TRADITIONAL-AGE, FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE WOMEN: THE INFLUENCE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ON THEIR ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the women who have faced inequity and yet persisted. Your stories make our stories possible.

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ABSTRACT

The number of women matriculating to college and successfully earning their degree continues to rise; all the while, college campuses continue to see a steady incline in the enrollment of first-generation students. Despite the fact that these two populations continue to grow, both still face many barriers while attempting to succeed in college. Although there is an abundance of literature on these two populations separately, there has been little focus on the perceptions and experiences of traditional-age, first-generation college women. There is a limited understanding of how these students perceive the ability of college environments to meet their social and emotional needs. In order to resolve this oversight, the purpose of my dissertation study was to explore how self-identified traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive interpersonal relationships to have influenced their academic successes. I utilized interviews in order to collect the viewpoints of the participants at a public institution in the southwestern United States in order to illuminate the participants' perceptions of the influence of interpersonal relationships on their academic choices and success.

This study highlights the importance of understanding the perceptions of first-generation college women about the role of relationships in their studies. The research focuses on their perspectives by hearing their own words, which is made possible by utilizing a phenomenological standpoint. The findings revealed the diverse, and at times, similar perceptions the participants held about the influence of interpersonal relationships on their academic decisions and successes. The women spoke at length about the impact

their family, peers, and academic agents had on both their academic and personal lives as they transitioned to and attended college. They also described their experiences as they transitioned to college and the social and emotional challenges associated with this change. The cross-case analysis revealed four categories the participants perceived to be most prominent in influencing their academic journeys: importance of funded programs, familial support, connections on campus, and maintaining academic priorities. Although there are many implications of this study, the most prominent is the ability to inform institutions of higher education on the ways they can provide supportive resources that meet the social and emotional needs of this population.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), 72.5% of females who recently graduated from high school were admitted to either a two-year or a four-year college institution. Due to their high matriculation rates, college women and their experiences and perceptions of support structures that result in academic achievement in higher education are overlooked. Instead, in an effort to address the barriers that many college students face on their road to attaining a college degree, research takes a deficit-based perspective on college students, resulting in an overemphasis on male students (O'Connor, 2002). For example, the gender gap in higher education is addressed in numerous publications such as *The War against Boys* (Sommers, 2013), *The Trouble with Boys* (Tyre, 2008), and *Boys Adrift* (Sax, 2008a). The lack of scholarship on college women suggests that because women are attending college and attaining college degrees at higher rates than their male peers, the barriers historically faced by females in their efforts to achieve access to higher education no longer exist. However, for first-generation college women, who comprise the majority of first-generation college students, this presents an injustice as they find themselves being labeled as educationally resilient by scholars who have applied this label to the sex collectively (Choy, 2001; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

When aiming to understand the experiences and perceptions of women and their needs when entering into and persisting within higher education, it is important that scholarship recognize that not all women are the same (Dupre, 2011). For example, despite the academic success of their same-gender peers, because women place more emphasis on forming personal relationships, first-generation college women may feel

isolated on a campus that lacks the emotional and academic support systems they may be accustomed to (Gatto, 2009). The opinions and perceptions of first-generation college women need to be heard and validated in order to form a better understanding of their experiences and needs for the benefit of not only this particular student population, but also for the institution as they seek to develop programs that address the needs of and promote the success of first-generation college women. There is a paucity of current research on the academic perceptions and needs of first-generation college women. In addressing this gap in the research, it is important that scholars focus on the influence of interpersonal relationships on academic decisions and successes. Because the gender gap in higher education is a complex issue that is subject to a myriad of diverse opinions, this study fills a gap in the literature by providing voices to an often-overlooked population.

Background

The majority of prior research links high school success and postsecondary education attainment (Adelman, 2006; Conger & Long, 2010; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2006; Goldin et al., 2006; Roderick, 2008; Smith, 2018; Tierney & Duncheon, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). For example, according to Perna (2015), "whether an individual is academically prepared for college is influenced by the availability of and the opportunity to participate in academically rigorous courses at the high school a student attends" (p. 7). Furthermore, according to the Institute for Higher Education Policy, "a student's high school grade point average and achievement test scores are also an indicator for college enrollment" (Adelman, 2006). Because many women who enter college have taken rigorous high school courses and scored high on college entrance exams, they are often deemed college ready. However, this population of student is only

being looked at through a quantitative lens, which creates a false narrative about women's academic abilities and needs (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker 2006). For example, research insinuates that in general high school females who matriculate to college socially and academically exceed their male peers, exhibit better social skills, demonstrate better classroom habits and behaviors (e.g., attentiveness, organization, self-discipline), are less likely to drop out of high school, score higher on standardized reading and writing tests, and report plans to go to college (Buchmann et al., 2008; Conger & Long, 2010; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2006, 2013; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2018; Whitmire, 2006; Voyer & Voyer, 2014). In turn, these high school experiences further perpetuate the narrative that when compared to their male peers, females overall are able to better utilize the skills developed in high school to transition to the more difficult academic demands of college courses (Goldin et al., 2006).

Although research has not sorted out all the methods that link performance in high school with college outcomes, Buchmann et al. (2008) supported the assessment that the link between high school and college enrollment and completion rates of females cannot be discounted: "females' higher educational aspirations and higher college graduation rates likely stem from the female advantage in academic performance that develops over the educational career" (p. 328). Due to this population's overall ability to achieve academic success in various learning environments, females are often labeled as educationally resilient (Daniels et al., 2001; O'Connor, 2002). This label in turn implies that when it comes to academics, women have inherent natural abilities that result in their capability to beat academic odds. This belief accounts for the lack of research that examines the complexity of factors such as relationships and social interactions that may

have provided women with the opportunity to employ these characteristics of resilience in ways that facilitate academic success (Daniels et al., 2001; Gordan & Song, 1994; Masten, 1994; Morales, 2008; Morales & Trotman, 2004; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). However, attrition rates show first-generation female college students are 57% more likely to drop out of college in their third year and 61% more likely to drop out in their fourth year than their first-generation male peers (Ishitani, 2003). My study provides first-generation undergraduate college women the opportunity to voice their perceptions of the role relationships have played in their academic journey as well as their needs for academic, emotional, and social support within higher education. To provide perspective of this unique student population, the following section covers issues and barriers faced by first-generation students as a collective group before focusing on the gendered aspect.

First-Generation College Students

In response to society's efforts to better itself by providing easier access to higher education, many colleges have seen a rise in the number of first-generation students on their campuses (Harvill et al., 2011; Maynard et al., 2014; Perna, 2015; Speirs Neumeister & Rinker 2006). The definition of first-generation varies. For example, Inman and Mayes (1999) define students as first-generation if "no immediate family members could have attended any college, two-year or four-year, with or without having earned a degree" (p. 6), while Speirs Neumeister and Rinker (2006) define first-generation students as those who have "parents and grandparents with high school or lower as the highest degree completed" (p. 310). Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) define first-generation as "students whose parents never enrolled in post-secondary education" (p. v). For the purpose of my dissertation, first-generation refers to a college

student whose parents or legal guardians do not have postsecondary experience (McConnell, 2000). First-generation college students tend to be from ethnic and minority backgrounds, female, receive less social and financial support from others, and have multiple obligations outside of their education (Choy, 2001; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Mehta et al., 2011). Furthermore, scholars argue that in general the academic struggles of first-generation students are attributed to a lack of positive self-concept and support systems as well as difficulties with academic and social integration (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Wyatt, 2014). As a result, this population tends to struggle more academically and socially when compared to their continuing-generation peers (Gatto, 2009). The influx of first-generation students onto college campuses, combined with statistics on attrition rates, has resulted in an abundance of research on the backgrounds and experiences of first-generation college students as they relate to their academic achievements in college.

Warburton et al. (2001) argued that when compared to continuing-generation college students, first-generation college students, regardless of gender, are less likely to enroll full-time in college and persist. Many factors contribute to the higher attrition rate of first-generation college students. For example, when compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation college students are more likely to have outside responsibilities, such as work, that impact their ability to integrate into the college environment (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). According to Orbe (2004) identity is grounded in an individual's personal characteristics, beliefs, roles, and relationships. Compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students have different experiences in regard to academics and academic discussions. For example, parents of

first-generation students are unable to explain what will be expected as they prepare for college. Because first-generation college students do not develop the same sense of identity as their continuing-generation peers, their inability to connect with the college atmosphere, and forge interpersonal relationships with peers and academic agents, impacts this population's rate of college persistence and success (Bui, 2002; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Orbe, 2004). As a result of these variables, first-generation students are disproportionately overrepresented as one of the most disadvantaged groups on college campuses.

Previous research based on students' primary and secondary educational experiences maintains that interpersonal relationships play a prominent role in students' academic success (Perna & Titus, 2005; Riegle-Crumb, 2010). However, first-generation college students receive less preparation, guidance, and encouragement to attend college than their continuing-generation peers (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Perna, 2015; Tierney et al., 2009). According to Wang et al. (1994) the family, school, and community promote academic success "when the resources in these contexts are united and dedicated to the healthy development and academic success of children" (p. 16). Academic success has been found among students who had relationships with family members who established and communicated high academic expectations (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015), promoted self-motivation (Xu, 2007; Xu & Corno, 2006; Xu & Wu, 2013), and firmly controlled and monitored the student's social interactions and academic behavior (Carter & Wojtkiewicz, 2000; Rampino & Taylor, 2013). In addition, students demonstrated higher academic performance when they had teachers who they perceived provided

positive academic support and feedback (Dentith, 2008; Vanderbrook, 2006). Because first-generation students lack familiarity with the college atmosphere and proper support structures, they are often fearful of interacting with others and therefore perceive their environment as one that is not supportive of their academic endeavors (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

While first-generation students are breaking familial trends by attending college, they do tend to experience more difficulties than their continuing-generation peers. For first-generation college students, the aforementioned barriers cause the transition to college as well as persistence from first-to-second year to be particularly challenging. For this reason, despite their success in secondary schools, first-generation students are often labeled as "at risk" as they enter college with needs that may require specialized services or programs (Folger et al., 2004). However, despite the fact that as a homogeneous group, first-generation students are considered "at risk," many first-generation students do manage to excel academically. Scholarship shows that when students dedicate time and energy to academic and social interactions, the student demonstrates positive effects in academics, retention, as well as their overall transition into higher education (Astin, 1984; Kouzoukas, 2011). In an effort to assist these students with their transition into college, institutions of higher education have taken some action to provide resources to promote academic and social integration. For example, in an effort to assist first-generation students, many postsecondary institutions offer financial aid packages and success courses that target the emotional, financial, and academic needs of this student population (Drotos & Cilesiz, 2016).

Although there is an abundance of literature on first-generation students, and how to retain them, research on women tends to utilize a gendered lens to examine their prevalent presence in higher education. For women, who comprise the majority of first-generation college students, this constitutes another gender-based inequity as they must not only battle the aforesaid hindrances, they are also stereotyped as educationally resilient as scholars have applied the term to the sex collectively (Choy, 2001; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

First-Generation College Women

As female students tend to outperform males in the classroom and outnumber them on college campuses, findings suggest that the barriers historically faced by females in their efforts to achieve access to higher education no longer exist (Caplan et al., 1997; Francis, 2000; Jackson, 1998; Richardson & Woodley, 2003; Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Van Houtte, 2004). However, the description of women as educationally resilient overall fails to account for the intersection of gender and first-generation status, which complicates narratives of women as academically advantaged. The danger is that such narratives have limited research on a population whose academic needs are not fully known: first-generation college women.

Although first-generation female college students may enter higher education with similar attributes such as their continuing-generation peers, there is an incorrect assumption about their academic success and abilities (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Despite the educational resilience label scholars have applied to females overall, first-generation female students are less likely than first-generation males or their

continuing-generation counterparts to persist in their academics (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Individuals who have demonstrated academic success often have various sources of support within their environment (Daniels et al., 2001; Werner & Smith, 1977). However, the way men and women process their success may differ (Werner & Smith, 1992). For women in particular, homosocial, familial, and teacher interactions have been found to influence their academic trajectories more heavily (Rampino & Taylor, 2013; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2006). Some scholars suggest the academic risk experiences of female students is associated with the lack of sustained academic interpersonal relationships (Choy, 2001; London, 1989, 1996; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; O'Connor, 2002).

Problem Statement

There are three coinciding problems throughout current literature on first-generation students in higher education: 1) first-generation students are studied as a homogenous population, 2) there is a lack of focus on how their academic identities are shaped while attending college, and 3) there is not a sufficient amount of qualitative research on how first-generation students perceive interpersonal relationships to influence their academic decisions and successes. The predominant issue with this oversight in higher education research is it hinders the exploration of additional factors that may improve the college experiences of first-generation students' outside of those researched and enacted in institutional programs as the development of many student interventions and support structures are based on the findings and recommendations of academic scholarship. Furthermore, utilizing a qualitative research approach provides a platform to

obtain a rich understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena, with significant attention to context, nuance, and complexity, as opposed to the emphasis of quantitative research, which derives statistical generalizations (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research also allows for the opportunity to obtain a more holistic understanding about the experiences and perceptions of diverse student populations as well as understand the specific needs of each student as they come to understand their own academic identities (Patton, 2015).

One of the overarching issues addressed within this study is the lack of focus on the intersectionality of the diversity within the first-generation student population. Instead first-generation students are categorized as a homogenous student population (Kouzoukas, 2017). However, first-generation college students are very diverse; they are disproportionately non-White, lower-income, and female, and are significantly less likely than their counterparts to persist (Choy, 2001). While scholars (Cerna et al., 2009; McCabe, 2009) have given considerable attention to first-generation students, by viewing this group as a homogeneous population, they fail to consider the experiences of first-generation women. This oversight demonstrates the lack of focus on how gender and first-generation status intersect. First-generation college women are either generalized simply as a first-generation student, or they are categorized as a college woman and generalized through an advantaged lens.

Although there is much diversity in the first-generation student population, there is a lack of scholarship that examines how their identity is impacted and reshaped in the college environment. Instead, research assumes that first-generation students all have similar experiences, based on similar academic and social deficits, while institutions of higher education forgo their purpose of developing the whole student by also generalizing

this student population (Evans et al., 2010; Kouzoukas, 2017). By failing to write about first-generation students as a heterogeneous population research fails to address how traditional-age, first-generation college women manage to persist despite the challenges that threaten their academic success. Valuable research from successful college women and the assets they leverage can address the imbalance. This could promote a more asset-based approach to understanding their college experience. Imperative information can be unveiled that will drive initiatives and programs to help students, specifically those working with first-generation college women.

In addition to the aforementioned issues on this topic, there is also a lack of qualitative research that addresses first-generation students' perceptions of the influence of interpersonal relationships on their transition and ability to integrate into higher education (Thomas, 2002). By relying primarily on quantitative studies, scholarship and institutions of higher education further generalize the experiences and perspectives that have now become synonymous with first-generation college students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Pascarella et al. (2004) state that despite the vast amount of scholarship on first-generation students, "surprisingly little is known about their college experiences or their cognitive and psychosocial development during college" (p. 250).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study is to investigate how traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive interpersonal relationships to have influenced their academic experiences. My analysis consists of an open discussion that allowed traditional-age, first-generation college women to express how interpersonal relationships impacted their academic decisions and success. Although literature identifies that first-generation

college students are at greater risk for academic failure than their continuing-generation peers, it remains unclear how first-generation women overcome the academic challenges and endure in higher education. Thus, I seek to contribute meaningful research to the field of higher education and fill a gap in the literature by implementing heuristic methods and focusing on traditional-age, first-generation college women's continued need for support structures that promote interpersonal relationships throughout their academic careers.

Scope of Methodology

This study is both qualitative and exploratory; my study explored how traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive interpersonal relationships to influence their academic decisions and successes. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that "In feminist research approaches, the goals are to establish collaborative and non-exploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformational" (p. 28). As a woman, who is also a college student, I wanted to know how other women perceived the role of interpersonal relationships in guiding their academic decisions and credited these relationships for their academic successes. For that reason, I chose to employ a qualitative inquiry for this study in order to cast light on the nuanced perceptions and experiences of traditional-age, first-generation college women and their perceptions of the phenomenon of interpersonal relationships on their academic decisions and experiences. Qualitative research allows scholars to attain the thick description that emerges when participants explore and verbalize their own histories. I also wanted to be an active learner who could tell their

stories, and phenomenology provides the ability to be an active participant as well as make meaning from the shared experiences of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Phenomenology has roots in philosophy and applications in psychology; its purpose is to describe how a phenomenon is experienced by a particular subject. According to Bogdan and Bicklen (1998), in order to "understand the way people think about their world and how those definitions are formed you need to get close to them, to hear them talk" (p. 32). The women in this study described their perceptions of how others have shaped and continue to shape their college-going decisions and successes. Furthermore, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), a phenomenological approach is best suited when understanding a common experience will be used to develop practices or policies. One of my primary hopes is that this research will be instrumental in assisting the development of policy and programming in higher education that will meet the needs of first-generation college women.

By casting light on the voices of women who share in a common phenomenon, the realities of this student population are no longer generalized under the first-generation student umbrella or that of the advantaged college woman. This study provides an opportunity to institutional stakeholders and policymakers to understand how their institutions of higher education can meet the holistic needs of college women through both social and academic supports that promote academic success.

Research Questions

My focus on interpersonal relationships extends beyond merely who influences the participants, but also how the participants perceive the support offered through these relationships. Therefore, it is important that I not only identify who influenced the

participants, but the types of support that are being offered to them. The research questions guiding my study are as follows:

1) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women perceive the roles of interpersonal relationships in their decisions to pursue higher education?
2) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women perceive the roles of interpersonal relationships in their current academic successes at their postsecondary educational institution?
3) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women describe the roles of the postsecondary educational institution they attend in fostering interpersonal relationships that support and encourage student successes?

Positionality

My interest in the social and academic well-being of traditional-age, first-generation college women and their perceptions of how relationships influence their college-going decisions, academic experiences, and academic success in the college environment stems from my personal past as a first-generation college woman who currently holds four degrees. As I left the supportive environment of high school behind and enrolled in college, I found myself in a strange new setting where my parents could no longer offer guidance. Their inability to help me was not because they did not want to; it was because they themselves had not attended college and did not know how to navigate the financial aid programs, determine which academic support programs were available to me, or identify who to send me to for help. The professors all seemed too busy to help outside of class. This was new to me as my high school teachers and

counselors had always been available to provide academic and emotional support when needed. Furthermore, I worked two jobs while attending class full-time and always felt disconnected from the campus and my peers. The first semester of my freshman year became so overwhelming that I failed my political science class and dropped earth science because I was going to fail that class as well. I was placed on academic probation and almost lost my full-tuition scholarship. It was at this point that I found myself having to seek out tutoring services, counselors, and classroom aids on my own. This was almost traumatic for a young woman who felt outside her element. I did not understand how my peers, whose parents had all attended college, managed to navigate the campus and all it had to offer so effortlessly.

Beyond my position as a first-generation college woman, my positionality also extends to my professional and scholarly self. For example, it was only after I became a student at a university in Texas that I learned about developmental education. I must admit that at first I was perplexed and assumed developmental was the same as remedial education. However, I quickly learned developmental education is not just coursework, but is a field that is "intended to bring together academic and student support services to assist students in preparing to make choices appropriate to their current stage in development, and is viewed as being appropriate for all students" (Kozeracki, 2002, p. 85). Casazza (1999) explained that developmental education is a comprehensive process that not only focuses on the intellectual development of students, but also addresses their social and emotional development and needs as well. I quickly realized that had I known a developmental educator or had access to someone who understood I was struggling emotionally and felt I had issues socially fitting in at college, I may not have struggled

with motivation and self-efficacy like I did. In my quest to understand the comprehensive picture and multidimensional needs of first-generation college women, a population that I am a member of, I have continued to navigate the field of developmental education and the studies and research it encompasses and produces. As a result, my personal narrative and scholarly interests have further intersected creating a new identity dynamic.

Therefore, due to my heightened awareness of how interpersonal relationships influenced my own college-going decisions and academic success, I have taken great interest in the growing gender gap in college matriculation. Given my positionality, it is important that further insight is given to how traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive the influence of interpersonal relationships on their academic decisions. Therefore, it is my intention to gain the necessary awareness through the personal testimonies (Pickering, 2003) of this student population.

Terminology and Operational Definitions

Distinction in defining terms in educational research is crucial, as different definitions may result in diverse implications and translations to practice. Below, I describe the chosen terminology as well as provide key definitions for my study.

Terminology

For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that gender is described as socially constructed and comprised of "culturally determined behaviors and personality characteristics" (Howard & Hollander, 1997, p. 11). Therefore, the terms *man/men* and *woman/women* will be used in my study. When paraphrasing and quoting the scholarship of others, the terminology on sex and gender used by the researchers and authors will be

honored. I have chosen to do this in direct quotations and paraphrasing to highlight the inconsistencies in terminology found throughout the literature.

Student Programs Offered by the U.S. Department of Education

Many programs exist to help first-generation students transition into higher education. These programs are federally funded, and provide many support services that assist first-generation students, low-income students, as well as students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Two specific programs are referenced throughout this study: TRiO and GEAR UP. To afford a clear understanding of these programs and the services they offer, I provide the definition utilized by the U.S. Department of Education's website.

