality. You will be provided with the typed summary via email. Additionally, you will also be invited to respond to a few follow-up questions to provide me with an opportunity to verify the data. Select demographic information may also be solicited to be included in the final write-up of this project. If you have questions regarding the focus or your participation in it, you can contact me at 757-537-4956.

This study has not been reviewed by the Old Dominion University Darden College of Education and has received Human Subjects approval. However, should you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a volunteer participant in this project, please contact Dr. Dana Burnett at dburnett@odu.edu or 757.683.3287.

Consent Statement:

I have read this form. I understand that nothing negative will happen if I choose not to participate. I know that I can stop my participation at any time. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Signature_____

Date_____

Printed Name_____

Appendix E: Focus Group Interview Protocol

The researcher will provide all supplies needed to conduct the focus groups.

This includes:

A list of participants

Copies of informed consent forms

Pens and paper

Name tags

Audio recorder

Flip chart and markers

Copies of moderators guide

Index cards

Researcher will ensure that room is set up correctly and supplies and refreshments are present prior to the start of the focus group. Researcher will check each participant in and review the informed consent form prior to the start of the focus group.

Introductions (5 minutes)

All focus groups will use the same format to ensure consistency. Participants will be greeted as they arrive will be asked to make a name plate for the facilitators to be able to easily call them by name. Focus group facilitators will have a facilitators guide provided. Keep in mind; moderator should speak less than 1/3 of the time.

Overview of study & focus group process

Each focus group will be greeted and thanked by the researcher. The researcher will briefly introduce the co moderators by name. Researcher will exit the room.

Focus group facilitators will turn on the audio recorder and introduce themselves. Each participant will introduce themselves as well.

Facilitator will explain focus group process and informed consent form. There is no right or wrong answers.

While one moderator facilitates the discussion the other will be taking notes for analysis BUT NO NAMES will be recorded.

Respect the confidentiality of each participant by not quoting or attributing comments to anyone outside of the group.

All should participate

Discussion and disagreement are encouraged; no need to reach consensus

Please be open and honest about your attitudes, opinions, and experiences -- we want to hear it all

Speak one at time, encourage active participation.

Clarify any questions or concerns before starting

Sessions will be recorded. Only the research team will have access to the tapes. They will only be used for data analysis.

Only group results will be shared; no individuals or individual responses will be shared.

Direct quotes may be used to illustrate a particular point.

We ask that we all respect each other and the confidentiality of the information that is shared during the focus group session.

Ask for any needed clarification, or questions and then begin the focus group.

Introduction of Participants (10 minutes)

Each participant should share their name, major and hometown

Warm up activity. Each participant will be asked to share their favorite [Institution] memory so far.

Discussion Questions (60 minutes)

Which experiences do first-generation college students perceive to impact their academic success?

- Please describe any academic challenges you have faced as an [Institution] student.
- How have you actively engaged in your academic experience outside of attending classes?
- What [Institution] experience(s) would you identify as having the greatest impact on your academic success?
- What about the experience aided your academic success?

Which experiences do first-generation college students perceive to impact their nonacademic success?

- Please describe any nonacademic challenges you have faced as an [Institution] student.
- How have you actively engaged in your nonacademic experience at [Institution]?
- What [Institution] experience(s) would you identify as having the greatest impact on your nonacademic success?
- What about the experience aided your nonacademic success?

What challenges do first-generation students perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students?

- Describe what challenges do you believe you experienced as a first-generation college student that a non-first-generation student did not?

What personal factors do first-generations students perceive impacts their college success?

- What factors do you personally possess that you believe impacts your college success?

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Each participant will be given two index cards.

On the blue index card and be asked to write one piece of advice they would give to the Old Dominion University administration that would make their experience as a first-generation college student better.

On the white index card each participant will be asked to write one piece of advice they would share with other first-generation students that they wish they would have known sooner.

Thank everyone for participating. Explain follow up process. Each participant will be given an opportunity to review the summary notes and offer any edits prior to it be included in the dissertation.

**The questions in bold serve as the research study questions. The bulleted questions will be used as the focus group questions.*

Moderator guide has been adapted(Pickering, 2013)

Appendix F: Sophomore Student Advice for First-Generation Students

One Piece of Advice you would share with other first generation students that you wish you would have known sooner.