TRiO is a federally funded program that specializes in academic assistance programs that help students from disadvantaged backgrounds progress through the academic pipeline. The program focuses primarily on student populations such as, first-generation, and low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

GEAR UP is a discretionary grant program that is designed to increase the number of low-income students who go to college and provide them the necessary assistance to succeed in postsecondary education through scholarship opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Operational Definitions

Academic agents: An academic agent may be the school environment or an individual such as a student's teacher, school counselor, advisor, or staff member (Morton et al., 2018). An academic agent provides various forms of capital that are pertinent to college access within the primary and secondary school settings.

Academic trajectory: An individual's developmental course of learning and its contribution to the student's academic achievement and persistence (Caprara et al., 2008).

At risk: At risk marks "a student's increased risk of non-completion and dropout from studies" (Korhonen & Rautopuro, 2018, p. 3).

Continuing-generation: A continuing-generation college student is a college student whose parents or legal guardians have some postsecondary education experience (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, p. 3).

Educational resilience: The ability to achieve success in school despite the presence of adverse conditions (Waxman et al., 2003).

Emotional support: Providing acceptance, encouragement, and praise on an interpersonal level. This includes being willing to listen, talk, care, support, and empathize with another individual (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

First-generation: a college student whose parents or legal guardians do not have postsecondary experience (McConnell, 2000).

Identity theory: The goal of identity theory is to "explain how social structures affect self and how self affects social behaviors" (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285). Identity theory is associated with the view that society influences social behavior through its influence on self (Mead, 1934).

Self-efficacy: Self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).

Social support: Shumaker and Brownell (1984) defined social support as "an exchange of resources between two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient" (p. 11).

Traditional-age college student: A traditional college student is between 18-22 years of age and has matriculated directly from a secondary educational institution to the university system with no stop-out (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Undergraduate: Undergraduate students are those seeking a bachelor's degree from a higher education institution who are classified as freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior.

Summary of Chapter

In this chapter, I introduced the background, problem, and purpose of my research study. First, I discussed the lack of research focus on the need for additional support services for women in higher education. Second, I described the state of higher education, including current perceptions and needs, for first-generation students as a cohort, before shifting the focus to first-generation college women in particular. Next, I presented the purpose of the study, scope of methodology, and the research questions. Lastly, I highlighted how this study is shaped by my personal positionality, and then provided a glossary of key terms and definitions. In the next chapters, I will delve deeper into research concerning the impact of interpersonal relationships with family, peers, and academic agents on women and first-generation college students' academic success, as well as the research design of the study.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The demographic make-up of students entering into higher education is shifting. As highlighted in chapter one, the number of females entering college and receiving degrees is increasing while simultaneously first-generation students also are making up a larger portion of college students (Rascon, 2012). Research too often takes a deficit-based perspective on first-generation college students filling an overemphasis on male students and why they are less successful than college-going women. In turn, college women and their experiences in higher education are overlooked. To counter this imbalance, more research is needed on college women overall that could promote a more asset-based approach to understanding their college experience. Indeed, college women may have valuable experiences about the assets they leverage to be successful that could drive initiatives for all students, and more importantly, that could inform programs working with first-generation college women whom past research has deemed both at risk due to their generational status and successful based on their gender.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine this multi-faceted phenomenon of gender within higher education, with a focus on the impact of interpersonal relationships on the academic decisions and successes of college-going women. However, first, it is important to establish the theoretical framework. In this area, I employ two theories, identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and student retention theory, specifically, Tinto's Institutional Departure Model (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Student retention theory is comprised of several theoretical models: Spady's (1970, 1971) Undergraduate Dropout Process Model, Tinto's (1975, 1993) Institutional Departure Model, ad Bean's (1980, 1982) Student Attrition Model; however, Tinto's model is the

most popular and widely cited as his model demonstrates that in order for students to be successful both their academic and social environments must work cohesively to support the students sense of belonging. It is worthy of note that when developing my theoretical framework, I have taken a historical purist perspective; meaning that although there have been modifications and extensions to both identity theory and Tinto's theoretical models, I rely on the roots of each theory when framing my study. I elaborate on research in identity theory and Tinto's Institutional Departure Model, exploring the history of each, and then providing a brief discussion on how these theories intersect in the collegiate environment. Next, I outline where my study falls within the field of developmental education, and the support programs it encompasses, before exploring the history of women in higher education. I then explore the research regarding the influence of interpersonal relationships on the academic success and decision making of students as they transition into and persist in college, and the impact these relationships may have on developing an academic identity.

Theoretical Framework

Due to the steady incline in the number of first-generation women enrolling in higher education, it is important to study who this population is and how to better serve their needs in attaining academic achievement. Previous research, specifically research on females and first-generation students, suggests that interpersonal relationships with family, peers, and academic agents contribute significantly to these students' academic success (Cooper et al., 2000; Crosnoe et al., 2007; Dennis et al., 2005; Lusher, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Stout et al., 2011). With a focus on understanding college women's perspectives of the influence of interpersonal relationships on their academic

success, two related theories informed the present investigation. First, identity theory is relevant to my study as it exposes the linkages of social structures, self-attitudes, and relationships. Identity theory is appropriate as the framework for my study because I explore how interpersonal relationships impact the development of self-concept and individual perceptions, which influences the academic trajectories of traditional-age, first-generation undergraduate college women. Second, Tinto's theoretical model broadly serves as a guide that connects students' perceptions of support within the college experience. This theory will be used as a sub-theory to provide context to the importance of ensuring that students feel both academic and emotional support in the higher education environment.

The overall purpose of my study is to address the lack of research combining first-generation and women undergraduate students. In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the overlap and conflict between the similarities in the academic needs of women and first-generation students, I employ both theories as identity theory and Tinto's theoretical model work simultaneously to explain how the emotional support needs of first-generation college women are developed through experiences and conversations with others and their environment. Therefore, to better demonstrate the intersection of women and the first-generation population, I will provide an overview of the two primary theories that framed this study and informed my understandings of how relationships influence the development of our academic selves. Due to the primary focus of my study being on gender, women in particular, I also delve into how gender interconnects with identity, and our academic development, before more closely examining the impact of social and emotional supports on student persistence via

theoretical models of student retention. In addition, I address how these models have been modified to address the needs of diverse student bodies. Next, I review bodies of literature that help to inform my study with a focus on the influence of interpersonal relationships in shaping academic decisions and successes.

Identity Theory

Identity theory is a broad framework that in part provides a social psychological lens into the development of self-concept and how the influence of others may impact academic trajectories (Gee, 2000). The general goal of identity theory is to "explain how social structures affect self and how self affects social behaviors" and is often employed to demonstrate how various identities are negotiated and managed (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285). The concept of gender cannot be discounted when discussing identity development as it is an essential component of an individual's identity (Erikson, 1968; Gilligan, 1982; Wood, 2006). Stets and Serpe (2013) stated the theory is used to describe "how identities relate to role performance (or behavior), affect (feelings), physical and mental health (such as stress, anxiety, and depression), the self-concept (such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-authenticity), and social structure" (p. 31). Research guided by identity theory provides a better understanding of how individuals interact in social settings and embed themselves within society (Stets & Serpe, 2013).

One perspective of identity theory is that of George Mead, who is viewed as one of the founders of symbolic interactionism; his sociological theory serves as a frame for understanding how behaviors are shaped by how individuals interact with one another. According to Mead (1977), the process of internalizing relationships with others and understanding how others perceive us through social interactions is how we come to understand and develop our own identities. While developing symbolic interactionism,

Mead was heavily influenced by Charles Cooley's work that connected society and the individual. Cooley's (1902) concept that one's self and identity are formed and developed through social transactions is one of the founding theories on which identity theory is based. This theory discusses the socially constructed self and how the perceptions of others assists in building, changing, and maintaining one's self-image. Cooley's theory connects direct interaction between self-perceptions and the perceptions of others by demonstrating the crucial roles that peers, family, and others who interact closely with the individual play in shaping their morals and ideals (Cooley, 1909). As individuals begin to define themselves, they place more emphasis on the perceptions and judgements of others; the self continues to develop through these perceptions and judgements (Cooley, 1902). The roles and characteristics that individuals select for themselves relate to social expectations and consequences (Gecas, 1982; Lundgren, 2004; Mead, 1934).

According to Stryker (1968, 1980), identity theory fuses the aforementioned concepts of Cooley (1902, 1909) and Mead (1934, 1977) in a manner which explains behavior in terms of a negotiation between society and self. Identity theory specifically posits that individuals create multiple identities whether they are alone, playing a *role*, or attached to a *group*. Although Stryker classifies identities as *person* identities, *role* identities, and *group* identities, throughout this study, the literature reviewed will focus on role and group identities as *person* identities are not unique to specific environments and may apply across various situations (Carter, 2014). Role identities (e.g., student) activate when an individual plays a role. Group identities (e.g., female) are activated when an individual identifies with a group or category (Carter, 2014). Furthermore, the more committed an individual is to an identity, the more salient an identity will be.

Invoking a particular identity increases the likelihood of an individual performing roles and demonstrating behaviors consistent with the associated expectations of the role (Carter, 2014). For example, Vantieghem and Van Houtte (2015) found when women surrounded themselves with same-sex peers, they were more likely to invoke the identity of a hard-working, well-behaved student; traits often associated with feminine identity. In the following section I provide more insight into how gender and identity theory intersect for the purpose of my study.

Gender and Identity Theory

Identity theory is associated with the view that social behavior and environment influence the self (Mead, 1934). The development of identity is a crucial function in a person's life. Within this, gender is an essential part of an individual's learned identity (Erikson, 1968; Wood, 2006). Although key theorists such as Erikson (1968), Perry (1970), and Kohlberg (1973) advanced the field of identity development and the influence of interpersonal relationships, their studies maintained a male-centered focus by allowing males to establish the norm with which females were compared (Campbell, 2004).

Gilligan (1982) argued that men and women "speak different languages," and that women should not be excluded or compared to males in identity research development (p. 173). Instead, gender should be described as a diffused status characteristic that is significant in various identities such as role and social group identities (Carter, 2014). Similarly, theorists such as Butler (1990) maintained that gender is not sexed but constructed in the social world—gender is performative. For example, in the classroom, women blend feminine frameworks such as fashion and make-up with being quiet in

class and demonstrating intelligence (Skelton et al., 2010). Therefore, when educators show a preference for a particular behavior, women know which identity to invoke. This implies that gender is not a characteristic attached to a specific skill but is instead invoked by cultural assumptions learned through familial and other sources of socialization. Because gender is salient in so many different situations, gender cues based primarily on stereotypes and myths are perpetuated resulting in labels such as being a good listener, a smart student, or a kind friend (Carter, 2014; Gilligan, 1982).

For women, rapport provides a foundation for building community and developing a sense of self-concept (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). Nowhere is this more evident than in the college environment. In a field similar to sociology, social and personality psychologists have developed an identity theory relevant to their own field, personality theory. According to Stryker (2007), the only difference between identity theory and personality theory "is that each follows its separate disciplinary heritage" (pp. 1094-1095). When investigating literature focused on the college experiences of females, there are two pieces of research that are considered empirical. Both pieces investigate the need for challenge and support for students, notably women on college campuses (Belenky et al., 1986; Dupre, 2011; Komives & Woodward, 2003; Sanford, 1966). Nevitt Sanford's (1966) longitudinal study was one of the first to focus on the female college student population. His findings concluded that in order for students to develop they must be in a supportive environment. Furthermore, in their seminal work, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky et al. (1986) conducted 135 in-depth interviews with college women to identify "five different perspectives from which women view the world of truth, knowledge, and authority" (Clinchy, 2002, p. 64). The authors concluded that

interpersonal relationships and the influences of those relationships provide women with a sense of self-knowing that assists with the development of academic confidence, resulting in a smoother transition into academia (Clinchy, 2002). Tinto's Institutional Departure Model provides a lens to examine how receiving emotional and social support through the development of relationships with others in the academic environment can further influence educational ambitions.

Identity Development and Intersectionality

Psychosocial identity development theories suggest that identity development relies upon various states and experiences that individuals have throughout their life (Evans et al., 2010; Karkouti, 2014). Identity is not only understood to be an individual's beliefs about themselves in relation to a particular social group, but is also understood to be socially constructed. Interactions within broader social contexts, which includes educational institutions, and the systems of power they represent influence the beliefs an individual holds about themselves and their social groups (Torres et al., 2009, p. 577). For example, on college campuses the social construction of identity can happen in many places, one of which being student organizations.

While there are many racial identity models (Cross, 1991; Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001; Helms, 1990; Kim 2001) as well as women's identities models (Gilligan, 1979, 1982; Josselson, 1996), they are often examined independently of one another (Jones & McEwen, 2000). However, scholarship (Bowleg, 2008; Jones, 1997; Torres, 2009) has shown that identity formation takes place across a spectrum of dimensions, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status. As institutions of higher education have become more diverse, theories within the fields of psychology and sociology have been expanded

to account for these new student populations. Specifically, the Multidimensional Identity Model (MIM) (Reynolds & Pope, 1991) and Crenshaw's (1991) theoretical approach, intersectionality, highlights the importance of understanding the various dimensions of identity (e.g., race, gender, income status) and how they impact an individual's sense of self (Jones & McEwen, 2000). MIM and intersectionality complement each other as each show that it is impossible for a person to just have one identity at a time (Pope & Reynolds, 2017). By examining the many layers of identity, scholars, and those within higher education, are able to better understand students and their experiences.

Tinto's Institutional Departure Model

Similar to the literature on identity theory, studies that focus on first-generation students have also revealed a connection between receiving social and emotional support and a student's educational aspirations (Hand & Payne, 2008). When examining the success and retention of this student population, their college experiences are a strong determinant, especially within the first year of academic enrollment (Ishitani, 2003). Ishitani (2003, 2006) conducted a longitudinal study that revealed that the risk of dropping out was greater for first-generation students within the first year and diminishes thereafter. Due to Tinto's model demonstrating the importance of fostering social and emotional supports in the academic environment, it too is an appropriate theory to guide my study.

Although Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) is one of the most widely cited scholars for student retention and persistence theory, his work was influenced by William Spady (1970) and Alexander Astin (1975). According to Spady (1970) the decision to leave college is comprised of various factors including family, academic potential,

institutional congruence, friendship support, intellectual development, grade performance, social integration, satisfaction, and institutional commitment. Astin (1975) conducted a longitudinal study in which he determined that environmental factors influenced the level of involvement of undergraduate students, and the more involved students were the more likely they were to persist in college. It was based off these foundational theories that Tinto was able to develop his own theoretical model.

Tinto's (1987, 1993) Institutional Departure Model maintains that students' social and academic integration are essential components for student retention. Precollege characteristics, such as familial background and school experiences, play a prominent role in predicting the degree of commitment students will have to their chosen college, and may predict their likelihood of dropping out (Tinto, 1987, 1993). The impact of precollege factors on first-generation college students are different than those of their continuing-generation peers. Tinto (1988) stated, "persons of minority backgrounds and/or from very poor families, older adults, and persons from very small rural communities" (p. 445) are more likely to experience difficulties transitioning to the college environment. Therefore, Tinto (1987, 1993) argued that students must separate from their prior culture and assimilate to the campus culture. However, he maintained that it was crucial that students be provided with support programs that promote comfort and familiarity that foster the norms and culture associated with the college environment. Recent scholarship has begun to break away from the *assimilation* way of thinking found in Tinto's earlier model of persistence in order to focus on the counter narratives of non-dominant student populations in an effort to account for how race, class, and gender may influence the retention of these diverse student populations (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012).

Not all aspects of Tinto's earlier theoretical model works for non-dominant student populations, a shortcoming that Tinto has acknowledged in the contemporary modifications of his theoretical models (1998, 2010); therefore, in the following section I look at how components of Tinto's theoretical model has been modified to address the diverse needs of this student population.

Non-Dominant Student Populations

First-generation college students are more likely to be minority, female, older, married or have dependents (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) found that when compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students often have lower standardized test scores, accumulate lower grade point averages, and have taken fewer rigorous courses during high school. Furthermore, these students typically come from families with lower incomes and are more likely to be employed. It is because of these various factors that the first-generation student population is often labeled as at risk, as these factors alone play a prominent role in impacting a student's navigation of the college environment as well as their retention (Choy, 2001).

Utilizing components of Tinto's model, Pascarella (1985) developed the General Model for Assessing Change that provided additional consideration to the higher education institutional structure and environment. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) have continued to expand this concept throughout the years. According to their most current work, there is an indirect relationship between campus culture and student persistence. An integral part of the connection is the interactions students have with academic agents

on campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Braxton (2000) supported the sentiment of formal and informal interaction, stating

> depicting social and academic systems of colleges as two separate boxes mask the fuller relationship between these two spheres of activity. A more accurate representation would show academic and social systems as two nested spheres, with the academic system occurring within the broader social system that pervades the campus. (p. 91)

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) agreed that "evidence consistently indicates that student involvement—both generally and in an array of specific academic and social areas and activities—is related in some fashion to intended or actual persistence into the next academic year" (p. 426).

Various critics of Tinto (Braxton et al., 1997; Braxton et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992) have argued that Tinto's model places the burden of integration upon the student and their ability to assimilate to the norms of the institution. Scholars have noted that the cultural foundations of Tinto's model is biased by favoring a Eurocentric framework that fails to recognize cultural variables as well as the needs of students of color (Museus, 2014). Yosso (2006) was particularly critical of Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) model. According to Yosso, when studying the experiences of Latinx students, instead of moving through Tinto's vectors of separation, transition and incorporation, Latinx students experienced stages of culture shock. In particular Yosso (2006) pointed out that the Latinx students who participated in her study often spoke of alienation and isolation as they worked to integrate into college life. However, she agreed that if done properly a sense of community could create an environment that would foster learning and validate

student cultures and viewpoints, and help promote student success (Yosso, 2006). Yosso's model of college persistence is more culturally focused and more inclusive of the experiences of non-dominant student populations, but similar to Tinto, her work maintains a focus on the influence of relationships on student persistence (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012).

Kuh and Love (2000) suggested that "from a cultural perspective when an individual joins a group, interactions between people influence the larger institutional environment" (p. 198). Meaning that the social interactions between people change both the student and institution. Therefore, instead of expecting students to forgo their cultural background, the institution should embrace how both the campus and students' culture can mutually shape one another. Tinto (2016) echoed this sentiment stating it is crucial that "all students see the institution as welcoming and supportive -- that the culture is one of inclusion" (para. 10).

Although not all postulates of Tinto's model work for the multi-cultural student population found on modern college campuses, a concept Tinto himself has acknowledged in his modifications of the model (1998, 2010); the overall premise of Tinto's model--that there is a link between college persistence and academic success fits well. The bond that a student forms with their institution is what makes Tinto's model relevant to my study and connects to identity development by demonstrating the influence of society on the experiences and perspectives of students. According to Kaufman and Feldman (2004),

> the college as an arena of social interaction in which the individual comes in contact with a multitude of actors in a variety of settings, emphasizing that

> through these social interactions and other social influences the identities of individuals are, in part, constituted. (p. 464)

I use Tinto's Institutional Departure Model to gain an understanding of the academic and social components of student persistence and retention. Tinto's model provides a concise explanation for a complex phenomenon by explaining the plausible connection between the relationships that students forge with academic agents who may influence their academic choices and successes.

Intersection of Theories

Identities change as people enter new contexts such as the college environment. Factors such as race, gender, and class affect college cultures and student integration. For example, knowledge about expectations based on gender shape how students participate in the social aspects (e.g., friendship forming) of college life (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Stuber, 2011). Identity theory helps look at how social structures affect self and social behaviors but is limited by its inability to explain how collegiate success is contingent on an individual's ability to connect with others and their environment (Orbe, 2004; Stryker & Burke, 2000). However, Tinto's model (Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini; 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993; Yosso, 2006) provides a firm understanding that interpersonal relationships between students and their college institution either promote persistence or attrition.

Psychosocial development focuses on the important issue's individuals encounter during their life, this includes aspects of self-identity and relationships with others (Evans et al., 2010).Utilizing a social psychological lens allows the focus to be placed on the interaction between an individual and how their environment may influence feelings,

behaviors, values, and thinking (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Evans et al. (2010) pointed out that understanding the students' environment is just as important as identity because the way students interact within their world provides the framework for exploring academic behaviors. These theories work together to demonstrate that gender and interpersonal relationships do not operate independently of each other, and to understand the experiences of an individual, their perceptions of these relationships must be explored. As part of these efforts, I use identity theory and Tinto's model to explore how others, social organizations, community, and environment interact to forge an academic identity that promotes student success. Specifically, I use these theories to understand how traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive the role of interpersonal relationships in their academic choices and success. Because one of the primary purposes of developmental education is to help students transition into higher education, I next look at the role of developmental education in providing social and academic supports, and how it frames my study.

Developmental Education

Developmental education is often inaccurately paralleled with remedial education (Casazza & Silverman, 2013). For this reason, asset-based research, or research that focuses on students who seem prepared for college, is often deemed as not relevant to the field. However, developmental education encompasses more than the courses students enroll in, it also includes support structures such as academic coaching and personal counseling that address students' holistic needs to help them successfully transition into the postsecondary education setting. A crucial component of development education, which influences my personal and professional philosophy of facilitating student success

stems from the primary purpose of the field, which is to support the academic and personal growth of students as they transition into higher education (NCDE, n.d.). The National Organization for Student Success (NOSS) defines developmental education as follows:

> a comprehensive process that focuses on the intellectual, social, and emotional growth and development of all students. Developmental education includes, but is not limited to, tutoring, personal/career counseling, academic advisement, and coursework. (NOSS, n.d., para. 4)

Chickering (1969) maintained that in order to support student development, campuses must develop programs that encourage continuity. This includes programs that assist with making students' academic and social transitions to college seamless. Focusing on developmental education, Higbee (1995) echoed Chickering, arguing that developmental educators should also address students' development of identities, interdependence, and mature interpersonal relationships. College students have diverse needs and setbacks are more pronounced for student populations that are often labeled as at risk (Billson & Terry, 1982; Terenzini et al., 1996). Failing to address the academic and social needs of this population can impact both the persistence and degree attainment of these students.

Developmental education is about more than providing courses that address the cognitive needs of students. Developmental education exists to help "underprepared students prepare; the prepared students advance; and the advanced students excel" (NOSS, n.d., para. 2). This includes providing services and support programs that address students' emotional needs in addition to their academic needs. Boylan (n.d.) pointed out that "students fail to do well in college for a variety of reasons, and only one of them is

lack of academic preparedness" (para. 3). The impact of the college environment in student development is a prominent factor that influences student success in college (Chickering, 1981; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Therefore, "social integration and academic acculturation" are crucial to "defining and predicting student success" (Lundell & Thomas, 2000, p. 46). By providing programs and support services that promote academic integration, students are more likely to enjoy their college experience and find it less difficult to integrate into the environment (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Elias et al. (1997) argued that when the emotional and social needs of students are met, academic achievement increases. The concept of social and emotional education emphasize "active learning techniques, the generalization of skills across settings, and the development of social decision-making and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many situations" (Elias et al., 1997, p. 2). These techniques and skills can be provided by various outlets, including classroom instruction, a supportive academic climate, and community service; these aspects are extremely crucial to the academic success of students whose cognitive abilities may be underdeveloped.

Higher education is not oblivious to the emotional needs of its first-year students, as many campuses offer first-year seminar courses that address interpersonal issues and integration into the campus culture (Liff, 2003). In turn, developmental education programs have also expanded via tutoring and counseling services (O'Shea, 2002). Colleges that have developmental programs that provide support services that address the student holistically, including their emotional and social needs, tend to report better retention rates and help students succeed in meeting their educational goals (Forbus et al., 2011; Kuh et al., 2006; Maxwell, 1997; Roueche & Snow, 1977; Tinto, 1993). The

literature reveals that at risk populations, such as first-generation students, place more value on academic and intellectual activities than they do social activities (Forbus et al., 2011; Hertel, 2002).

Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) found that first-generation students who successfully integrated academically into the college environment were more likely to obtain higher grade point averages and persist. Therefore, academically meaningful interactions with others may play a prominent role in the motivation and positive integration of at risk students (Hertel, 2002; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Clowes (1980) argued that educational experiences can be found beyond the classroom as long as the institution "assumes a strong in loco parentis role" in addition to providing compensatory programs that offer "strong support for students' academic endeavors" (p. 8). By adopting a developmental education perspective that frames student support in more holistic terms, my study examines the role of relationships in student success.

Educational Support Programs

First-generation college students often face many obstacles in their pursuit for degree attainment. Research indicates that when compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation college students have different experiences with the college culture and climate, making connections to the campus community, family income and support, academic expectations and preparation, and motivation to complete a degree (Kezar, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004). Muraskin (1997) stated, "isolation from the academic and social experiences that foster integration increases the likelihood of withdrawal" (p. 56). Although the literature notes many areas, both academic and social, in which first-generation college students struggle, there are programs designed to help this

demographic of student. These programs address the social and academic needs of students through career counseling, peer tutoring, and mentoring, alongside other services. For example, the TRiO program is a federally funded program designed for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, which includes first-generation and low-income students, that specializes in academic assistance programs that help students progress through the academic pipeline (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Support programs such as TRiO help this cohort of students learn the "educational system and have provided an understanding of what is required in order to successfully maneuver through the system academically" (Thayer, 2007, p. 64). Research shows that first-generation students who are involved in TRiO consistently have better retention, transfer and graduation rates than other first-generation students who do not receive services through TRiO (Ruiz, 2008; Thayer, 2000).

There are eight programs housed under TRiO: 1) Educational Opportunity Centers, 2) Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement, 3) Student Support Services, 4) Talent Search, 5) Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff, 6) Upward Bound, 7) Upward Bound Math-Science, and 8) Veterans Upward Bound. According to Engle and Tinto (2008), students who utilize TRiO programs typically have higher persistence rates than their equally disadvantaged peers. The improved retention statistics are attributed to these services as they provide students with the skills needed to achieve academic success, operate flexible scheduling of services, track students' academic performance, and provide intervention services when needed (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Furthermore, these services are not only designed to meet the academic needs of students, the programs also address social needs by providing services

such as peer tutoring, cultural outings, and other purposely designed events for participants in the program (Zhang et al., 2005). As a result, first-generation college students who utilize these services are better able to make a successful transition into their new educational and social environment. Building on the theoretical framework discussed above, and with the purpose of developmental education in promoting a successful transition in to postsecondary education established, I turn to a review of scholarship relevant to my study, with a particular focus on understanding the role academic relationships play in influencing academic decisions and successes.

Literature Review

The following section provides the historical and scholarly background for this dissertation. This literature review begins with a historical overview of gender in higher education before progressing to empirical studies related to my particular research problem with a focus on the implications of interpersonal relationships on the academic decisions and success of first-generation college women.

Entry of Women into Higher Education

Higher education has historically been framed as "created by and geared toward men," with women isolated from active participation (Simonds & Cooper, 2001, p. 122). Betty Frieden (1963) captured the dilemma facing women who entered into higher education in *The Feminine Mystique*. Frieden (1963) stated,

> The one lesson a girl could hardly avoid learning, if she went to college between 1945 and 1960, was not to get interested … in anything besides getting married and having children, if she wanted to be normal, happy, adjusted, feminine, have a successful husband, successful children, and a normal, feminine, adjusted successful sex life. (p. 156)

Women who did choose to enter higher education were deemed to need guidance and were closely monitored by school administration and subjected to more excessive rules than their male peers.

In the United States, the women's movement began to bloom in the late 1960s; however, academic writing and research agendas continued to ignore the gender inequities within higher education (Sandler, 2002). Women did not see positive changes in higher education until the 1970s when the Women's Liberation Movement, born from second wave feminists who raised female awareness through self-knowledge and self-empowerment, coupled with congressional hearings regarding Title IX resulted in calls for greater equality for women in college (Dupre, 2011; Rowbotham, 1997). During this time, society saw a growth in research produced for, by, and about women (Mercer, 1997). Additionally, as admissions guidelines became less restrictive and women no longer sought good marriages, but instead vied for great jobs, the rate of women attending and completing college increased. By 1982 females surpassed their male peers in earning a majority of bachelor's degrees, and by 1986, a majority of master's degrees (Jones, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 1993).

Despite the fact that women surpassed men in college attendance, scholarship in the early 1990s continued to focus on women and their educational disadvantages (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Feminists viewed schools as a primary source in which inequality for women was developed and argued that it was within the walls of these institutions such inequalities could be dismantled (Arnot et al., 1999; Weiner, 1994). However, in the mid-1990s the disparity in the enrollment of men in higher education began to attract the attention of high school guidance counselors, college admissions

officers, and policymakers (Koerner et al., 1999; Mortenson, 1999; Sommers, 2013). Gender and education research shifted away from the academic inequities and success of women and began to focus on the "boy turn" (Weaver-Hightower, 2003, p. 472). Sommers (2013) argued that while focusing on women and minorities, researchers failed to acknowledge men have lower literacy measures; struggle with academic engagement in school and college enrollment; and account for the majority of suspensions, expulsions, dropout rates, special education placements, and diagnoses of attention deficit disorder. With this shift in research, which focuses primarily on the learning, social outcomes, and academic experiences of males an abundance of theoretical and practice-oriented scholarship has shifted to primitive times when the inequities and needs of females was ignored.

Interpersonal Relationships and Academic Achievement

Kirk and Okazawa-Rey (2007) explained that identity formation is "the result of a complex interplay among a range of factors: individual decisions and choices, particular life events, community recognition and expectations, societal categorization, classification and socialization, and key national or international events" (p. 61). First-generation college women struggle more with developing their own identities and understanding what it means to be a successful college student. Although the development of each individual's identity is a unique path, women's perceptions of their identity is the result of different levels of influence (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2007). At the individual level, women identify who they are by various characteristics and roles. This is the area they have the most control over and it includes interpersonal relationships. The next level of influence includes outside influences such as school and the community.

Identity at this level helps determine group standards, expectations, obligations, responsibilities, and demands. These levels impact women in unique ways because gender is constantly recreated out of human interactions (Lorber, 1991). In the following sections, I will review the role of influences from family, peers, and academic agents on the academic choices and success of college students.

Influence of Family

An individual's family is one of the primary instruments used to pass on gender role expectations (Leeder, 2004). The integration of identity and gender transcend from familial values and interactions, which impact development and self-perception. These factors can influence decision-making in regard to academic trajectory (Aronson & Buchholz, 2001). Although most of the research that addresses family influence on education trajectories is on children, Uhlenberg and Mueller (2004) stated that "many of the same family factors that predict whether or not a child will graduate from high school also are relevant for attending college" (p. 135).

Identity literature, which encompasses socialization tactics, primarily focuses on family and peer support as well as societal role expectations (Dennis et al., 2005). Dennis et al. (2005) utilized an ecological theoretical framework to conduct a short-term longitudinal study with 100 college students (M age = 19.02; 70% women, 30% men) in which they investigated the influence of family and peer support on the college outcomes of ethnic minority first-generation college students. The findings indicated that for females in particular the emotional support provided by family members was instrumental in their adjustment to the college atmosphere (Dennis et al., 2005). This may

be due to the emotional safety net of comfort that is provided by a supportive family (Hurtado et al., 1996).

Jackson et al. (2003) conducted a qualitative study with Native American college students (n= 15; 7 females, 8 males). After conducting three interviews that were thematically analyzed, the researchers concluded that Native American students who expressed they had familial support and encouragement were more apt to utilize student support services, which includes mentor/faculty support programs (Jackson et al., 2003). Students who possessed the academic skills developed form these interactions were much more likely to persist to graduation (Pavel & Padilla, 1993). These findings seem to confirm portions of Tinto's model, revealing that familial support is connected to academic success and persistence.

Familial expectations also influence children's educational attainment (Marjoribanks, 2002). For example, Keller and Tillman (2008) used assimilation theory to frame their quantitative study that focused on how parents' expectations for college influenced educational attainment through academic ability and achievement. The researchers used a binary logistic regression to determine the impact of "sociodemographic characteristics, parental behaviors (i.e., parental control, parental involvement) and expectations, and high school ability/achievement on the likelihood of college attendance, and multinomial logistic regression to estimate the effects of these factors on type of college attended" (Keller & Tillman, 2008, p. 130). Results indicated that parental behavior and expectations indirectly affected college-going behavior through their students' academic achievement during high school (Keller & Tillman, 2008). Furthermore, the findings supported previous research findings on the importance

of family beliefs about education for long-term academic outcomes, as Keller and Tillman (2008) found that parental expectations had significant direct effects on college attendance. Although parental expectations are considered important to most adolescents and young adults, it is especially influential to daughters (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Kerpelman et al., 1997; Samuolis et al., 2001). Similar studies have found that females report a closeness with their parents in which conversations about education and college are topics frequently discussed (Christofides et al., 2015; Riegle-Crumb, 2010). In turn, females utilize these expectations and relationships to bolster their own academic engagement, which results in higher rates of college attendance (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010).

Academic discussions are not the only aspect of familial involvement that encourages academic engagement. Home-based involvement, which includes homework assistance and visiting educational venues (e.g., museums), also promotes academic success (Comer, 1995; Reynolds & Gill, 1994). Cooper et al. (2000) conducted a quantitative study in which students, parents, and teachers completed a Homework Process Inventory (HPI) survey. Parental feedback indicated that parents of high school females had more direct involvement in their student's homework, in high school females received more direct involvement than males, $r(180) = .15$, $p < .047$. This result indicates that females are socialized to be more reliant on interpersonal relationships in their achievement-related behaviors (Cooper et al., 2000). Today's undergraduate women come from familial environments that have fostered an identity that promotes obtaining the approval of others and development of interpersonal relationships through emotional

attachments in order to be academically successful in college (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Li & Kerpelman, 2007; Samuolis et al., 2001).

However, despite the expectations and encouragement of parents to attend college, the parents of first-generation students may lack the knowledge and experience to help them succeed academically once they begin the higher education process (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Inman and Mayes (1999) conducted a quantitative study with a large sample (n= 5,057) of community college students. Their findings indicated that there was a statistically significant difference, $t(4521) = -6.77$, $p < .001$, $r = .10$, between how first-generation students reported feeling less prepared for higher education when compared to continuing-generation students. Similarly, O'Connor (2002), who interviewed first-generation college women, found that participants' immediate families were not able to help them navigate the academic or financial processes.

The lack of assistance and academic discussions may be one reason why first-generation students struggle in their pursuit of higher education (Gatto, 2009). Stieha (2010) revealed that the culture and values found within family relationships of first-generation students' families can also cause conflict in their attempts to successfully integrate into the college environment. Barbatis' (2010) qualitative study represented students (n= 22; 17 females, 5 males) who were first-generation college students, first generation in the United States, non-native English speakers, females, and under-represented minority populations. The research utilized critical theory, and concluded that unlike Tinto's (1975) model, which stresses assimilation into the college culture, some students rely on their family's cultural values for support during their college experience (Barbatis, 2010). The students in the study pointed to factors such as "responsibility, goal

orientation, resourcefulness, determination, and faith" as contributors to their academic persistence (Barbatis, 2010, p. 20). These personal characteristics are not recognized in the interactionalist student departure model proposed by Tinto (1975, 1987).

Influence of Peers

Research shows that undergraduate college women utilize same-sex peer support in distinct ways when compared to college-going men. Aries and Johnson (1983) maintained that women rely on same-sex peer support as a way to articulate the self and develop their identities. For example, women are more likely to consult others and to be influenced by the opinions of others in regard to academic choices (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Hackett, 1985; Shashaani, 1997). In addition to wielding influence over academic choices, "college women's friendships are learning relationships in which college women can experience learning that is purposeful, practical, and productive" (Martínez Alemán, 1997, p. 144). The social support provided by peers assists with integration into higher education, as peers can act as ""identity agents" or "cultural brokers"—individuals who have a vested interest and play an active role in the development of youths' identities" (Syed et al., 2011, p. 450). Tinto (1998) pointed out that peers can provide guidance as well as model how to deal with transitional challenges, which may encourage persistence to graduation.

Dennis et al. (2005) found that although both peer and family support are relevant to college outcomes, peer support was a stronger predictor of college grades and adjustment. Students indicated that their peers played a prominent role in their adjustment to college because they were able to connect with each other to study, share life experiences, and form friendship bonds with (Dennis et al., 2005). These relationships are

crucial to the academic success of first-generation students in particular as peers were able to assist with adjustment to the college environment and development of study skills that family members of first-generation students are not as familiar with. Pillay and Ngcobo (2010) confirmed these findings in their exploratory study of first-year college students. The researchers utilized a questionnaire in a psychology class that was comprised of 79% female and 21% male participants. A significant number of first-year female college students (83.2%) indicated that they found the support of friends and peers to be most supportive in their academic success than males (60.0%) (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010). These findings were in line with Friedlander et al. (2007), who also determined that increased social support from friends, not family, predicted successful adjustment to college for first-generation undergraduate students. However, of note, first-generation students do report that their lack of knowledge of the university environment does hinder their ability to form supportive peer networks (Bui, 2002). Pascarella et al. (2004) supported this assessment as they stated, "first-generation students' derived greater outcome benefits from extracurricular involvement and peer interaction than other students even though they were significantly less likely to be engaged in these activities during college" (p. 278).

Peer mentors also benefit first-year students with their social development for overall well-being (Flores & Estudillo, 2018). Involvement in professional and peer mentoring programs can help students, such as first-generation students, who are unfamiliar with the university environment make social connections and avoid feelings of isolation (Bui, 2002). Phinney and Haas (2003) conducted a mixed-methods study with 30 ethnic minority first-year students (21 females, 9 males) to examine the impact of

factors such as self-efficacy and social support on coping strategies of first-generation college students. A post hoc analysis revealed that the most successful way of coping was seeking support (M = 3.73, SW = .20). The results indicated that for first-generation students, the ability to seek support during stressful times was a central coping strategy. Additionally, those students who perceived that they had less social support experienced greater difficulty in focusing on their academics (Phinney & Haas, 2003). For women in particular the connections with others that are developed in peer mentor programs assist with college transition (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; Leafgren, 1990). However, women not only benefit from being mentees, but also do well serving as role models. Utilizing a social change conceptual framework, Dugan (2006) found that women also serve as excellent role models for peers because they enjoy social responsibility.

Studies examining the academic achievement of students who identify as racial minorities have examined gender differences in academic success and persistence. Martínez Alemán's (2000) qualitative study of same-sex friendships among college women of color found that peer relationships encourage cognitive development, a process closely tied to identity development. Similarly, in a study of Latinx youth college students, it was found that Latinas were more likely to seek out and engage in close interpersonal relationships with same-sex peers (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). In turn, Latina youth utilized these relationships as a strategy in their path to school success in college (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). Similarly, in their quantitative study, which utilized stereotype threat theoretical framework, Stout et al. (2011) used a two-way ANOVA, and found that when women came into contact with peers they identified with, they tended to feel more confident, show increased class participation, and demonstrate a willingness to seek help

from instructors after class. These results support the conclusion that academic success is influenced by the academic achievement of significant others (Devos & Cruz Torres, 2007). By using these gendered strategies, the research shows that relationships and connections to others are more important to women (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Gilligan, 1982). Research has documented the increasing importance of peers in young adults' transition to college (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001; Cooper, 2011). In Azmitia et al. (2013), the authors' quantitative analysis of their mixed-methods study led to the finding that students' consistently credited peers and friends for a successful transition to college. The students pointed out that this support network, specifically those with shared interests, helped them feel like they belonged there (Azmitia et al., 2013). However, although peer support in college is often framed as serving a positive role in college success (Kuh et al., 2008), there is very little empirical research that delves into the perceptions of college females (Othman et al., 2013).

Influence of Academic Agents

Identity development encompasses more than connectedness to peers and family; it can also be represented by an attachment between an individual and an academic agent, such as a school or guidance counselor (Berrueta-Clement et al., 1984; Kulka et al., 1980; Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977). Voelkl (1997) stated that "according to this perspective, the person comes to identify with a place or activity structure that may represent certain expectations, values, beliefs, and practices" (p. 295). The experience and emotions of starting college and connecting with the environment are individualistic, and differ depending on gender (Ball et al., 2002). The transition into higher education can be a difficult period for any student, and the ability to transition successfully may impact

academic achievement (Haggis, 2006; Hultberg et al., 2008; Yau & Cheng, 2012). A successful adjustment to school involves positive school experiences including academic achievement and persistence (Bloom, 1976; Busch-Rossnagel & Vance, 1982). Tinto (1987, 2006) emphasized that the interdependent nature of first-year students can affect their commitment to the institution and their educational goals. Although research exists that focuses on the academic, social, and psychological adjustments students experience as they transition to college, less is known about gender differences in these relationships (Wintre et al., 2009).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) stated that "people seem to need frequent, affectively pleasant or positive interactions with the same individuals, and they need these interactions to occur in a framework of long-term, stable caring, and concern" (p. 520). Research shows that although college women excel in adjusting academically to higher education, it is more difficult for them to establish social relationships (Cook, 1995). McWhirter (1997) conducted a quantitative study in which multiple regression analyses were performed and found that female students have fewer chances to take the role of leaders in societies and clubs, and therefore, are less involved in university activities. When denied the opportunity to develop interpersonal relationships, women are more likely to develop internal distress and anxiety, which can impact their academic performance (Pomerantz et al., 2002).

Similar studies of first-generation students show that when this population is successful in becoming academically integrated into the college environment, they are more likely to succeed academically (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) used an integrated model of student retention and self-determination

theory of motivation in the quantitative study they conducted. The results indicated a significant correlation between intrinsic motivation and academic integration ($r = .446$, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that students who have a positive college experience are better able to integrate into the environment. However, first-generation students are less likely to become engaged academically and socially (Hertel, 2002; Mehta et al., 2011). According to Mehta et al. (2011), first-generation students who do not socially integrate into the campus culture have lower academic performance and are dissatisfied with their college experience. This may be due to the fact that first-generation students place more value on academic and intellectual activities than they do social activities (Forbus et al., 2011; Hertel, 2002; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Because student-faculty interactions play a significant role in keeping first-generation students connected to the college environment (Hertel, 2002; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). However, several studies found that first-generation students are less likely to interact with faculty due to discrepancies between their expectations and experiences (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Smith & Zhang, 2010).

Tinto (1989) stated that "the more faculty members interact with and become engaged with students, the more likely students are to stay in college" (para. 7). This interaction is most likely to occur in the classroom as it is the one location all students attend while on campus (Tinto, 2006). Research has consistently pointed to positive impacts on college grades and persistence as a result of engaging with faculty (Astin, 1993; Bean & Kuh ,1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996; Terenzini et al., 1995; Tinto, 1993; Wilson et al., 1975). In particular, educators are significant individuals in women's social environment. O'Shea et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative, comparative case study of 23 high school women who were considered academically

talented. All of the participants but one credited a nurturing school environment, challenging curricula, and high-quality teachers as contributors to their academic success (O'Shea et al., 2010). In a similar study Godwin and Potvin (2017) conducted a case study on a woman in high school at risk of dropping out. The findings indicated that due to the positive influence of her high school chemistry teacher, the student became a central member of her school's clean water project and pursued a geological engineering degree in college. Sax et al. (2005) conducted a large-scale longitudinal study in which the researchers found that women reported that faculty provided them emotional support, respect, and encouragement to attend graduate school. However, the findings also revealed that women experienced higher rates of feeling "overwhelmed", when challenging professors' ideas and viewpoints (p. 651).