1. Find a mentor (older, wiser)/mentoring program.
2. Create a goal. Try to reach it.
3. Sit in front of class
4. Get financially literate and save
5. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Take the amount of class and work you can complete to be successful.
6. Stay on top of your plan to graduate (class/credit count). This way you won't have to rush to get everything done in the end.
7. That a degree alone will not get you a job! You need experience.
8. Engage in class:
 - a. Build relationships with professors
 - b. Sit in front
 - c. Don't fall asleep
 - d. Be on time
 - e. Want to learn
 - f. Build study groups with classmates
9. Research your course load and requirements', changing your major is okay, but it helps to have it planned out.
10. Stay calm, utilize your resources and never give up!
11. Learn to manage your time and finances properly
12. Find all of your resources that will help you to make a successful experience at [Institution].
13. Utilize all resources available and don't be afraid to ask for help
14. Follow your heart, remember why you came to school and always do your best. Balance all areas of life without letting academics suffer.
15. Give advice to 1st generation students
 - a. You are not alone in this experience and what you are going through. Don't be afraid to ask for help. There are so many departments and resources available and get involved on campus!
16. College is a wealth of free/cheap resources; a gym, computer labs, counseling, sports, cultural events, career management, etc. These are things that students use all the time and you should absolutely take advantage while you have a chance!
17. Look to get involved! Great way to network and find friends to build strong healthy relationships which could last a lifetime!

18. The best advice I can give a first generation student would be to immerse yourself in the college life experience. Just throw yourself into any opportunity because that's what a college life should be all about. And most importantly, everything will be ok! ☺
19. Plan, plan, plan! Finance, academics, and work. Even tentative plans help a lot!
20. Make sure that you plan out your first two semesters financially so that you can see what extra funds you'll need for books and whatever else.

Appendix G: Senior Student Advice to Other First Generation Students

One Piece of Advice you would share with other first generation students that you wish you would have known sooner.

1. Talk to faculty →get connected!
2. Use all [Institution] resources.
3. Have a four year plan.
4. If you're having problems, SAY SOMETHING
5. Be responsible and accountable
6. Find a mentor! They can help so much with classes/campus events.
7. Explore your interests and build networks. It will definitely help you later.
8. Take advantage of every opportunity given to you and never be afraid to ask questions.
You never know who could help you!
9. If I had known that certain degrees/careers and their corresponding colleges were ranked I would have been a more successful college student.
10. Getting connected to student support services your first semester (early). You could have the support and tutoring experiences you need in college.
11. Go learn about all the resources available to you as a student. Even though getting good grades is important, remember to not overwhelm yourself and enjoy the college experience. Last but not least network.
12. I would tell other first generation students to stay focused, set a goal, and work on achieving it.
13. Don't look at it as a disadvantage-you are just as qualified as everyone else.
Do your research about this experience, and stay motivated.
14. Make sure that you have done the research on your chosen degree and that it is really something you enjoy. Ask a lot of questions about financial aid.
15. "Be the change you want to see in the world" As a first generation college student, you are already about to experience a challenge going down a different path than your family, do not give up, seek it through and do not let struggles tell you that you cannot because you can.
16. Fully take advantage of your resources on campus. Also, become involved with activities to make the best out of your college experience.
17. Seek for student support center, involve in activities, meet more friends, manage your time, play hard, and enjoy life.

Appendix H: Sophomore Student Advice to Administrators

One Piece of Advice they would give to the Old Dominion University Administration that would make their experience as a first-generation college student better.

1. A “first-gen” department/resource center/LLC
2. Admitted student day for first generation students. Focus on academic support and grants/ financial aid. Get specific about what resources exist for which difficulties.
3. Better communication of front line staff to better assist students in the moment rather than refer to others who are not available
4. Recognize those students who are first generation and counsel them on issues involving financial aid and the difficulties to maintain a certain GPA while trying to sustain yourself financially.
5. Be more helpful by guiding first generation students more. They do not have the help or experience at home to do this on their own.
6. Creating a community of club for first generation students to enable them to gain the same knowledge as non-first generation. This could also help be a support system.
7. Administration needs to know that we barely know anything starting out so they need to be more knowledgeable so they can help more efficiently.
8. Set aside a separate orientation for first generation students for financial aid and scheduling as well as counseling services available.
9. Advisors are key! Make sure they are building relationships with the students.
10. First generation students deserve the guidance regarding college that second generation students (and beyond) receive from their parents.
11. Student advisory board and non-voting student representative for 1st generation students
12. There should be a group/committee for future first generation students!!! ☺
13. Have first-generation students assigned to mandatory career coaches for at least a semester
14. Provide more information to first-generation students about where they can find more grants and scholarships to help pay for school.
15. Have an extra day during preview/admitted student day to show all resources and details about how they help/what problems they deal with.
16. Advertise the resources [Institution] offers more broadly across campus and online.
17. Be more open minded and more understandable with students and their problems.
18. Show first generation students all their options immediately including things like grants and student support services.
19. Actually acknowledge the fact that first generation students attend the university.