Perceptions of Higher Education. The social and academic interactions students have on campus, whether it be in resource centers (e.g., tutor labs) or at social events (e.g., Greek life), can influence their perceptions of the campus environment, which, in turn, may influence the students' satisfaction, retention and academic success in college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Spady, 1970, 1971). Pike and Kuh (2005) found that unlike their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students often reported unfavorable perceptions of the college environment. For first-generation students who may lack the resources and supports afforded to others, higher education can seem unwelcoming, making the transition to college difficult (Gatto, 2009). Thayer (2000) stated

> Not only that they must leave home for an unfamiliar academic setting, but that they also must enter an alien physical and social environment that they, their family, and their peers have never experienced. They are faced with leaving a

> certain world in which they fit for an uncertain world where they already know they do not fit in. (p. 5)

The culture shock first-generation students may experience can hinder their ability to successfully navigate the college environment (Inman & Mayes, 1999). As a result, many within this cohort may fail to succeed academically (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005).

The acknowledgment of others as well as placement in a supportive environment can influence the student's identity and sense of belonging within the academic community (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000; Wegner, 1998). Although early experiences with academic concepts and communities are important, identity development during college is primarily shaped by faculty members, peers and environment (Godwin et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2010). For women, who are often marginalized in academic environments that promote a patriarchy, recognition as a capable member of the academic community promotes a stronger identity and sense of belonging (Tonso, 1999).

Stephens et al. (2012) conducted several studies utilizing diverse methods, including surveys, longitudinal data, and experiments, to test cultural mismatch theory. The purpose of the multiple studies was to test for generalizability between private and public institutions. Participants at the private institution included 88 undergraduate students (M age = 18.2 years; 57% female, 43% male) of whom, 42 identified as first-generation. Participants at the public institution included 147 undergraduate students (M age = 18.8 years; 60% female, 40% male) of whom, 67 identified as first-generation. Results indicated that for first-generation college students it is crucial that in order for their academic identities to develop, they be provided with a cultural climate that aligns

with their sense of self (interdependence) (Stephens et al., 2012). First-generation students are typically from working-class backgrounds and are socialized to be attentive to the needs of others as well as the importance of being part of a community (Stephens et al., 2012). When these students are placed in a university culture that matches their sense of self, first-generation students are more likely to obtain better grades (Stephens et al., 2012).

Of interest, according to Pike and Kuh (2005), females, minority students, and other students who resided on campus and had the opportunity to immerse themselves into the campus culture reported greater gains in their learning and intellectual development. Females specifically have been found to rely on interpersonal relationships as a support network that assists with their integration into the campus community (Crosnoe et al., 2007; Lusher, 2011). These findings indicate that the ability to form connections with peers and the college environment may influence gains in learning, persistence, and intellectual development all of which are linked to academic success (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Sather, 2018). For this reason, researchers such as Healey et al. (2014) argued that it behooves institutions of higher education to provide programs to equity-seeking groups, such as first-generation students, that encourage a sense of community and belonging as these programs increase "student retention and success" (p. 35).

According to the Census Bureau report as of October 2016, for young adults between the ages 18 to 24, 14% of females have earned a bachelor's or higher degree, compared to only 9% of males. Additionally, 55% of college students are now female (U.S. Census, 2017). Due to the fact that the rate of female college enrollment and

retention surpasses that of their male peers, the emotional and social needs of females often become disregarded as institutions of higher education continue to foster an environment that ignores the academic support needs of females (Connell, 1996; Ng, 2000). For example, because current educational research focuses primarily on the growing disparity between college men and women, policymakers and institutions of higher education seem to have concluded that males are the disadvantaged ones in terms of educational opportunity (Kinzie et al., 2007). As a result, in an effort to increase the enrollment and retention of male students, many colleges have promoted policy change in mentoring programs for this population while failing to provide similar programs that address the various barriers females face in college such as gender expectations, role responsibilities, and lack of self-confidence (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Marsh & Martin, 2011; Spanard, 1990). For instance, the University of Illinois Springfield has one such program, Black Male Initiative (BMI), that strives to "strengthen the secondary-to-higher education pipeline to enable many more black male students to attend college" (University of Illinois Springfield, n.d., para. 3). Boys Project, another outreach program for males, provides resources on the academic needs of young males in the educational system (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). However, despite the promising practices of these programs for retaining minority males by meeting their academic, social, and emotional needs, most universities have failed to develop comparable counterpart programs for their opposite gender peers (Dinan, 2016; Sadker et al., 2009; Sax, 2008a).

The ability to successfully transition, integrate, and adjust to the college environment has been identified as a significant factor of academic persistence (Tinto, 1987). For college women and first-generation students receiving social support from

family, peers, and academic agents is an important factor in helping these two student populations adjust to the challenges found within the college environment (Dennis et al., 2005). Researchers agree that a lack of social support results in an inability for these groups to successfully integrate into the college environment, which may negatively impact their academic success and persistence (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Additionally, the literature available on academic success and persistence gives insight into how different factors, such as types of social support from family and friends, faculty, and mentoring programs influence internal factors such as sense of belonging, motivation, determination, and resourcefulness (Barbatis, 2010; Busch-Rossnagel & Vance, 1982; Stout et al., 2011). The findings of these studies may play a prominent role in assisting administrators, faculty, and other interested stakeholders in developing interventions and programs to increase persistence and retention rates among traditional-age, first-generation college women.

Gaps in the Literature

The majority of research available on first-generation students is quantitative in nature, and specifically focuses on characteristics such as socioeconomic status, enrollment and persistence rates, and degree attainment (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Pike & Kuh 2005; Stephens et al., 2012; Stuber 2011; Terenzini et al. 1996). Researchers (Gatto, 2009; Terenzini et al., 1996) tend to produce studies that fall within three categories: 1) pre-college experiences; 2) higher education matriculation; and 3) academic outcomes. Furthermore, literature tends to focus on two separate populations—first-generation students and college women. By examining focusing on each population separately, scholarship is discounting how factors

such as race, gender, and ethnicity also influence these students' experiences. Additionally, by failing to look at the diverse populations within the first-generation population, the specific needs of first-generation college women are also not being addressed.

Although there is research on interpersonal relationships and academic success (Crosnoe et al., 2007; Rampino & Taylor, 2013; Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2006), there is a lack of literature that utilizes qualitative methods. Therefore, there is a lack of understanding of how students perceive the influence of these relationships on their college-going decisions and success. More specifically, the literature on the perceptions and experiences of women in higher education is limited. Similar to the literature on first-generation students, the emerging research on women in higher education that does exist is quantitative. For example, the majority of research examining interpersonal relationships in relation to gender focuses on enrollment in STEM courses. However, this research fails to explain how interpersonal relationships influence academic self-worth or provide insight into students' academic experiences from their own perspective (Conger & Long, 2013; Leaper et al., 2012).

Researchers agree that for women, factors that influence college matriculation and academic success are positively influenced by the familial, peer, and academic agent interactions developed within their community (Rampino & Taylor, 2013; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2006). However, a vast majority of the research focuses on primary and secondary education levels, and as a result fails to capture students' perceptions of the influence of interpersonal relationships on their higher education decisions and academic experiences.

Furthermore, current research that does highlight the academic success of college women does so as a backdrop for promoting policy changes for college men.

Lastly, there is a lack of literature utilizing identity theory and Tinto's interactionalist student departure theory as it relates to how social structures intertwine with gender identities and behaviors (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1968). The aforementioned theories suggest that for women, their social networks influence self-concept and academic worth. The ability of women to invoke various identities may promote positive behaviors that result in academic success.

Summary of Chapter

In this chapter I utilized identity theory and Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Institutional Departure Model to construct the theoretical framework of my study. I demonstrated how both theories work simultaneously to explain how the emotional support needs of college women and first-generation students are developed through experiences and conversations with others and their environment. I identified and discussed literature that focused on first-generation and college women. Although the population for my study are traditional-age, first-generation college women, the literature reviewed tended to focus on this group as two separate populations—first-generation students and college women. Additionally, I focused on the impact of interpersonal relationships with family (primarily parents), peers, and academic agents on women and first-generation students' academic success.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research I reviewed in chapter two shows that both women and first-generation students achieved greater academic outcomes when immersed in interpersonal relationships with others (Pascarella et al., 2004). The literature on first-generation college students addresses the issues that this population faces placing them at greater risk for academic failure than their continuing generation peers. However, it, does not fully capture how some students, notably females, within the first-generation population manage to overcome academic barriers and persist in higher education (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Wyatt, 2014). This oversight demonstrates that despite the fact that females are now the majority within institutions of higher education, they still face gender-based inequities on campus (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). The purpose of my study was to investigate how traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive interpersonal relationships to have influenced their academic experiences. Through the course of my investigation I strived to provide a forum to traditional-age, first-generation college women to voice their perspective on how interpersonal relationships influenced their academic success.

In this chapter, I explain the rationale for the qualitative phenomenological research method designed to answer my research questions:

1) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women perceive the roles of interpersonal relationships in their decisions to pursue higher education?

2) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women perceive the roles of interpersonal relationships in their current academic successes at their postsecondary educational institution?
3) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women describe the roles of the postsecondary educational institution they attend in fostering interpersonal relationships that support and encourage student successes?

This chapter outlines the study's methodological plan, interview methods, ethical considerations, sampling strategy, and the overall qualitative research design. The chapter concludes with data analysis and study significance.

Overview of Methodology

Within educational research phenomenology seeks to "preserve students' voices and their lived experiences" (Arminio et al., 2000, p. 497). Phenomenology is "concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). Because this study is focused on the experiences of the participants, a phenomenological research design is most appropriate as it allows for exploration of the students' perceptions of various factors that may impact their decisions during the college-going process (Stieha, 2010; Wyatt, 2014).

As a methodology, phenomenology relies on a qualitative frame to help the researcher discover and understand the lived experiences of the participants. Many studies are classified as phenomenology based on the fact that the study focuses on the experiences of individuals (Morse & Field, 1996). However, literature on the development of phenomenology points out that there is much diversity between

phenomenological philosophers making it difficult to define one single approach as a phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1970; Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1960, 1975, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). According to Lowes and Prowse (2001),

> researchers who describe themselves as phenomenologists need to consider the philosophical assumptions underpinning their selected method of inquiry, examine whether those assumptions are consistent with their own views, ensure the methods used reflect those assumptions and account for those assumptions at all stages in the conduct of the research. (p. 472)

There are two main types of phenomenology: Transcendental and Hermeneutical. Husserl is often referred to as the 'founding father' of the phenomenological movement, and is known for transcendental phenomenology, while his pupil and at one time, his believed-to-be successor, Heidegger, is known for hermeneutical phenomenology (El-Sherif, 2017; Lowes & Prowse, 2001; Speigelberg, 1978). Because Heidegger was a pupil of Husserl, they collectively shared some of the core principles of phenomenology. For example, both were "concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). However, the difference between the two philosophers as well as their phenomenological stances was how the researcher should examine the phenomenon being studied (El-Sherif, 2017). According to Husserl, and followers of transcendental phenomenology, the researcher must avoid any presupposition, and although they can examine and acknowledge their prior beliefs, once the researcher has done so, they must bracket, or set aside, their beliefs. Conversely, according to Heidegger, and followers of hermeneutical phenomenology, the researcher is a vital participant within the research, and their ability to interpret the data relies upon their prior

knowledge, and can therefore not be overlooked (El- Sherif, 2017). Before a researcher can begin conducting a phenomenological study, they must first determine if their philosophical underpinnings are grounded in either the teachings of Husserl or Heidegger as their phenomenological approach to data collection (e.g., interviews) and data analysis is dependent upon which school of thought they align with (Lowes & Prowse, 2001). What follows is a brief discussion of both philosophies, and how both the philosophical underpinnings of Husserl and Heidegger have influenced my study.

According to Husserl (1962), knowledge is constructed through experiences individuals have as they grow older and have interactions within society. He argued that in order to understand experiences, one cannot be contaminated by preconceptions. Labeled as 'Transcendental' phenomenology, this methodology "proposes that researchers can, and must, transcend their natural attitude and suspend their beliefs about the existence of the objects of experience" (Lowes & Prowse, 2001, p. 473). Husserl (1964) called this process *epoche´* and argued that in order to engage in true phenomenological research, the researcher must maintain a distance and objectivity during the research process. Transcendental methodology insists that "phenomenological research is pure description," and interpretation is not part of the research process (van Manen, 1990, pp. 25-26)

Heidegger expanded on Husserl's stance on phenomenology. Unlike Husserl who stressed defining the original objects within the experience, Heidegger argued that understanding the experience was more beneficial than the description (Dowling, 2005). Followers of Heidegger argue that the phenomenon that phenomenology is concerned with is the essence of being (Cohen & Omery, 1994). The essence of being is the

meaning of the phenomena that an individual experiences, and understanding the experience is essential in order to explain it to others (Dunn Carpenter, 2011). Unlike Husserl, Heidegger pointed out that people are involved in the world they experience, and the only way to fully understand an experience lies in how it is understood before and after having experienced it (van Manen, 1990). Referred to as Hermeneutics, this viewpoint combines interpretation and experience, and links the researcher with what is being interpreted. The connection between the research and the experience provides the researcher with an understanding of their own subjectivity. According to van Manen (1990),

> From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is to always question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to know the world is to be in the world a certain way, the act of researching – questioning—theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world. Phenomenology calls this inseparable connection to the world the principle of "intentionality." (p. 5)

Because a researcher will have preconceived prejudices that can influence the interpretation of the experience, it is essential that researcher and participant maintain contact to ensure the accuracy of the study (Koch, 1999).

As described, Husserl and Heidegger maintain different viewpoints on the role of the researcher as they relate to the experience of the participant. Husserl argued that through the processes of *epoche´* and reduction, the researcher could accurately describe the participant's experience in a manner that does not contain the researcher's prejudices.

Unlike Husserl, Heidegger suggested that interpretation by the individual researcher is unavoidable (Osborne, 1994). Because the researcher lives and interacts within the world, the researcher cannot avoid having prejudices when interpreting knowledge, but the researcher derives the knowledge from the insights of the participant (Sinha, 1963).

Like both Husserl and Heidegger, I too seek to understand human experience. For this reason, I do rely upon the principal teachings of phenomenology, as established by Husserl, and his assertion that knowledge "about the world exists through layers of experiences which build up as we grow older and learn more" (Lowes & Prowse, 2001, p. 473). However, throughout the research process, I found that I more so aligned with Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, as I do not believe that the experiences and understanding of the researcher can be presupposed. For this reason, as I collected and analyzed my data, I closely followed the core teachings of Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology as it related to conducting and interpreting interviews with participants. Because my own experiences as a first-generation college woman cannot be negated, I understand that my own viewpoint may influence the interpretation of the lived experiences of the participants as I pulled from the philosophical underpinnings of both Husserl and Heidegger as I navigated the collection and analyzation of data.

Assumptions

In designing this study, I made key assumptions about traditional-age, first-generation college women. First, I made the assumption that interpersonal relationships had a positive influence on the academic choices and success of traditional-age, first-generation college women. I also assumed that their experiences and perceptions are different from continuing-generation college women. These assumptions led to the belief

that understanding the experiences of traditional-age, first-generation college women and their perceptions of interpersonal relationships warranted investigation in order to allow institutions of higher education to provide the best support to this population.

Positionality of Methods

Reflexivity and positioning are important to my study, as I have personally been impacted by interpersonal relationships as a first-generation college student. According to Moustakas (1994), it is imperative that a researcher is able to look at a phenomenon with an openness, or fresh lens, to see "what it is, just as it is, and to explicate what is in its own terms" (p. 41). Therefore, continually throughout my study, I reflected through memoing on my own experiences and how my biases may have influenced my study (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research acknowledges that a researcher cannot be completely objective and detached (Groenewald, 2004; Milacci, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). I acknowledge that my own experiences and beliefs about academic decisions and interpersonal relationships played a crucial role in my analysis of the academic choices of women. I myself am a woman who identifies as a first-generation student. My social relationships with family, peers, and academic personnel played a crucial role in my course selection decisions in secondary and higher education as well as influenced my decision to attend college.

Research Design

An individual's approach to research begins with philosophical assumptions and the beliefs deeply ingrained in the researcher either unknowingly through education or related experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), in order to conduct a thorough qualitative investigation, researchers should begin by

identifying their assumptions and beliefs, understanding that one's own outlook will influence research inquiry and practice. In qualitative research, researchers must position themselves within the writing by first making their past experiences with the phenomenon explicit (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). However, van Manen (1990) stated, "drawing up personal descriptions of lived experiences, the phenomenologist knows that one's own experiences are also the possible experiences of others" (p. 54); therefore, instead of bracketing during the interview process, researchers should acknowledge their assumptions. This sentiment is echoed by other scholars who have also argued that interviews are a human encounter in which the researcher should be meaningfully communicative, as phenomenological interviews are a product of human interaction and are 'co-created' by both interviewer and interviewee (Ashworth, 1987; Lowes & Prowse, 2001).

As discussed in the aforementioned section, due to my own lived experiences associated with my study, during the interview with my participants placing my subjective experience in epoché or bracketing would render parts of this study inauthentic. The purpose of epoché is for the researcher to have no position or stance, but to look at, notice, or become aware of the essence of an experience without passing a judgment on what we see, think, imagine or feel (Moustakas, 1994). Because I am both a current college administrator and a first-generation college student, I felt that it was important to connect with the participants by sharing my own experiences when appropriate during the interview process.

Because the purpose of my study was to examine the perceived experiences of traditional-age, first-generation college women, a qualitative phenomenological approach

seemed most appropriate. Creswell (2014) maintained that qualitative studies are exploratory and inductive investigations where the researcher seeks to understand the phenomenon of interest directly from the perspectives of the participants. The primary purpose of phenomenological research is to understand the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of the phenomenon of interest for a person or group of people (Patton, 2015). Because the formation of a woman's academic identity emerges as a component of interpersonal relationships, understanding the phenomenon may inform the need for academic support structures for this population.

In the following section I will discuss the setting, ethical considerations, participants, materials, including interview protocol, and procedures. I will also discuss the limitations and delimitations as they relate to my study.

Institutional Setting

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), when utilizing a qualitative research design, researchers should purposefully select participants and research sites that will be most beneficial in providing a greater understanding of the research problem. Universities typically focus on norms of independence, which is beneficial to continuing-generation students who also typically have an identity that emphasizes independence (Stephens et al., 2012). However, as discussed previously, first-generation college students' identities emphasize interdependence (Stephens et al., 2012). Stephens et al. (2012) argued that this creates a mismatch for first-generation students that renders academic tasks difficult and undermines their academic performance.

Furthermore, although four-year universities typically have a more rigorous admissions process than two-year colleges, when students begin their academic careers at

a four-year institution, they are 15 to 20% more likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Bui, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). First-generation students in particular are "seven times more likely to earn bachelor's degrees if they started in four-year institutions as opposed to two-year institutions" (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 2). Due to the success first-generation students do achieve when they begin at a four-year institution, I chose to utilize a four-year university for the study as I wanted to understand how traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive interpersonal relationships to have influenced their academic decisions and success.

Criteria for selecting the research site was: 1) a four-year institution, 2) an institution with women actively enrolled, 3) an institution with support programs for first-generation students, and 4) a research site close to my location in order to account for feasibility of access and data collection (Maxwell, 2013). The location selected for this study is a four-year university in the Southwestern United States. The university is currently a public, tier II research university and is classified as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The university is ranked as the fifth-largest university in the state and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

Ethical Considerations

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested researchers should consider ethical issues during each phase of the research process: data collection, data analysis, and data representation. Carey and Asbury (2012) noted "A researcher's primary ethical obligation is to the people whose lives are involved in the studies" (p. 56). The ethical guidelines found within Creswell and Poth (2018) framed my research plan.

Institutional Review Board

Upon receiving approval from my dissertation committee, I sought approval from the site's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in order to conduct my study. Approval extended to all consent forms, recruitment emails, surveys, scripts, and interview protocols. The IRB's primary concern is with protecting the welfare, rights, and privacy of human subjects involved in research activities being conducted under its authority. I, too, have striven to uphold the integrity of the IRB by protecting the welfare, rights, and privacy of the participants throughout the study.

Informed Consent

During the processes of receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, I was provided a template by my home institution that addressed standards of ethical research. The participants who agreed to participate in the individual interviews were given an informed consent form (see Appendix A). The participants signed and returned the form prior to scheduling a meeting for the initial interview. This form explained the purpose of the study, its methodology, its risks, its duration, its confidentiality, and its potential rewards. Additionally, the form explained that the participant had the right to withdraw at any time. Participants were told how the results of the information would be utilized in my dissertation. Each participant provided a pseudonym to further ensure their privacy and protect their identity.

Confidentiality

As suggested by Patton (2015), to maintain confidentiality, each interview participant was able to assign their own pseudonym. I assigned a pseudonym to all

identifying locations associated with the research site. To further protect the participants' confidentiality, all identifying information is removed from the data.

During the interview process, I stressed that their participation and all information provided during my study would remain confidential. To further protect the privacy of the participants, after I verified the transcription and interview data, I erased the interviews from both recording devices. All hard data is being kept in a locked file, in my office, throughout the course of my study. I am storing the informed consent forms in a separate locked filing cabinet in my office. The computer storing the transcribed data and the online contact information forms is password protected.

Incentives

Compensation, even in small amounts, demonstrates to participants that their insights are valued and appreciated (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Janesick, 2004). Fontana and Frey (2000) indicated that researchers need to demonstrate that they do not see participants as mere objects of research. Therefore, I offered two incentives to show my gratitude to both the survey participants, and interview participants. After I analyzed the survey data and reached out to the eligible participants to gauge their interest in taking part in the individual interviews, I conducted a drawing in which all eligible participants who completed the survey and had provided their contact email were entered into for a $25.00 Amazon gift card. Potential participants did not have to agree to the individual interviews to be eligible; however, they did need to meet the study's target demographic requirements and provide their preferred email address. In addition to the drawing, at the conclusion of the follow-up interviews, all participants who qualified for, actively participated in, and completed all requested interviews were given a $25.00 university

bookstore gift card. I value the time the participants gave me for my research because they graciously offered me insight into their lives.

Participants and Sampling

I used purposeful sampling during participant selection. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), purposeful sampling helps identify individuals who have direct experience or knowledge of the phenomenon of interest. The individuals participating in my study self-identified as 1) enrolled students at the research site, 2) traditional-age students, 3) first-generation, and 4) women. There were no criteria in selecting or stratifying ethnic subgroups because that is not the focus of my current research; however, my study represented the research site by having ethnic diversity among the selected participants.

I define traditional-age students as a those between 18-22 years of age who have matriculated directly from a secondary educational institution to the university system with no stop-out (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). I focused on traditional-age students, as non-traditional or transfer students could bring experiences with others not classified as peers, family, or academic agents into their reflection. For example, non-traditional college women of working age could reflect on their experiences with an employer, which is outside the scope of my study. I recruited five student participants, all of whom self-identified as traditional-age, first-generation undergraduate college women. My recruitment number aligns with Creswell (1998, 2013) who recommended three to 10 participants for a phenomenological study.

Participant Recruitment Procedures

After obtaining initial Institutional Review Board approval, with the help of one of my dissertation committee members, I established contact with two staff members on campus who worked extensively with TRiO and Student Support Services. To solicit student participation in my research, the staff contacts forwarded my recruitment email announcement invitation (see Appendix B) to students within the TRiO program via the campus notification system. The email contained a link to the Qualtrics Survey (see Appendix C). On this survey, the participants were asked to provide general demographic information. Individuals who did not meet the research criteria demographic were filtered out during the survey completion process.

Individuals who did qualify for the study were asked additional questions about their perceptions about the influence of interpersonal relationships on their academic decisions and successes. Potential participants were also asked to provide their preferred email address if they were interested in participating in individual interviews. These individuals were made aware that if they agreed to and completed all requested interviews, they would be provided a $25.00 university bookstore gift card. After 14 days, 46 individuals had attempted the survey; however, only seven college women who met the research criteria had indicated interest.

To solicit more participation, I amended my proposal through the Institutional Review Board to offer an opportunity to win a $25.00 gift card via raffle for completing the survey as well as expand the survey participant population to include the Individualized Academic and Career Center (IACC). I specifically targeted IACC as the staff primarily work with first-year students, which is my target population for this study.

I emailed staff in IACC responsible for organizing the first-generation organization on campus. My staff contacts for the research gave me an email distribution list of students who had agreed to be contacted and expressed interest in joining the first-generation organization. I emailed the potential participants. Over the course of a week, 13 individuals attempted the survey, but only seven additional college women indicated interest in the individual interviews.

Until I reached a satisfactory number of potential interview participants, I systematically emailed each individual to establish meeting times almost immediately upon receipt of their completed survey. Out of the 14 individuals who indicated interest in the individual interviews, only five responded with the informed consent form, and were scheduled. The entire process, from the initial posting of the announcement to the first interview, took a little more than four weeks.

Data Collection Instrumentation and Artifacts

In qualitative research, triangulation, or having at least three sources of data collection, provides support for credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1986; Patton, 2015). Schwandt (2007) stated, "triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of inferences one draws . . . the central point of the procedure is to examine a conclusion from more than one vantage point" (p. 298). I used a survey, semi-structured individual interviews, and field notes in an effort to illuminate participants' perceptions of the influence of interpersonal relationships on their academic choices. Each of these sources will be detailed in the following sections.

Survey

I administered the survey I created, located in Appendix C, via a link to the Qualtrics Survey in an email announcement invitation sent out by staff contacts I had made. The purpose of the survey was to identify participants who met the research criteria and were willing to partake in the individual interviews, which serve as the primary data collection instrument. Initial questions on the survey were used to obtain background information, such as first-generation status, ethnicity, and self-identified gender. During this section of the survey, individuals who did not meet the research criteria demographic were thanked for their time and removed. Participants who were not removed during the background collection portion of the survey were asked additional questions that explored how the participants felt interpersonal relationships (e.g., relationships with family, friends, and/or teachers) influenced their academic experiences. Specifically, those filling out the survey were provided a variant of each research question and were able to answer in an open-ended format. For example, one question asked "Who, if anyone, would you say has influenced your decision to pursue higher education?"

The question asked the survey participant to elaborate on how this individual impacted their decision to go to college. In addition to capturing this information, I also asked the participant to provide the gender identity of this individual. Although gender identification of the individual was not relevant to this study, I wanted to ascertain if the findings on what gender women are most influenced by in regard to academics aligned with the literature. While designing the survey, I felt it was important to directly ask the participants what forms of emotional/social supports they wish they had, and how well

they felt their institution addressed their needs and provided opportunity for them to develop these bonds. The purpose of this question was to provide insight when developing the implications and recommendations for administrators within higher education.

Fink (2003) stated, “qualitative surveys are particularly suited to examining the feelings, opinions, and values of individuals and groups” (p. 62). Given that the purpose of my study was to explore the perceptions of traditional-age, first-generation college women, the survey helped narrow my participant pool to include only the target demographic. The exploratory questions on the survey were crafted as open-ended questions that allowed participants the flexibility in answering in any direction they chose (Merriam, 1998). I used the survey to not only assist with determining sample eligibility, but to also identify common themes that I incorporated into the interview protocol.

Once the survey data was obtained, I entered the data into an Excel spreadsheet. Eligible participants who indicated they were interested in participating in an individual interview were contacted via campus email and invited to participate in up to three semi-structured interviews. In Table 1, I provide a brief overview of each participant, crafted from their survey responses.

Table 1

Participant Overview

	Sabina	Monique	Suzanne	Yuli	Erica
Attempted Hours	69	74	72	100	80
Completed Hours	69	74	72	100	80
Race/ethnicity	Hispanic	Hispanic	Mexican	Hispanic	Hispanic
Primary influence on decision to pursue higher education?	Mother and siblings	Grandmother	Parents	Mother	Parents
Primary support while at college?	Student Support Services	University personnel (Career Counselor, Student Support Services)	Campus sponsored organization and campus personnel	Campus sponsored organizations and campus personnel	University personnel (Academic Advisor, Student Support Services)
Support needs while on campus?	Group support	Group support	Group (professional) support	Group support	Group support

Interviews

According to Fontana and Frey (2000), interviewing is one of the most effective means of understanding others. Janesick (2004) concurred, adding that "interviews provide such rich and substantive data for the researcher and are also a major part of qualitative research work" (p. 71). It permits the researcher to enter into others' perspectives and gather their stories (Patton, 2015). Therefore, this study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary data collection tool. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility in interpretations of responses, as well as direction of

conversation. The individual interview protocol for my study can be found in Appendix D.

I selected the interview participants from the aforementioned survey recipients. Each participant was initially asked to participate in up to three semi-structured interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes each. Seidman (2013) argued that although there is not a set time frame for interviews, the goal of interviews is to have "the participants reconstruct their experience, put it in the context of their lives, and reflect on its meaning" (p. 24). By providing the timeframe of 60 to 90 minutes, I wanted to afford enough space for participants to reflect without imposing a time limit. Seidman (2013) stated that "a phenomenological approach to interviewing focuses on the experiences of participants and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 16). Research participants are central to a phenomenological study and offer explanations for how the meaning-making process drives behavior. Behavior is driven by context of the individual's life and of those around them, without understanding the context, then it is impossible to make meaning of the experience (Seidman, 2013).

The initial interview protocol was designed to target three topic domains that directly align with my research questions: 1) perceptions of the role of interpersonal relationships in pursuing higher education, 2) perceptions of the role of interpersonal relationships in the participants' academic success within their university, and 3) perceptions of the role of the university in providing emotional and social support resources. The phenomenological interview structure provided the foundation of detail needed in order for each domain to illuminate the next (Seidman, 2013). I pilot tested these questions with a traditional-age, first-generation college woman from the research

institution. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that this process strengthens the line of questioning as the researcher can better develop "relevant lines of questions" (p. 165).

I interviewed five self-identified traditional-age, first-generation college women. Prior to beginning the interview, I asked each participant if they would allow two weeks for the interview to be transcribed in order to determine if a follow-up interview was needed. All participants agreed to participate in follow-up interviews as needed. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated that the number of individual interviews conducted by a researcher can often vary and depends upon the objectives of the researcher. My goal was to achieve data saturation by obtaining a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions of how interpersonal relationships influenced their academic decisions and success. Krueger and Casey (2000) describe data saturation as "the point when you have heard the range of ideas and aren't getting new information" (p. 26). Each interview I conducted lasted an average of 45 minutes. Four of the interviews took place on campus either in an empty room in the campus library or at a public congregating spot where we found a quiet table. One participant chose to meet at a public area off campus. The participants chose the meeting place.

I audio-recorded each semi-structured individual interview, using two recording devices in case one failed. I used an identical interview protocol for each interview. Although I did not provide these questions to the participants prior to the initial interview, I gave each participant a copy of the follow-up interview questions prior to our second conversation. I chose to give the interview questions prior to the follow-up interview because several of the participants appeared nervous during our first meeting, and conversation did not flow as freely as I hoped it would. I made the assumption that

giving the participants time to review the questions and reflect on their responses may make them more comfortable and open to conversation. During our follow-up conversations, all participants appeared more comfortable and open with their responses.

In an effort to be considerate of the participants' time and commitment to my study, I utilized a transcription service company to transcribe the recordings verbatim. I verified the transcription for accuracy and made notes of follow-up interview questions. I then sent emails to each participant requesting a follow-up interview. I amended my proposal through the Institutional Review Board again to allow for phone or virtual interviews as a viable method for the follow-up interviews. I held one follow-up interview with each of the five participants. These also lasted an average of 45 minutes. The meetings took place mostly by phone, per their request. I gave each participant a copy of the follow-up interview questions prior to our conversation. I audio-recorded the follow-up interviews, alerting the participants of this prior to the beginning of the interview. I also took notes during the follow-up interview. At the conclusion of the interview, I obtained the mailing address of each participant and mailed them a $25.00 university bookstore gift card. I utilized a transcription service company to transcribe the recordings verbatim. I then verified the transcription for accuracy.

Among the survey, both the initial individual interviews, and the follow-up interviews, I determined that the data instruments were yielding similar findings as well as confirming the recurring categories that are discussed more in-depth in chapter four; therefore, I determined that data saturation was achieved.

Field Notes

Field notes may consist of both a running record, details of the physical environment, activities, and interactions amongst people, and observer comments

(Rossman & Rallis, 2003), whereas thick descriptions help provide "detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another" (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). Phillippi and Lauderdale (2017) stated that field notes are an essential component of rigorous qualitative research as the notes assist in "constructing thick, rich descriptions of the study context, encounter, interview, focus group, and document's valuable contextual data" (p. 381). In order to detail a thick description (Denzin, 1989; Geertz, 1973) I kept field notes about any thoughts, impressions, and personal biases that arose during the individual interviews. I also relied on my field notes to create additional questions for each participant for the follow-up interviews. These additional questions allowed me to clarify misconceptions, gain a better understanding about the participant's perceptions, and member check my preliminary interpretations.

According to Merriam (2016), reflective comments are based on the researcher's feelings, reactions, and initial interpretations and constitute preliminary data analysis. Since one of my key assumptions was that interpersonal relationships have a positive influence on the academic choices and success of traditional-age, first-generation college women, it was important that I stayed aware of comments or actions throughout the interview that either supported or negated my hypothesis. The details of the field notes allowed me to look broadly at all the data, which helped facilitate preliminary coding, and ensured I did not project my beliefs into the findings (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Data Analysis Procedures

The overarching goal of my research was to illuminate the participants' perceptions and experiences of the influence of interpersonal relationships on their

academic choices and successes; therefore, a qualitative phenomenological research design was most appropriate. Qualitative data exposes an emerging story. The researcher will often find that the data reveals "surprises open to serendipity and it often leads to something unanticipated in the original design of the research project" (Janesick, 2004, p. 106). Although there is not a single correct method to analyze data, it is important to be thorough and organized as well as immerse oneself in the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Clark, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Riessman, 1993). Saldaña (2016) suggested using the research questions for classification because the goal of the research was to answer the research questions. It is worthy of note that data analysis was initiated with data collection; thus, throughout the data collection and analysis phases of my research, I continually referred back to my research questions to maintain the aim of my study.

As explained by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), qualitative research is a complex methodology that requires much rigor and attention; therefore, employing this type of research methodology should be undertaken with care. Although for both the initial and follow-up interviews, I utilized a transcription service to transcribe all 10 interviews, I followed the advice of Riessman (1993) and engaged with my data through "close and repeated listening" to the interviews during my morning and afternoon commute to and from work (p. 60). I would carry my audio recorder with me so I could notate any ideas or questions I had about the data. I made notes of anything significant, such as participants' phrases, in order to have the participant clarify or expand upon in follow-up interviews. This information was included in the protocol utilized in the follow-up conversation. I completed a similar process for listening to the recordings with the follow-up interviews. Transcript-based analysis served as the primary analysis strategy,

with audio recordings of each interview serving as the primary data source (Morgan & Kreuger, 1988).

Before discussing my data analysis process, I first need to address the terminology to be used. It's important to note that some methodologists use the terms *code* and *category* interchangeably and even in combination (Saldaña, 2016). In my study, I use these terms to denote two separate components of data analysis. Saldaña (2016) states "some use the terms *code* and *category* interchangeably and even in combination when they are, in fact, two separate components of data analysis" (p. 9). By contrast, Creswell and Poth (2018) ascertain that in the literature categories and themes are used synonymously to describe "broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 194). Although I reference Creswell (2013, 2014), Creswell and Poth (2018), and Saldaña (2016), I rely on Saldaña's terminology; therefore, for the purpose of my study, I assigned qualitative *codes* to the data I used in order to capture the core elements of my data, whereas *category* refers to the codes I clustered together to facilitate the development of, and make connections with the data, during my within and cross-case data analysis. What follows is discussion of my within-case analysis, where each participant is an individual case. I then provide a cross-case analysis where I compare and contrast the commonalities and differences in the participants' stories.

Within-Case Analysis

For the within-case analysis, I coded in three phases to develop categories: phase one I coded for the source of support (the who), phase two I coded for the form of support (the type), and phase three I collapsed and categorized the codes I identified in

the prior two phases using a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It is worthy of note that throughout each phase of coding of the within-case analysis, I used a constant comparative method in which I clustered quotations into common groups. Although my altered provisional codes and research questions were the primary determinants for my within-case analysis, I used these common groups of the constant comparative method to develop and connect my categories during my cross-case analysis.

I began the coding process with the transcriptions. When I received the interviews back, I first verified them against the recording for accuracy. I then reread through each transcript again and made note of any additional thoughts before I began the first phase of coding. According to Saldaña (2016), when coding, provisional codes, or researcher-generated codes based on prior investigation, including "the researcher's previous knowledge and experiences," can be used, but should be revised, modified, or expanded as qualitative data is collected and analyzed (Saldaña, 2016, p. 168). Following this advice, I compiled a tentative list of codes I expected the data to reflect based on prior research over academic success and interpersonal relationship support as well as the research questions I developed. For example, during phase one where I coded for the source of support, the provisional codes I developed were: (a) parents, (b) friends, (c) guidance counselors, and (d) administrators. Although the provisional codes were inspired by the literature, I revised, modified, and collapsed the codes to make them my own utilizing my research questions for saliency. According to Saldaña (2016), this is a form of descriptive coding that helps the researcher gain an organizational grasp of the data by assigning a word or short phrase that describes the data.

During the first two phases of coding, I coded for terms that aligned with my first two research questions. The purpose of my coding methods was to ensure I was obtaining the necessary data needed to answer my research questions. My focus on interpersonal relationships extends beyond merely who influences the participants, but also how the participants perceive the support offered through these relationships. Therefore, it was important that I not only identify who influenced the participants' academic journeys, but the types of supports that were offered to them.

In the first phase of coding, I chose to select terms that represented individuals I assumed would be key to promoting the participants' academic decisions and successes. These provisional codes included (a) mom, (b) dad, (c) friend, (d) tutor, and (e) teacher/professor. As I read through each transcript for first phase coding, I performed a within-case analysis, and coded for an individual based on whether the participant acknowledged the individual who impacted their academic decisions or successes; for example, "I already knew my mom was my role model because she was always there for me" was coded as "mom." As another example, "And he [Erica's sensei] also went through same experiences… so he kinda understands where I'm going about in my random decision making" was coded as "friend."

I began the second phase of coding using a similar method. I used the literature and research questions to devise another list of provisional codes; however, this time I was looking at the type of support offered. I chose to code for types of support because based on the literature, students' perceptions of support and what influences and encourages them to succeed in school is diverse, and I wanted to make sure the data was answering the research questions. These provisional codes included (a) encouragement,

(b) venting, (c) financial, (d) studying, and (e) educational. For example, “they found other, other summer camps, other programs, um, different organizations and stuff like that, to, to help me go forward” was grouped with other units of meaning under the label “educational,” while “the good thing I have like a lot of people there surrounded by me and help me” was grouped with other units of meaning under the label “encouragement.” The goal of the third phase of coding was to address my third research question as well as collapse and categorize my two units of analysis identified in phases one and two of coding: the source of support and form of support. The third phase of coding was crucial to the development of the participant portraits that are provided in chapter four. In order to consolidate my initial codes into broader categories, I utilized focused coding, which is the process of categorizing “coded data based on thematic or conceptual similarity” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 262). I first looked at the codes used during the first phase of coding, and, for example, all codes that indicated support from a family member (e.g., (a) mom, (b) dad, (c) grandma) were collapsed into one code: “Family.” I continued this process several times, until I had categorized all of the sources of support into three categories: (a) family, (b) peers/friends, and (c) academic agents. I then repeated the same process for the forms of support. I categorized the forms of support based on broader categories: (a) emotional, (b) social, (c) financial, and (d) academic. For example, “It was kind of like ever since I was little it was like, okay you’re gonna go to college” was categorized as “Academic.” Throughout the process I continually returned to my research questions and removed codes that were not relevant. For example, two participants mentioned how their Hispanic culture played a role in their educational efforts and academic journey. Although this code was originally coded in phase two, I removed the code during the

third phase as the participants also discussed how their families and friends shaped the cultural beliefs they referenced. For the within-case analysis, rather than label each category, I chose a summation of each research question (pursuing higher education, attending higher education, and institutional resources), which is presented in my findings found in chapter four.

Cross-Case Analysis

For the cross-case analysis, I used the findings of my constant comparative method and employed axial coding, or the process of reassembling the data back together in a manner that "explores how the categories and subcategories relate to each other" to further collapse the codes developed in the within-case analysis as well as develop meaningful categories that were seen amongst all participants' responses (Saldaña, 2016, p. 209). I returned to the source and type of support categories from the within-case analysis and further collapsed the data into broader categories based on their properties. Saldaña (2016) described properties as characteristics of a category that "refer to such components as the conditions, causes, and consequence of a process" (p. 158). For example, references to program supports such as TRiO and GEAR UP that were categorized as academic agents in the within-case analysis phase of analysis (see Table 4 for examples) were coded as "Funded Programs," and categorized as "Importance of Funded Programs" whereas Campus Learning Center, which was also categorized as academic agents in the within-case analysis phase of analysis, was coded as "Institutional Resources" and categorized as "Maintaining Academic Priorities." It is worthy of note that "Institutional Resources" is a very broad axial code. The participants all mentioned using some type of campus resources, such as the Campus Learning Center, and although

they may not have interacted with the same tutor on every occasion, they continued to use the same method of support. Once I felt I had properly categorized that data, I returned to my initial axial codes and applied the categories to ensure that the broader categories represented the data accurately. The axial codes and categories are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Axial Coding and Categorization

Sample Within-Case Code	Axial Code	Category	Description of Category
TRiO/GEAR UP	Funded Program	Importance of Funded Programs	Funded programs are prudent to the college-going process.
Mom, Dad, etc.	Family	Familial Support	Familial expectations are a crucial component in college-going decisions.
Peer, Friend, Roommate, etc.	Social Integration	Connections on Campus	Interacting with peers and academic agents influences academic standards, commitment, and actions.
Campus Learning Center	Institutional Resources	Maintaining Academic Priorities	Institutional components influence academic habits.