Appendix I: Senior Student Advice to Administrators

One Piece of Advice they would give to the Old Dominion University Administration that would make their experience as a first-generation college student better.

1. More advising and career assistance
2. Facilitate connections to other first generation students throughout the semester
3. Academic advisor for first generation students
4. First generation student checklist/what to expect
5. Create a first-year generation office. Within the student success center you can find the honors, disability, freshman, sophomore office, but not a first year generation office to help them feel important.
6. First generation students aren't as knowledgeable as you think. Check up on them, make sure they are aware!
7. Getting advising through this university for help for my future career has been one of the toughest parts of my academic journey. If students know their major when entering they should be advised by the advisor in their major.
8. Create a peer to peer/mentor program to be a support system to those first generation so they are kept on track.
9. Just wish you all had more/had a class or program that is required for 1st generation students to take to teach us how to find ways to pay for school, things to help motivate you, and ways to make sure you graduate.
10. Start a program that at the start of the year connects other first year students, have them talk about their experience and bring in older first generation students to give their advice.
11. Extend resources and available jobs for first generation students; such as increased financial aid, counseling, as well as any jobs that may alleviate any financial stress.
12. A leadership retreat that appeals to first generation or teaches them how to use resources and get involved in ways their parents wouldn't be able to because they've never done things.
13. First generation students need guidance. The best thing I see that can help them is to inform them of every detail. Taking the initiative to place them with that title of first generation and having a team form intricate ideas to support and assist could be highly beneficial.
14. Have a center for families whose students are first generation where they can show families what to do about financial aid and what college is like.
15. First generation students should have an advisor to help with FAFSA, scholarships, applying for private loans, and general questions about college and what to do after college.
16. First generation students could use a little recognition for achieving a goal that may have been out of reach to other members of their family. By recognizing this as an

achievement and connecting them with others on the same path you will have done a good deed.

17. Be readily available to help families of first generation students by giving them needed and helpful info.
18. Offer a club for first generation students to join, so they can meet other students that are in the same situation.
19. First generation students often don't know how to find the answers to their questions; therefore, they should be exposed to their resources and reminded of them often.
20. Make students feel "ok" with not knowing how everything works rather than just out of luck. This could be accomplished by quick responses to student questions- big and small.
21. More mentoring programs. Keep the peer educator programs mentoring services.
22. Offer resources in helping with the transition of being a first year student in workshops or how to access it if resources are already available.

Appendix J: Summary of Town Hall Meeting

- Be careful with becoming overwhelmed.
- You need to have outstanding time management and balance your involvement.
- Advisor from the community college are more helpful because they understand the first-generation student experience.
- Take time on yourself, who you are, personality-it is important to have a strong sense of self.
- Other friends (not first generation) have help/support at home that we do not have.
- Don't fit into a model created for you-create your own.
- Networking (start early), it's all about who you know.
- No consistency in financial aid. Depending on who you talk to you will get a different answer.
- It is important to find someone who you can trust, makes the process easier.
- Don't be anti-social. Get out and meet people.
- Form a First-Generation Student Organization.
- Ask advisors to help students be more goals oriented-we need to be goal focused.
- Create peer-to-peer advising for first-generation students.
- Be open to advisors; don't be intimidated to ask questions.
- First Generation focused advisor-to better understand the experience.
- Create a pool of money for events such FSI/Preview for First-Generation students.
- Create First-Generation Scholarships.
- Help with textbooks-rentals, interlibrary loan.
- Create mentorship program within major.
- Engage Alumni; "been through it".
- Provide a First Generation Guideline and checklist.