Conversation between interviewer and participant is key to phenomenological interviews that follow a hermeneutical approach. The participant becomes a co-investigator in the study. Therefore, once transcript codes and categories were identified, I member-checked during the follow-up conversations with the participants as a form of collaboration to ensure I accurately captured the essence of the participants' experiences and described the experience by using the appropriate categories (van Manen, 1990). As an example, when I was unsure of a description or details provided by a participant, I would iterate to them my perception of what they meant and ask them if my understanding was accurate. For example, in our first conversation Yuli mentioned her

struggles in high school that were a result of a complicated relationship with her mother. I mistook this to mean that Yuli's mother was not supportive of her academic endeavors; however, Yuli was able to provide clarity into their relationship and explain that her mother wanted to be supportive of Yuli's academic journey, but her mother's own lack of college knowledge and demanding work schedule hindered her ability to be present at various academic functions such as FAFSA nights. To further ensure that my activities produced appropriate codes and categories, I gave a section of the transcript and the codes I developed to my dissertation chair and a colleague in my academic program for intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability is a measure of agreement between two or more coders about how they select and apply codes to the same unit of text (Krippendorff, 2004). I also kept a journal where I would memo and notate any thoughts, first impressions, and reflective notes; the purpose of this journal was to ensure an audit trail (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After completing the aforementioned steps, I began compiling the narrative. I once again used the research questions as the framework with the recurring categories I identified during the data analysis. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) called this reporting and interpreting the findings.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed criteria for judging the thoroughness and accuracy of qualitative research. The authors defined trustworthiness as the quality of the investigation that makes the study noteworthy to others and established four criteria for qualitative researchers to validate their work that they consider parallel to quantitative procedures. Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1986) used the terms credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability as the criteria for establishing trustworthiness. They contended that these criteria are the naturalist's equivalencies for criteria used in quantitative research, e.g., internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (p. 76). I will use terminology and criteria established by Lincoln and Guba within this study.

Credibility

Schwandt (2007) defines credibility as "the issue of the inquirer providing assurances of the fit between respondents' views of their life ways and the inquirer's reconstruction and representation of the same" (p. 299). Lincoln and Guba (1986) recommend several ways to achieve credibility, including member checks, triangulation of data, and peer debriefing. To establish credibility as well as to ensure I documented all findings including the unexpected, I conducted member checks during the data collection process by asking for clarification or examples during the follow-up interviews. I also cross-checked my data by utilizing various data collection instruments and artifacts. Lastly, throughout the research process, I relied on my dissertation chair as a source of accountability and advice.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the generalization of the students, and how the qualitative research could be transferred from case-to-case (Schwandt, 2007). The most common way to establish transferability is through thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In order to achieve transferability via thick description, I kept field notes about any thoughts, impressions, and personal biases that arose during the individual interviews.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is the logical, traceable, and documented processes of the study. Confirmability establishes that the findings were not the "figments of the inquirer's imagination" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299). Both can be achieved by maintaining a thorough and clear audit trail throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Schwandt (2007) stated, "an audit trail includes decisions and their rationale at each step in the study—raw data, field notes, data summaries, theoretical notes, and analysis. The audit trail helps to assist the reader in evaluating the soundness of the study" (p. 56). I kept an organized documentation system of all procedures, data, and notes, including my biases and viewpoints, by consistently documenting my research activities and processes in my field notebook and through the memoing process.

Delimitations and Limitations

Although the techniques employed during data collection and analysis helped maintain the trustworthiness of the study, there are several delimitations and limitations of the study to consider. First, in regard to the selection criteria, because my study focused on traditional age, first-generation college women, certain first-generation populations were excluded, including men, as well as women who identified as non-traditional students. The participants were recruited via university-affiliated departments and organizations that primarily work with first-generation students. Therefore, if individuals did not engage with the specified departments or were not personally known within the department, they may not have been considered for the study

In addition to the delimitations presented above, one key limitation pertains to my study. Because I chose to utilize self-selected purposeful sampling, I relied upon the

willingness of the participants to volunteer. Although I intended to have racial/ethnic diversity amongst the participants, all interview participants self-identified as either 'Hispanic' or 'Mexican.' Therefore, the research findings may be strongly influenced by the backgrounds of the women who self-selected to participate in the study.

Summary of Chapter

In chapter three, I presented why the rationale for my qualitative phenomenological research design. My interest was in how traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive interpersonal relationships to have influenced their academic experiences. I provided an overview of the study, the participants, incentives provided, and the context for my study. I also offered an in-depth description on how I recruited participants, the instrumentation I employed, as well as how data were analyzed. In closing, I indicated how trustworthiness was provided through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of my study is to investigate how traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive interpersonal relationships to have influenced their academic experiences. By focusing on this student population, my study provides valuable research from the perspective of successful college women and the social and emotional supports they seek out and utilize. Furthermore, by taking an assets-based approach my study fills a gap in educational research as well as provides a new understanding of the college experience. My hope is that my findings can be used to promote initiatives and programs to help students, specifically first-generation college women.

Three research questions have guided the formation and analysis of this study and the analysis of this data. These questions also directed the organization of this chapter. Therefore, this chapter, which provides the findings of this study, will be organized around the following research questions:

1) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women perceive the roles of interpersonal relationships in their decisions to pursue higher education?
2) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women perceive the roles of interpersonal relationships in their current academic successes at their postsecondary educational institution?
3) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women describe the roles of the postsecondary educational institution they attend in fostering interpersonal relationships that support and encourage student successes?

I first provide individual participant portraits where I explore the answers to these research questions from a within-case perspective. Each participant portrait is organized around an exploration of the phenomenological descriptions and factors that have influenced their college-going decisions and successes in respect to the research questions. This includes the three phases of the within-in case analysis in which I coded for the sources of support (the who), the forms of support (the type), and then collapsed and categorized the codes identified. To ensure I did not lose meaning, I used direct quotations from the transcripts. I also included fillers such as "ums" and "uhs," so as not to alter the participant's words or meaning. After discussing the individual participants, I explore the recurring categories that emerged: importance of funded programs, familial support, connections on campus, and maintaining academic priorities.

Participant Portraits

In all, five self-identified college women were interviewed for this study. All five (Erica, Monique, Sabina, Suzanne, and Yuli) identified as first-generation college women. Although some participants (Monique, Sabina, and Suzanne), were eager to share their story, others (Yuli and Erica) were hesitant at first. Each woman was unique in her own way. They were aspiring doctors, athletic trainers, writers, teachers, and scientists. They were rich and poor, urban and rural, introverts and extroverts, and from diverse family dynamics.

The following section will present specific and detailed portraits of the individual participants (see Table 1 in Chapter 3 for an overview of the participants). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) stated, "one way to present your findings is to develop and craft profiles or vignettes of individual participants" (p. 108). Although these are not

autobiographies written by the participants, their willingness to share their stories makes them collaborators in this study (Milacci, 2003). I provide an in-depth vignette of each participant, crafted from my own observations and field notes and from their interviews and surveys; each story utilizes quotes that address the research questions. Within each portrait, there are three topic-headings, reflective of each of the three research questions: pursuing higher education, attending higher education, and institutional resources.

Erica

Erica self-identified as a "Hispanic" college woman who has completed 80 hours toward her engineering degree. Based on her completed hours, her institution has her classified as a junior. Erica comes from a two-parent household. Erica was hesitant during the initial interview with divulging in-depth details of her story; however, during our second conversation, she was much more communicative with her higher education journey.

Pursuing Higher Education

When discussing the influences behind Erica's decision to pursue higher education, Erica credited her family, but did not discuss her parents and sibling(s) to the same extent as the other participants. According to Erica, her parents provided support and encouragement of her pursuing college. She explained that there was a life-long expectation for pursing higher education carried by her parents; college was the expected next step. However, due to their lack of experience with the education system, Erica's parents struggled with how to help her academically. To help foster Erica's interest in math and science, her parents sought out other avenues to support Erica's academic endeavors:

> they did their best and they found other, other summer camps, other programs, um, different organizations and stuff like that, to, to help me go forward. And then like, okay we can't help you out but we found this program and this organization. We're gonna put you in it so they can help you out and continue growing because this is as far as we can go.

It was a summer camp Erica's mother found for her through one of Erica's teachers when she was in the fifth grade that encouraged her to pursue engineering. Although her parents could not help her with her homework, the best support they could offer in its place was encouraging her to embrace the resources they could provide her even when she was too young to fully appreciate the resources. Erica took this advice to heart, stating "so it's like okay, I need to do this." She expressed that she is genuinely grateful for all of the resources her parents provided her, because "they're the ones that kind of pushed me through."

Having access to an individual who could provide insight about what to expect as she prepared to apply for, and move on to a college campus, was important to Erica in regard to alleviating stress and uncertainty. Erica's older sister who is currently attending college and offered her advice on how to navigate the college-going process; however, Erica admitted she does discount that advice at times because her sister "never transferred so this is kinda like a different vibe." Erica explained that she feels her sister cannot identify with her situation completely because her sister stayed at home to attend college, while Erica chose to move to another city.

In order to receive more insight into the college going process and what to expect, Erica also referenced receiving information from her sensei. Erica views her sensei as a

mentor, because he has completed university, so when she feels "super-duper stressed out mostly because of school and classes" that "having that person to like calm me down is like, really good to like relate" to. When she first moved away to college, he tried to explain to her what college would be like. She elaborated on their conversations by describing how he would tell her things like,

> you're gonna have that, that awkward phase where you're gonna feel like you don't even know a lot of things but you're in the position that you need to learn a lot of things or know. And he kinda just, it was kind of more like motivation and like those, uh, those one-on-one conversation was just like, Erica you could still co- continue on, continuing going forward. You, if you need anything, we're still here for you.

This support is important to Erica because she describes herself as "stressful uh, I like to tell everyone like, I tend to try to be a perfectionist." Having access to a mentor who understands all aspects of attending college, including moving away from family, is instrumental for her academic journey.

Besides having the support of family and mentors, as Erica began to pursue college, she also received assistance from individuals in programs such as GEAR UP and TRiO that helped her navigate a process she was unfamiliar with. In Erica's opinion the individuals who run these programs are the "ones that kinda helped me focus and like, okay so let's go to field trips. So they would take us out to college trips and give us tours." These experiences with organizations that focus on first-generation students as well as those with her family played a prominent role in how Erica navigated the college-going process and influenced her academic and career path that she values as a student.

Attending Higher Education

Erica's experiences on campus with organizations and forming relationships with peers were a focal point of our conversations. In an effort to become involved in the campus community, Erica has become a tutor through Student Support Services. She admitted that she "kind of like lean towards them because that's where I work at, and that's also where I am like a member" due to her first-generation status. Through engaging in programs offered by Student Support Services, Erica has become more comfortable on campus, and has been able to form relationships not only with her peers, but also with academic agents. For example, through her work at her campus job, Erica explained her boss has become instrumental in providing her emotional support; she elaborated,

> there's times where I'm having a bad week, I'm having a bad month and I tend to just go over to his place and like knock on his office, like can you give me two minutes to like de-stress and like, let everything out of my system? He's like, Erica open the door and just go in, kind of thing, and I was like, okay cool. Um, so I'd sit down and I'll talk him and I'll let everything out, so it's really good to like, heading back to that and ask him for like advices and he's always on top of me like, hey you need to do this, you need to do that, so it's, he's been an impact.

Erica further explained that this has "kept her on track" during really "tough" times during the semester, when she questions if she still needs to attend class. Her boss tells her "you need to go all the way and like continue and go talk to the professors, go talk to-go seek help, you-you're tutor here, go get another tutoring help like, and it has, it has helped me."

Being surrounded by people and organizations that can relate to her first-generation status is important to Erica. She described one event in particular:

> So there's this one event where it's like, how to-to get A's in the semester, like, doing things to get A's for all your classes, get the 4.0 kinda thing. And it does help because they do relate to that, like first-gen kind of aspect, where it's like, it's going to be harder for us to understand and like take in all these stuff, um, these are some steps to guide you to it. And I'm just like, cool, let's just do it, that's the first, like do you know any information I was actually like put in to actual work into use, that has impacted me.

Attending programs and events geared toward first-generation students has helped Erica embrace academic development programs and meet peers on her campus. Erica expressed that relationships with peers are important to her. She elucidated that she often surrounds herself with "higher upper classmans." For her, these relationships create an environment where

> you talk amongst people, you're sitting down at the library and they ask you like, hey can you help me out with this like, super duper quick question? And I was like yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. And that drifts off to like someone else having their own like, stuff and you relate with them, so that kinda does help.

In addition to academic help, her friends also help her cope mentally. For Erica, academic support as well as emotional and mental support are important and work together in encouraging her academic journey. For example, she said,

> And they casually come up and check on me, they come and bring me coffee, they're like, you need coffee! They come for me, you haven't eaten! Let's get you

> food. Um, they take me out, they're like, okay let's go out, like get some air, because it looks like you need some air.

Erica also discussed how she likes to surround herself with people from different majors. According to Erica, the study strategies that she picks up from her diverse group of peers helps her expand her own knowledge and understanding of courses outside of engineering. She said,

> I also have like biology and chemistry friends, uh which helps because their study habits is different from my study habits and trying to interpret it and trying to use them, helps me expand my knowledge.

In addition to being exposed to different study strategies, Erica indicated that she also shares tips and tricks with her peers when they do study together. Erica described these interactions: "And I'll tell them like, oh when I took that course, this is what I did and this is what worked out for me. And they're like, oh that's a pretty cool, nice trick. Let me try that out as well." She further explained that hanging out with her peers also motivates her to study more and makes going to the library more enjoyable:

> they would just say like, let's go to the library. Let's all hang out at the library at 5:00 on, on a Friday or on a Thursday and we would all go together […] it was just kind of like a good pusher, helper to like, okay we should be studying. Let's go study together. If you don't want to study by yourself, then let's drag you in with us, kind of a thing.

Despite all of the positive relationships Erica has made on campus, the stigma she feels she faces being a woman in STEM at times makes things uncomfortable for her. She described her anxiety of being the only woman in class:

> I walk into class, I walk into the lab at the beginning of semester, and it's just like me hoping that there's going to be another girl in the classroom. And it has happened, I sit down in lab, and I get there early and I'm just patiently waiting, a guy walks in, and then another one, and then another one ... And finally one girl walks in, and she automatically sits next to me and I'm like, thank you!

Her anxiety extends beyond just being the only woman in class. When discussing her academic interactions with her male peers in her STEM courses, she said,

> And there's times where you're working in a lab, and because you're the girl, they automatically assume like, oh you're not smart. So, I'm struggling, everyone struggles, there's other people struggling too, and there's this one person passes by and he's like, you could've asked me 30 minutes ago, and I could've helped you out, and then just walks out of the class.

The varied relationships Erica has formed on campus have encouraged her to pursue all avenues, and "to get that A." The dissimilar relationships Erica has experienced with her peers serve as a good comparison to gauge how both positive and negative interpersonal relationships may motivate students to excel in academics.

Institutional Resources

Institutions of higher education need to ensure they are promoting academic resources on campus with terminology and explanations that all students, especially first-generation students, can identify with. Throughout our conversations, Erica referenced several resources across campus that she used and felt helped her but indicated that for first-generation students it can be difficult knowing how to ask for help. Unlike the other

participants, Erica made few, if any, references to institutional resources. Instead, she described herself as reluctant to seek out help:

> where I come from, it's usually like you have to figure out by yourself once you reach the max of like, you can't deal with it anymore, and then go seek help […] If you automatically ask for help in the first moment that you have a question, then you're not really actually putting your brain into like, okay let's think of a scenario, let's try to do this, let's walk through it, and automatically goes to like goes to the first thing, it doesn't really help.

Although like the other participants Erica also reported utilizing the academic support programs on campus, Erica did so less often, and according to her own words, more reluctantly than her peers. Erica explained that because of her background she perceives struggling a little bit before asking for help to be a study strategy in itself.

For this reason, colleges and universities need to be cognizant of the influence of how students' cultural/racial backgrounds influence their willingness to form relationships and utilize resources across campus. By framing resources on campus as less about help-seeking, and more about building a sense of community in which students' experiences are validated and viewed as important, students, such as Erica, who come from diverse cultural backgrounds may be less reluctant to engage in academic spaces that foster learning.

Monique

Monique self-identified as a "Hispanic" college woman who completed 74 hours toward her degree in Biochemistry. Based on her completed hours, her institution has her classified as a junior. Similar to other participants, Monique comes from a lower-income,

single-guardian household. She has lived with her grandmother who was her primary guardian since a young age.

Pursuing Higher Education

For Monique, her family and their financial predicament were strong determinants in her desire to go to college. Monique described her grandmother as having come "from like second grade education in Mexico and um, no job at all." Monique stated that her grandmother was supportive of Monique pursuing higher education, and believed college was the way to become financially successful. She elaborated that her grandmother would often tell her "we don't want to live like this for the rest of our lives. Go to college, get money and succeed." Therefore, Monique indicated she needed to go to college

> to succeed here to do, uh, to like pay off, like all the debt that my family has. Because my grandma was in so much debt, but uh, like she, she would waste money that she didn't have like to support me and my brother.

Despite the encouragement Monique received from her family, for guidance with the college-going process, Monique relied on her high school college advisor and advisors in the GEAR UP program for assistance. Monique explained that although she felt her assigned college advisor was "mean," the college advisor "got you to where you were." Her high school also hosted forums where recent alumni would come and speak about their own college experiences but did not provide in-depth information about what to expect once Monique and her peers arrived on campus. Monique explained, "All they said was like, like the basic things like, oh, you get fed, you have swipes, you like ... you have a dorms and stuff." Monique indicated that she wishes the individuals hosting the

forums provided more thorough details about what life would be like once she arrived on campus. She responded that she would enjoy speaking at the student panel to provide information she wishes she had been told as she planned for her own transition to college. She indicated that most of the assistance, both college knowledge and emotional-based support, came from her GEAR UP coordinator. She explained,

> I didn't start getting nervous about college stuff until like, very late in the semester, like, spring. And I was like, I don't know what I should be doing, like, financial aid, like, eh- eh- eh he- he was like, "Calm down." He just like, told me to calm down 'cause like, I was freaking out a lot […] It was mostly just, uh, trying to get accepted into college. Uh, trying to get financial aid. Like, those were the major things that they would only help with.

Monique implied that her lack of college knowledge was very frustrating, especially as she began her transition to college. She detailed that competing with her peers for assistance from the GEAR UP program became very frustrating, and that she "kept getting angry. I was like, 'I need help too.' But I had so many questions, so it was like, hard to help me." The need for help and conversation about the college process is a recurring category throughout her dialogue. As she further elaborated regarding her interactions with GEAR UP, she needed not only monetary assistance, she also wanted the continued emotional support as well. She stated,

> I want like, I dunno like weekly meetings where we all talk and, about college and stuff […] They were like, cause uh, they were with us since like middle school. Like ... we were like a special class. Like every year they're like helping us and

> everything. And then like as soon as freshman year head they just left. I was like okay, let me find some other people to like get help from.

For Monique, the monetary items were not as important as needing the comradery and emotional connection she felt she had with her peers and GEAR UP staff. However, when Monique failed to receive the on-on-one support she needed from academic agents, especially once she arrive at college, she sought out other avenues, such as peers, to provide the attentiveness she needed.

Attending Higher Education

As Monique transitioned to college, her ability to seek out interpersonal relationships led her to form relationships she said helped her succeed in college. She gave details about how she selects her friends and the academic support network they have formed:

> I make friends, like I try to make friends in every class so that like we can study together and just like, like work ourselves up to like an A. Oh, I guess like being successful like getting like A's basically. Cause, uh, like my friends, like I pick the ones that really want that A.

Monique stressed that for her it is important that her friends are as dedicated to academic excellence as her. She in-turn leverages these relationships as motivation and to develop skills to further her own academic endeavors.

The motivational aspects of Monique's friendships extend beyond academic support, also becoming emotional. For Monique having a support system in place to offer encouragement when she feels academically defeated is a key motivational factor in her academic endeavors. She elaborated,

> Like, like about how like, this class is so hard. I'm so tired, I'm done. But like it's so funny because like whenever one of us is feeling like that the other one is like no we can do this. Just keep going. We're almost done […] And we just like motivate each other to keep going.

According to Monique, it is not only the support her friends provide her, but also the sense of competitiveness she gets from these relationships that propel her academically. She elucidated, "if they weren't there then you don't have like anybody to compare yourself, like you're told not to compare yourself to others, but I think that's like a little helpful for you because like, you need that like little like anxiety." She further expounded,

> I like the idea of having like friends in your class and them like telling, like asking you what did she get on your test or like how did you do? Because like if in your head you are going, why don't I want to tell them, I'm like ashamed of my grade, why should you feel ashamed of your grade?

Monique continued to provide many examples of how her friends provided the academic and emotional support she felt she needed to be successful in college. These relationships ranged from sharing their struggles in their academic journeys to late night study phone calls, all of which Monique responded that she needed to keep her going when she felt stressed out and anxious.

In addition to her friends, Monique also found faculty and staff across campus very supportive in her academic endeavors; she specifically cited her academic coach in Student Support Services and how he helped her become aware of how her confidence in herself impacts her academic success:

> And um, he, like the coach there like, he actually told me like, what was wrong. I guess it's just my confidence is down. I don't believe I can do it. And so like, I just had to feel a little bit more confident in myself to actually make it through the semester [...] And I know for sure I'm not getting any Cs, but it's mostly just like my confidence needing to go higher and stuff like that. So just ... just being like, knowing that you can actually do it.

For Monique, knowing that another individual on her campus believed in her ability to be successful not only bolstered her self-confidence, but according to Monique, also impacted her grades.

Despite acknowledging the impact of her low confidence in achieving high marks in class, Monique further indicated that her academic struggles actually help her connect with professors. For example, she said, "Yeah, I found that it's like eas- it's very easy to like talk to professors and be their friends when you're struggling in the class. It's only when you're struggling in class." Feeling comfortable with her professors was something Monique really stressed was important to her. Her chemistry professor in particular made her feel very at ease with seeking out help. She said,

> my chemistry professor was the one who actually brought that up like in class cause he kind of understands what the students are going through and he knows like, he actually knows like why people don't come to his office is because they don't have specific questions to ask […] also for chemistry after my second test, I, it felt really comfortable being in there, like being in that all cause he's really friendly.

With the help of her academic coach and chemistry professor, Monique explained that she started to better navigate her interactions with her professors. For instance, she discussed how instead of waiting until after receiving test results she did not score well on, or waiting until the end of the term when she notices she is not doing well in the class to ask her professors questions, she now makes notes throughout the lectures and follows up with the professor on things she feels she does not understand. But in classes where Monique receives A's or B's, she responded she did not feel the need to interact with her professors.

Similar to when Monique was preparing for college, in some ways she felt like her status as a first-generation student hindered her ability to know what questions to ask when she did need help, but she knew she needed to ask for help in order for her to improve her grades. For example, she sought out her calculus professor:

> He tried explaining to me and I had no idea what he was trying to explain, but I just kept nodding and then he's like, okay, we're done. And um, it got quiet and I was, I know like, I don't know that much about math, but I didn't know what questions to ask to get me the help.

In situations such as this, where Monique did not feel she was getting the help she needed, she sought out other avenues of help with peers. For calculus, she ended up going to the teaching assistant for help. She described their interactions:

> like he helped me out so much because um, we actually became like closer friends because uh, like, like every, every time after lab I stay like, uh, like a couple of a minutes afterwards so he can help me and like I actually get everything he's trying to say and I'm just like, I wish like, I like this could have been like this like

> the whole semester, but he actually helped out a lot. I stay at like, after every lab and then my grades got better.

Being able to have an open dialogue with an academic agent where the individual helped explain assignments to her more in-depth and in diverse ways made Monique more comfortable seeking out assistance.

For Monique academic and emotional support came in many forms. When interacting with her peers, Monique explained that being surrounded with other academically motivated individuals is important to her as she perceives them to understand and support her academic success. However, when seeking guidance from academic agents on her campus, reassurance and communication were key. In instance where Monique was unsure of how to phrase questions or ask for specific help, it was crucial to her success that she felt that others were understanding of her struggles.

Institutional Resources

In addition to her interactions with friends, peers, faculty, and staff, Monique felt her campus did a wonderful job of providing her resources and interactions that promote academic success. She elaborated,

> I tried to use everything because like, I feel like there's not one thing that helps me. I think it's like a combination of everything that actually helps me because like for me, I need someone to like to tell me like 100 times what this means and one person isn't going to sit down and tell me that. Repeat that again and again. So I have to like move from people to people tell me the same thing and I'm like, oh, okay, I get it now, but one tutor's not enough, he's going to be really

> frustrated if they keep repeating the same thing over and over again… Like I need all these resources to help me. Like they make me who I am.

For Monique, she maintained that interpersonal relationships are not only a confidence promoter but are also important to academic success. And she truly believes the individuals she interacts with have her best interest and success in mind; she claimed, "There's like so many people out there who can help. There's like the SIs [Supplemental Instructors] and in classes, there's the TAs, there is the professors. It's a lot of people out there like everybody wants you to succeed."

Sabina

Sabina self-identified as a "Hispanic" college woman who has completed 69 hours toward her degree for athletic training. Based on her completed hours, her institution has her classified as a junior. Sabina comes from a lower-income, single-parent household. Her parents divorced when she was a sophomore in high school, and although she moved around a lot, her mother currently lives in a small rural town where Sabina attended high school. Sabina stated that while she was in high school, and her parents were still married, "there was like a lot strain on us, like a lot, a lotta strain, like emotionally, physically everything." However, after her father left, things got better. Um, when like, see, like I started doing better academically."

Pursuing Higher Education

Sabina indicated that being a good role model for her younger sisters and making her mother proud were the primary catalysts for attending college and being academically successful. According to Sabina, it is important that her mother knows that Sabina appreciates all of the struggles her mother has undergone in order to provide Sabina and her siblings better opportunities. She stated,

> I'm building for my future, or like helping like build an example for my little sisters… so like I wanna show her [her mother] like, look this is the woman I'm becoming and I'm trying hard because you showed me you did the same thing so. Yeah, she's definitely my role model like forever.

According to Sabina, the familial support she received from her family, and her desire to make her family proud, is not a connection that ended when she finished high school, but is a connection that has extended into college. Sabina still relies heavily upon these relationships as she continues to navigate higher education.

As Sabina began to traverse the college admissions process, she still credited the support of her mother for her academic decisions and successes; however, Sabina did not discount the assistance she received from programs such as GEAR UP and TRiO. She explained that the GEAR UP program exposed her to college campuses through field trips and financial support, but it was the program administrator for the TRiO program that provided emotional and academic support. Sabina described,

> she was very like, she loved helping us so much. Like anytime we felt like we needed something to go to, like the information, like she was very nice. She was like, oh, like you can just come to me if you need any help. And like, I forgot what she, she always encouraged students to apply to multiple colleges and like, even though you felt like you wouldn't get in to still apply, like I always saw her doing that […] she like helped me ease my mind about college. Like that it wasn't, like it wasn't as like scary as it seemed like it was difficult but it wasn't as scary as it seemed.

Sabina further explained that because the TRiO administrator demonstrated a welcoming and kind behavior, Sabina felt she could approach her with questions about the college-going process, such as the application process, which Sabina's mother was unable to help with. Through the TRiO program, Sabina also met peers who helped to reassure her about going to college. Sabina indicated that the combination of these interactions helped her embrace her future of attending higher education.

Attending Higher Education

Before transferring to her current institution, Sabina chose to attend a smaller university. Sabina acknowledged that while at that institution, she did not make many relationships with peers or academic agents, and felt this may have been a factor into why she procrastinated. However, since transferring to her current institution, she explained that she has become more organized. She said, "now I'm like a little bit better at it. I like ap-, I plan ahead now. Like I look at my schedules and I try to fit everything in neatly." Sabina credits her making relationships with peers on campus with influencing her to develop better study habits.

Though she indicated that she understands the importance of forging relationships in college, Sabina discussed how she is still self-conscious about her first-generation status. Sabina explained,

> And I always feel like, as a student I feel like, compared to other like students that are like, have the like background, had the education on how to do, be successful in college, had their parents to tell them, "Look, you do this, this, this. This is how you study." I always feel like I'm doing so little compared to other people and I feel like I'm behind in that like, oh this, this is like a idiot, or this is like a 90, like

> oh my g-, like I coulda done better. I'm pretty sure other people are doing better. Like I don't have, like someone compared to my grades. So I'm just like, I'm always trying to do better 'cause I wanna like, I don't have anything to go off of.

Furthermore, Sabina suggested she worries about how she measures academically to her peers. Her fear of not academically measuring up to her peers motivates Sabina to study as often as possible. Sabina stated,

> But most of the time I'm like, really like stuck on studying. Like people have like, the one friend I have here they're like, "You need to take a break." Like I'm just like, "No, I need to study more." Like, late nights everything, like every single day. Like even Friday, Saturdays and Sundays at the library so.

Because studying is important to Sabina, she explained that she tries to develop relationships with peers whom she also feels value academics. Sabina talked at length about the similar study patterns of one peer she identifies as a friend:

> So he's always in the library every day. So that, that's a good relationship because he always like, he's like, "Oh, you're at the library?" I'm like, "No, I'm at my dorm." He's like, "Come to the library I wanna like, I don't wanna be alone studying." So like, I'm like, "I guess I have to study." So it helps me go over there even when I don't want to sometimes so.

Sabina responded that having someone to study with at the library helps motivate her and helps her retain information because she is able to ask questions. Sabina further clarified that their relationship extends beyond academic support because her friend encourages her. She detailed how he supports her:

> And like he like encourages me and says like tells me that I'm super smart and that like he knows that I can do good and he's like, he knows that like I won't mess up as much as he did and everything.

Sabina affirmed that relationships with people who understand and share her college-going experiences is important:

> Like you have a lot of thoughts and emotions running through your head, a lot of stressing, a lot of, a lot of different things going on. And if you don't have someone to share those, your experiences with your, your highs, your lows, you're all your thoughts and emotions. Like you're going to, you're going to explode.

As conversation turned to how her university helps foster relationships, Sabina was very open about the relationship she has forged with her Student Support Services coach, Stacy. Sabina affirmed that having someone who has graduated from and works at a college giving her support and positive feedback means a lot because, unlike her family, Stacy understands the challenges Sabina is going through in her academic journey. Outside of her friend and academic coach, Sabina indicated that her shyness has made it difficult to make connections with faculty.

Institutional Resources

Sabina pointed out that her status as first generation also hinders her because, unlike her continuing-generation peers who know who to ask for help or what resources are available to them, she lacks the knowledge about the resources on campus or how to ask about them. For example, her focus was particularly on Career Services:

> Like, I know it's there, but I don't know what they offer. Like because I know I can get internships so, I can know more in depth about my, I could see like my opportunities through them. But like, I don't know, like I don't really see stuff like about that office, about the resource around campus are just displayed, you know, because I know that's like a really important like resource to use because that's who you're going to go to when you're about to graduate. You know, like that's like one resources, one resource you really need to utilize when you're almost about to get out of college and start looking for a job. So I know that's one resource, like I don't like to see a lot about, but I really want to know more about.

Sabina elaborated that she feels like the university should do a better job of highlighting resources such as Career Services more because in her opinion these resources are paths to forming connections with other in the campus community and are important to the long-term success of students.

Suzanne

Suzanne self-identified as a "Mexican" college woman who has completed 72 hours toward her journalism degree. Based on her completed hours, her institution has her classified as a junior. Suzanne comes from a middle-class, two-parent household. Suzanne is the second oldest of four siblings, and although her mother did obtain an associate's degree, and her older sister is currently attending another state university, Suzanne stated that the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) was a difficult process for her mother to help with.

Pursuing Higher Education

Suzanne stated that although her parents "were never the parents that were like, okay well you have to get the best grades and be the top of your class in order to make me happy and be proud of you," there was an expectation that she would go to college. According to Suzanne, because no one in her family had attended college she felt like she did not really have a role model, but knew she wanted to excel in academics. She said,

> like I didn't really have anyone to tell me go to college. I didn't really have anyone to look up to except maybe one cousin at the time then. So it was, like I said, it was not really a, you have to go, my parents. And then I had no one else to look up to, so it was like I didn't pay much attention to it. But I always knew I wanted to do good in school. I was just, I don't know, I didn't, I wanted to try.

Suzanne explained that she became more academically motivated in middle school when she noticed the treatment students labeled as advanced received. Suzanne explained, "they had their own separate hallway, they had their own teachers. Like they were in there they all moved together and everyone else was just not." Therefore, when the opportunity arose in middle school, Suzanne said her mother made her teachers put her in the advanced courses, and when presented with the opportunity to go to an early college high school, Suzanne's mother encouraged her to attend.

Suzanne indicated she also was encouraged to work toward going to college by the excitement her high school peers expressed when they were admitted to college. She elaborated,

> see even then I think it was my first, freshman year of high school when I really started to see people getting excited to go to university. Like, I was taking these

> classes. I didn't realize what my advantage was 'cause I wasn't just, I was just living my life (laughs). I didn't like, it was like, whatever. Then I saw people getting excited, like towards the end of my freshman year and sophomore year of high school. People were getting their acceptance letters. They were all opening them and just yelling and I was like, I want that.

While she excelled academically, Suzanne utilized the excitement of her peers for motivation to pursue higher education. In time, Suzanne became more pro-active about the college going process. Perhaps it was the sense of community that Suzanne shared with her peers that shaped Suzanne's eagerness to pursue college.

Students' desires to attend college is shaped by the encouragement and support received from individuals they interact with, including academic agents in their high school. In addition to her peers, Suzanne was also encouraged by counselors and teachers in her high school. According to her, the faculty and staff were very encouraging of promoting academic success and college attendance. She explained,

> at my high school, they encouraged everyone to apply to university. They encouraged us to take the SAT more than once. If we had questions about our FAFSA, they had people we could talk to […] I didn't realize how much help they would actually have when applying to financial aid, when applying to FAFSA, like looking for scholarships, that whole process kind of was, there was always help. There was always a class dedicated to that. And there was also other students who were doing the same thing and I know, one time there was, they brought in this lady from a community college that we were attending. And she, my mom was there. She came to help with our FAFSA, like for right next to each

> other. She gave us the phone number of who to call if we had questions. And my mom was on the phone with the person from, I don't know, the government and the lady helping with FAFSA, was helping us too. And we got that problem resolved within less than an hour and I was able to submit my FAFSA in one day.

One of her biggest challenges Suzanne faced was navigating the financial side of attending college. Many first-generation students, such as Suzanne, and their families find the financial aid process to be mysterious. Yet, as Suzanne found out, assistance was available to her through her high school.

Suzanne indicated that attending a smaller high school and receiving the encouragement of its faculty and staff in the college-going process, gave her an advantage compared to those that did not. Suzanne discussed how her sister, who attended a large high school, "struggled when applying to university." According to Suzanne, although her sister graduated in the top percent of her class and got accepted to a prominent university, "she didn't know that financial aid was awarded based on how high your SAT scores in addition to your ranking."

Despite all of the positive assistance Suzanne received with the college-going process, she discussed one conversation with a high school teacher that she said "hurt" her. Suzanne described her interaction:

> I had a teacher tell me, she, I told her my score. Out of a 1600 I got like an 1110, so I mean it wasn't bad but it wasn't a 1500. I know my teacher, she was like, why are you applying to schools that you know you can't get into? And I was like, well why not? I mean I, my grades are fine, my person- like I write, I wrote my essays. I wrote all three of them. I did stuff in high school. I wasn't just,

> because my scores weren't good enough you're going to tell me not to do something? That really hurt me.

Despite this negative interaction, Suzanne still applied for admissions to get into that school, and although she was not admitted, she said she did not regret applying. However, she was happy that she was accepted to her current university because they "have really good [journalism] programs."

Attending Higher Education

First-generation students need both academic and emotional support from peers as they transition to college. As Suzanne began to transition to her current home institution, she recalled feeling scared and alone due her lack of connections on campus. She described,

> Only one other person from my high school went here and no one else did. Me and him and even then we weren't that good of friends. So, I mean we're friends but it wasn't like I had that one person that we could talk to whenever I needed it. And I felt I was terrified. I was like oh my god, I didn't make any friends in orientation. I was, like they gave us all the resources information that said, here's everything you need. But it was so much, I left so overwhelmed.

Suzanne further explained that although her parents let her know she could stay closer to home and attend college, they also encouraged her to pursue the college she wanted to attend. Suzanne expressed that she perceived that her family encouraged her to pursue education and excel in academics. She recalled,

> So just I knew what I had to do and I knew that I wanted to be successful, maybe because of what I've seen in my family of certain people who didn't go to college,

> like I wanted that for myself. I had the drive of wanting to do good and I knew that even if I was by myself I wasn't going to let myself get to a point where I would fail. At least my definition of failure, or you know not doing well in my classes.

So, in an effort to "experience some kind of independence and some kind of just freedom," Suzanne chose to move away to college.

Because Suzanne has people telling her the "importance of certain stuff," she has chosen to immerse herself in campus activities and outreach. She remembered advice a teacher at her high school had given her:

> to be successful in university you have to get kind of more experience and hopefully make you more, uh, make you look better for employers was when you had things on your resume.

In terms of developing interpersonal relationships on campus, Suzanne had several sources that she had drawn on to make connections, but campus organizations were high on the list. For Suzanne, finding organizations to gain experience for future employers was important; however, becoming involved with organizations helped her to actually connect to campus.

Institutional Resources

According to Suzanne, once she moved on to campus, her home institution provided her with many resources to promote interpersonal relationships and academic success. She reflected on one experience in particular when discussing campus outreach at her home institution:

> they provided us a career, or not career, an organization fair with the different organizations here on campus 'cause I know that's where I was able to get involved. Like I went through all the ones that interest me.

Through the organization fair, Suzanne found one organization that has made her feel connected to her campus. When describing this organization, she said,

> and with them, it made it e- it was like you found your s- your spot in a big campus. It didn't feel so much like I was alone anymore and I can walk through a campus and wave to so many people.

She stated that through her volunteer efforts within her organization, she has been able to "pass on so much information to other people because I felt like they didn't have it."

Suzanne also reflected on her positive experience with campus faculty. Specifically, she highlighted interactions with professors in her degree minor program. One professor told her about "events throughout the semester, different conferences, different lectures, different symposiums." Furthermore, the director of her minor program also influenced Suzanne to learn how to interact with others at events. She described watching the director interact with others:

> through these events I saw my professor, what she would do […] I just saw her go up to people and be like, this is my like, I'm introduce, I never met you but this is, I'm Dr. So and so, this is what I do here, what do you do? And I was like, she didn't wait for any, I saw that she didn't wait for anyone to introduce her. Just seeing those people, just seeing the good habits they had, I picked up on them because I saw that she wasn't afraid to go out there and put herself out there. So I realized I need to do the same thing.

Positive interactions with professors and approachability are important to Suzanne; however, she expounded that the course being taught is also a factor in relationships she chooses to build. She clarified,

> I know I built the relationship with my professors because they were classes I cared about and they were topics I cared about and I wanted to learn more about […] my Latinos and media class, which is the one class I was the most interested in, and I decided, let me go introduce myself to my professor. I went after her office hours. We talked. I told her my, my research interests and what I wanted to do and if she could help me with anything.

Suzanne indicated that the relationships she has fostered with campus faculty have been critical to helping her find resources that promote academic success. However, Suzanne feels that the campus needs to work to make students aware of resources beyond their first year. She said,

> I guess just the importance of helping students even after their first year 'cause I feel like first year ... I know statistics, statistically they did it for a reason of why first year because that's where they get more people drop out. But it goes on beyond the first year. Especially once you hit junior year, everyone's kind of, like they're in the shock of this is what my major is.

Suzanne implied that for her, relationships with others are instrumental in making her feel welcome on campus. Suzanne discussed how interacting with peers and mentors who have a similar background as her, such as being a first-generation student, is important to her realizing her own value in academics:

> Mentors and relationships with other people. People who don't make you feel bad if you're a first-generation student 'cause I definitely had some people say "Oh, my parents were first-generation students too, so I know exactly what you're feeling." Uh, it's people who are willing to listen to my experience and not turn my experience down and not be and not saying "Oh, yeah, you don't, you think you have it bad well get this." No, it's people willing to listen to you, not making you feel better than or less than anyone. And it's meeting those professor through those friendships, through those mentoring ... I think mentoring and having people listen to you and making themselves available, I think that's what's missing and what needs to be added.

These feelings of understanding and connectedness were especially important when Suzanne discussed interacting with professors on campus:

> I've had other professors tell me you know I might be a PhD, but we're all people, we're the same, I'm not more than anything of you- than you. And having people tell me that and realizing yeah like I'm not, I still have something to add to a conversation whether it's something based, that I see, whether it be experience, whether it's something I've learned or something I've researched for whatever reason. Like, I say researched even though like professors probably have, like their research is different than undergrad research. So I- I don't feel the same, I don't feel like I'm qualified enough to say "Oh research for my, what I do?"

For Suzanne, surrounding herself with others who enact behaviors she can "mimic" is important to her academic decisions and successes. She elucidated that for her, copying

the behaviors of others gave her a sense of “empowerment” and helped her pick up “on things that other quote unquote successful people” do that help them succeed.

Yuli

Yuli self-identified as a “Hispanic” college woman who has completed 100 hours toward her consumer science degree with teaching certification. Based on her completed hours, her institution has her classified as a senior. Yuli comes from a low-income, single-parent household. Yuli said that her father and brother moved to Mexico when she was in middle school, and her mother had to work three jobs, with Yuli also having to work when she turned 14.

Pursuing Higher Education

Compared to the other participants of the study, Yuli’s family did not discuss going to college with her as much. Yuli explained that her father had moved away and her mother, who worked long hours, was her primary caregiver. According to Yuli, it was her mother’s intensive work schedule that encouraged her because her mother had few conversations with her about academics:

> there were no conversations about it [school]. Um, in high school I was going through a rough phase. My junior year I missed a total of three months and my mom never noticed [...] once ah, my mom found out more, and I was a little bit more open to her um, she was more supportive. Um, she was like, really more open to me like, “You need to have something better, you know? You, you can’t be cleaning houses like I am, because that’s what you’re going to end up doing if you’re going to miss all school.”

But, for Yuli, seeing the struggles her mother went through were prominent in her choice to pursue college and succeed. She stated, “she was the biggest, you know, motivator for me to like, okay, I gotta do something for my mom.” Although her father and brother were physically absent, they provided verbal encouragement. She explained her father would tell her “you can do it,” and offered financial assistance “once he got a little bit more stable over there [Mexico].” Her brother points to “his decisions, bad decisions and stuff” as he reinforces to her to “do better.” Despite familial encouragement coming in a different form for Yuli, she still valued their influence. Yuli’s indicated that her desire to make a better life for herself and her family is still relevant to her aspirations to achieve college success.

For Yuli, having access to academic agents that could assist her with the college going process was crucial in her journey. While reflecting on her high school experiences, Yuli explained that she did not have an easy time, but it was her troubles that helped her develop relationships with teachers who were able to promote academic success. She revealed that she developed a

> really good relationship with three of my teachers, um, are Ms. Burns, Ms. Sams, um, and um, Ms. Smith. Which was the college and career teacher. Um, and so they helped me through that. They’re like, okay, your academic suck. Um, so we need to fix that. And so through that I was able to talk to them about my troubles and stuff. So I guess all that was my academic support

She further elaborated that Ms. Burns and Ms. Sams, not only provided emotional support, but also that they helped her “plan out like, okay, this is one way I could do my life.” Yuli indicated that Ms. Burns particularly understood she did not “have my parents

to talk to about anything college, anything school. So whenever I would have trouble or something, I would tell her and she'd be like, okay, okay. Like, this is what you gotta do to fix it."

In addition to her teachers, her high school also provided help with the college admissions process. She explained that her high school had "integrated a program or a classroom, um, specifically for those that are like, yeah, I want to go to college." The class had "four teachers in that class, every class period, eight class periods," and the teachers would walk students through the application process "step-by-step."

Yuli's narrative of her path to college highlights how many students need various resources in order to achieve college matriculation. By her own account, Yuli's family was not able to provide adequate encouragement or assistance with the process, not because they did not want to support Yuli, but because their personal and financial situation did not allow for it. Yuli's access to academic agents and programs within her high school were able to provide the assistance, both emotional, academic, and financial, that Yuli needed in order to achieve the necessary knowledge in order to matriculate to college.

Attending Higher Education

When Yuli moved onto the college campus her freshman year, she had one friend with whom she was very close; however, she explained "after we both moved in, we just stopped talking." Yuli attributed the falling out with her friend to their different personalities. She described her friend as "very involved in a lot of leadership roles at [home institution], so she was very, very busy […] and she was into parties and I wasn't." Losing access to a relationship that she was familiar with while going through

the changes associated with moving away from the support structures at her high school resulted in stress for Yuli. Luckily, despite the rift with her friend, Yuli had another support system in place:

> my boyfriend at the time who am married to now Ramon. Um, he helped me with that transition. Um, he knew a lot of people at [home institution] although he didn't go to [home institution] […] Um, and then he helped me like move everything over here cause I wasn't going to live on campus at first […] Um, so he helped me financially as well. Uh, I couldn't afford anything. Um, and then also for, um, that first semester I had to pay out of pocket, I think it was like $2000, and I was like, oh crap. Um, and I barely started having a job here or like a call center Telenetwork. Yeah. Um, and so I hadn't even received my first paycheck yet. And, um, so Ramon was like I'll pay for it. Don't worry about it. Yeah. And I was, oh my gosh. Yeah. So, um, and then he also helped me get my first car. So he was the main financial person. Most of all that, like if I didn't have that, I don't think of, I would've probably dropped out.

Ramon was able to provide the encouragement and financial support that Yuli needed in order to continue attending college. According to Yuli, without Ramon's support she believes that she would not have been able to attend college due to the stress and uncertainty she encountered.

In addition to the support of her husband, Yuli also has an important connection to her college campus. Yuli stressed that the assistance she receives from a faculty member on her college campus is crucial to her emotional and academic wellbeing and has also been a prominent factor in her pursuing a teaching career. According to Yuli, the

approachability of Dr. Carp and the open dialogue they engage in is a prominent factor in her openness to the relationship. When Yuli wanted to major in family and consumer sciences, Dr. Carp was her "biggest mentor." Her connection to Dr. Carp began almost immediately, and she described how Dr. Carp helped guide her academic decisions:

> she talked about her experience a little bit and one of her classes, the first class I ever had with her. And um, I approached her and I was like, I don't know what I'm going to do after I graduate. I want a useful degree. Uh, but also degree that I really like. And so she was like coming to my office. And so she talked to me a little bit more about what had she had done with her degree in home economics, um, and so she got a teaching certification. Um, and so she told me about consumer affairs with the teaching certification [...] She told me, you know, like, it's a little bit of everything within FCS and I really liked that. Um, and so I changed my majors because of that and it was amazing. It was like meant to be. Um, and then afterwards I would just come into her office hours, any, any question really. Like, oh, oh, what, what is an extension agent do? Um, can I job shadow someone? And she gave me a list of like, people I could job shadow a teachers I could shadow places I can observe and stuff like that. Um, but she was also a little bit of an emotional support, whatever. Like I had trouble with family or something like that. Like she took kind of that role that my teachers from high school did.

For Yuli academic agents, and their ability to not only provide college knowledge and information about the college attendance process, both prior to, and while attending college, were and are central resources to her pursuit of higher education.

Similar to the other participants Yuli feels that her first-generation status has at times impacted her ability to forge relationships with academic agents on campus. Yuli indicated that in her opinion as a first-generation student, she and her peers need "a lot of support, um, on like the hidden curriculum." She explained that she did not know "how to talk to your professor in the right way, how to email your professor the right way." Having access to a mentor that is approachable and provides guidance in how to develop relationships on campus are important. For Yuli, Dr. Carp not only provided academic support, but she also helped Yuli understand how to tackle these tasks:

> I went to her office and I was talking to her about financial aid and then she, um, she was like, okay, well call this number, do this, do that. And so she helped me out through that and she was like, look at your email please.

When developing relationships with peers on campus, Yuli also made an identity claim about her first-generation status. Although her status does not stop her from forging relationships with her continuing-generation peers, Yuli noted that her first-generation status does cause some friction with her continuing-generation peers:

> Um, I'm the only First-gen from all of my friends that are FCS. Um, and so I feel like they have, their approach to school is slacking. Like they kind of don't, they come off as like, they don't care about it. Um, or I don't know, like the smaller things, like for example, um, we'll be talking about something on campus like, and they'll say, I can't believe my money goes to that or something like that. And it's just always pisses me off.

Despite their background differences and the frustration Yuli sometimes feels with her peers, Yuli still perceives her peers as friends and resources that assist with and promote

good academic habits. Specifically, through her program, Yuli has made many friends who have helped her academically and emotionally. Yuli explained that she and her friends

> sometimes do study groups, uh, which really help out one of, we have this in classes. Like this semester, this past semester we had all the classes together. Um, yeah, so we studied a lot and so they helped me a lot with that. Um, but I found myself helping them out a little bit more. Um, and then socially, uh, as well, uh, they're always like, let's hang out or something like that

What Yuli finds most helpful from these friendships is how they can help each other flourish in their coming professional careers. According to her,

> it's really nice knowing that they're also going to be FCS teachers [...] So we're going to know what we're doing. And like, let's say I get nutrition wellness, I hope I don't, but, um, let's say I get that class, I know which one of my friends would know more about nutrition and wellness. Um, or which ones we'll know more about FM because we each have like, well we're mostly interested in

As a first-generation student, Yuli needed academic resources, but it is the friendships made that give her support and confidence to sustain her through trying times academically as well as emotionally.

Institutional Resources

In Yuli's opinion, her home institution does provide academic resources that help promote success. For her in particular the Campus Learning Center (CLC) has been a tremendous help—one she uses for math and writing assistance:

> Um, the one that I mainly use for my freshman and sophomore year was the CLC. Um, for my math and for my writing. Uh, I still use the CLC all the time for my writing. Uh, whenever I have papers due or something. Um, they have like the online our thing, we just turn in the paper and then go like basically the next day, like, get back to you with that. It's um, so I've used that one a lot because of time. Um, but whenever I do have time, I taken my paper and like read over it and stuff and that'll make the biggest difference between a B and an a on that paper.

Access to tutors and academic coaches are also instrumental in providing Yuli with academic support. Yuli specifically referenced tutors in Student Support Services a helpful academic agent:

> Um, SSS, student support services. Um, so I joined them on bobcat…bobcat preview. Um, and so they offered a lot of private tutoring for free, pretty, um, and, uh, so I got private tutoring for math, um, writing again, um, and then history, um, and a little bit of nutrition with the math portion of it. Um, and then I also got an academic coach, so they would just check in with me three times a semester.

In addition to academic support, having a resource that promotes mental wellness is also important. When discussing one resource, the counseling center, Yuli said, "the counseling center, my goodness. Yes, I used it a lot, um, because I, I anxiety, um, most of all and just life situations. Um, and they were really great."

According to Yuli, relationships are not only a form of motivation, they also provided her with opportunities:

> Um, relationships will get you far. Uh, if it wasn't for developing those relationships, uh, I wouldn't be so or extra determined as I am now or motivated,

> um, that would be really exhausted without those relationships. And, um, I mean it goes hand and hand with networking. Um, you build those relationships and so there's an internship opportunity.

Yuli commented that she places value on relationships not only for academic and emotional support, and also sees value in maintaining and developing relationships for use in her professional future.

Recurring Categories

The categories that developed with this research were both anticipated as evidenced through my analysis of the available literature, and unexpected as emergent categories developed as the data were analyzed. The categories themselves are overarching and allow for collective stories to develop as the participants entered and succeeded in college, each with their own experience of academic and social integration. There were several outlying categories that were not prevalent amongst all participants. Those categories are not discussed in-depth within this study but are viable for future research. Table 3 shows the emergence of categories and how each participant contributed.

Table 3

Distribution of Participant Responses and Emergent Categories

	Importance of Funded Programs	Familial Support	Connections on Campus	Maintaining Academic Priorities
Erica	✓	X	X	X
Monique	X	X	X	X
Sabina	X	X	X	X
Suzanne	X	X	X	X
Yuli	✓	X	X	X

Note. Categories directly referenced by the participants are marked with a X. Categories indirectly referenced by the participants are marked with a ✓.

The purpose of the aforementioned table is to demonstrate that all of the categories were developed as a response to the participants' experiences. The categories offer points for discussion and provide a scope for the content to be explored. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand the perceptions and experiences of each of the participants, and to uncover how interpersonal relationships influenced their academic successes.

The most noticeable quality of the group was the similarities of the participants' experience. Although each participant's story was different, they shared a commonality when they discussed the impact of family on their academic decisions and experiences: a family member—most usually their primary guardian—instilled the need for a college education in them. Only one participant did not speak positively of her familial support system; still, for her, it was their doubt that encouraged her to go to college.

The other mutually shared factor was the impact of peer support. The college journey was challenging for some of the participants. Several shared the difficulty they had making friends in a strange environment far from home. Despite these difficulties, each participant pressed through, relying on her own self-efficacy in addition to the support and encouragement of others to influence her academic journey. The interactions between their support systems and their own determination was most noteworthy in scaffolding their academic experiences.

When discussing their perceptions on the roles of interpersonal relationships in their academic decisions and successes, the participants perceived their relationship with their family and peers to be most influential on their academic successes. However, each acknowledged that it was overall a myriad of individuals and programs that have

positively influenced their academic progress. Based on my in-depth conversations with the participants, and the analysis of the transcripts, I developed four primary categories: Importance of Funded Programs, Familial Support, Connections on Campus, and Maintaining Academic Priorities. These four broad categories encapsulate the various individuals and programs that represented the commonalities amongst the participants. What follows is an in-depth look at the role each relationship played in shaping the participants' academic journeys.

Importance of Funded Programs

Discussions about the importance of funded programs and the assistance of the staff affiliated with such programs, as well as the college selection and admissions process, was a recurring category, either indirectly and/or directly, mentioned by all participants. Table 4 utilizes each participant's own words from the interview to highlight how varied the experience could be, but how each participant contributed to the category of "Importance of Funded Programs."

Table 4

Importance of Funded Programs

	Importance of Funded Programs
Erica	"...there was at least a person designated for two high schools...he stayed with us all the time and he, he was the one that was in charge of us and we would always go up to him if we had any questions."
Monique	"Uh, trying to get financial aid. Like, those were the major things that they would only help with."
Sabina	"Like they gave me a lot of information that I didn't know about."
Suzanne	"There was always a class [applying for financial aid] dedicated to that."
Yuli	"...they (academic agents) would always like guide you, okay, this is the next step, this is the next step and so forth. Um, and then there would also host (College Knowledge) nights."

According to all five participants, their high school had staff on-hand to provide guidance with the college-going process. Additionally, the participants all self-identified as first-generation and discussed the difficulties of family not being familiar with the college-going and admissions processes. For example, Suzanne discussed the difficulties of family not being familiar with the financial aid application process:

> they struggled like half a year with that document, my parents. And they were, my parents were frustrated with my older sister but we didn't, no one really knew who to take the frustration out on besides each other

For some participants, the lack of 'college knowledge' created anxiety as they sought out answers to many of the questions their families had about the many phases of applying to and enrolling in college:

> my family like always makes me anxious because they always like asking me questions. They're like, do you know where you live, do you know where you're gonna live? And that got me scared because like, I don't know, like, I don't know what to do, cause they expect me to do everything on my own, but I don't know how to do things on my own.

The struggle with the family's unfamiliarity with the financial aid aspect of attending college was also a recurrent category throughout the interviews. Most of the participants partook in federally funded programs such as GEAR UP and TRiO and praised these programs with helping them navigate the college-going process. Sabina highlighted the GEAR UP program:

> they also had a program called GEAR UP, which they only did like every four years. So they gave us, but I was lucky enough to be in that like group where they,

> like the fourth year that they got the next like freshman class and stayed with them till senior year and like c-, first year of college and kept up with you. Like they gave me a lot of information that I didn't know about. And like, like help me come to trips and stuff so I could like, this is how I found, like saw [home institution] with GEAR UP. Like I got to see like all the campuses, what the type of environment I would like to be in.

Monique echoed the sentiment that GEAR UP coordinators helped her navigate the process as well. She stated, "It was mostly just, uh, trying to get accepted into college. Uh, trying to get financial aid. Like, those were the major things that they would only help with."

The categories overall were not surprising; however, the nuance to this category was Suzanne, who did not partake in either the GEAR UP program or a TRiO program, but still utilized the staff at her high school to assist with the financial aid process. Suzanne explained that while her sister went to a larger high school, she chose to attend a smaller high school because of the hands-on assistance she would be afforded by going to the smaller school.

This finding is relevant because with the rising cost associated with attending college, financial aid will continue to play a critical part in students' educational pursuits and having access to an individual who can provide insight into the intricacies of the process will continue to be something each participant needs. This highlights that the need for programs such as GEAR UP or TRiO does not end during the first year of college. Considering the constant changes to financial aid availability, it is imperative for

students to have access to continuous support programs that can assist throughout the college-going years.

Familial Support

The support, expectations, and encouragement of the familial network was also affirmed by the participants. Table 5 uses the participants' own words to demonstrate how each participant perceived "Familial Support" to have impacted their college-going decisions.

Table 5

Familial Support

	Familial Support
Erica	"they did their best and they found other, other summer camps, other programs, um, different organizations and stuff like that, to, to help me go forward."
Monique	"she would always like say education is important. We don't want to live like this for the rest of our lives."
Sabina	"She's like, I know mija but you have to like you have to finish strong. Like you're almost done with the semester."
Suzanne	"it was always like an expectation in my family of, well you'll go to college."
Yuli	"they both wanted me to pursue something higher."

In most cases, the participants primarily discussed the influence of a maternal figure as a form of encouragement in their college matriculation decisions. When asked, "Who, if anyone, would you say has influenced your decision to pursue higher education?" all participants directly referred to their guardian(s), but three of the five highlighted their mother or grandmother as their primary source of encouragement network. Sabina was one example:

> My mom influenced my decision to pursue higher education because I wanted to show her that all her sacrifices she made for me and my siblings weren't made in

> vain. I want to show her how her strength in our multitude of struggles, whether it be dealing with my alcoholic abusive father or not knowing if we'd have a place to live the next month, gave me strength as well. My little sisters have influenced me as well because I want to show them that no matter where you came from, no matter how little you had growing up, and no matter how impossible it seems to be successful and live happily in this lifetime, you can become something great. I want to show my family that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

Monique added "She [grandmother] only made it to the 2nd grade and never had a chance to be really happy because of money problems and she always treated me as a beacon of hope who can go to college and receive a successful career." Yuli stated something similar about her mother:

> She had to balance three jobs just to pay off rent and loans. We lived off of food stamps and other government services. She sacrificed time with me and with herself so that I can have a better future. Her hard work and dedication has motivated me greatly to peruse higher education so that I can pay it forward to her and make her proud.

The sentiments echoed by the participants demonstrate that in their perceptions familial support comes in multiple forms. In the case of Sabina, Monique, and Yuli, they not only wanted to make their family proud, they wanted to be able to assist in affording their family with a better life by obtaining a college education. Their commitment to family and the support they received from them is not a support structure that ended as they transitioned to college, it is a relationship that continues to influence their educational trajectory.

It is worthy of note that not all encouragement from family was positive. The only exception to familial encouragement was Monique. When discussing her uncle, Monique elaborated,

> I didn't know where I was living until like, like July or June, like around there I think, like, and then they gave me like temporary, temporary housing and I didn't know what room I was going to live in until like one or two weeks before college started. And my uncle, like he kept making jokes. He's like, you're going to live in a box…. my uncle was like, "Oh, now you're gonna have to be independent." And like, he- 'cause of the way he talks is just like, too much. Like, he expects you to like, pay for everything on your own, like, you're basically on your own. And I'm like, I can't do that. That makes me anxious. I'm just like, I'm tired, like, I a- I always, like, tell him that, um, I'm an investment. Like, you should, like, help me out. But he's like, "I don't need to invest in you." And I'm just like, hmm, 'cause I- I feel like I need a lot of help.

According to Monique, although saddened by the negative interactions with her uncle, she uses this relationship as a source of internal motivation while continuing with her education.

Similar to Monique, Yuli also was inspired to pursue college and continue with her education by "negative" interactions. Yuli explained how her brother, who she said made bad decisions, told her, "uh, also my, my brother through his decisions, bad decisions and stuff. I learned a lot through him and he also told me do better." When talking about her brother, Sabina said, "like I've taken what he said about why he's not continuing [in college] and like use it as advice myself." These interactions that are not

only positive demonstrate that familial support can provide encouragement and be relationships that are leveraged in diverse ways. The participants in this study not only relied upon familial

Connections on Campus

Once the participants arrived on campus, one vital persistence and academic success factor was developing interpersonal relationships with others on campus. Table 6 provides an example of how each participant perceives the importance of "Connections on Campus."

Table 6

Connections on Campus

	Connections on Campus
Erica	"And they (peers) were very, like they would just listen. They would just hear me out and they're like, it's okay. You're gonna go through this."
Monique	"I didn't realize, like, like, how, like, them, how important that was, like, to actually have friends and stuff in college […] I always try to study with friends."
Sabina	"And like he like encourages me and says like tells me that I'm super smart and that like he knows that I can do good and he's like, he knows that like I won't mess up as much as he did and everything. Like just him sharing his experiences about all the and like telling me that like he knows I can do good and that like, just seeing how he went from like from looking like he won't get his degree to graduating next year and like having a summer internship at a big company like working every single day, they're now like, it's just like, it's a big encouragement for me because he's in a field that's like really competitive..."
Suzanne	"So it was never me really being alone, I had people there, I had older students, kind of mentors, mentor type friendships that they would tell- if I had a question I would go to them or if I had some kind of if I needed advice on something I would go them."
Yuli	"Um, we sometimes do study groups, uh, which really help out one of, we have this in classes. Like this semester, this past semester we had all the classes together. Um, yeah, so we studied a lot and so they helped me a lot with that."

All of the participants' experiences and perceptions demonstrate elements of making connections with friends, faculty and staff, and involvement in campus organizations. The depth of these relationships and the participants' perceptions of them will be further explored throughout this section.

When discussing fitting in on campus and the interpersonal relationships she has formed at her home institution, Sabina discussed the importance of making connections. As a transfer student, she described her experience at her prior institution:

> I didn't really build any connections there at all. Like I worked for, I did work study there. And um, I made some friends, but no one really, I was pretty much by myself there, like I'm, like a very shy person. So I didn't make connections, like at all, at all. Like so I was just there, like by myself over there.

Sabina explained that at her home institution, she has made one crucial connection with her Student Support Services coach Stacy:

> And then here, the one connection that I made was like from my SSO t-, SSS coach um, Stacy. Like she helped me a lot to 'cause like I told her how shy I was, and told her how I was doing in classes. And like, she told me like, "Okay, this is what you can do to be like, open up a little bit more."[…] So like, talking to Stacy, like every once in a while, like it helped me a lot because like when she gave me feedback like, I knew like she had gone through it too. So like it helped me a lot to know where I was at and stuff. And she like, gave me a lot of resources as to what could help me, like clubs that I could join that would like help me build more relations.

When making connections with academic agents on campus, similar to Sabina, the other participants also indicated that knowing the individual could identify with them in some manner, whether that be as a first-generation student, or understanding their reluctance to ask questions, was a factor in their decisions in who to form relationships with.

In addition to forming relationships with academic agents on campus, others defined their connections on campus as a support network with their peers. Erica explained how her diverse network of friends help her academically and emotionally:

> I also have like biology and chemistry friends, uh which helps because their study habits is different from my study habits, and trying to interpret it and trying to use them, helps me expand my knowledge[…]they just notice like something was up or something was wrong. And they would just come up to me and hug me like, it's okay. It's like, thanks.

Monique also stressed the necessity of having friends who "pushed" her academically:

> I guess my friends like, like them actually like, cause uh, I make friends, like I try to make friends in every class so that like we can study together and just like, like work ourselves up to like an A […] But like it's so funny because like whenever one of us is feeling like that the other one is like no we can do this. Just keep going. We're almost done […]And we just like motivate each other to keep going.

In each instance, having a peer that the participants felt cared about their emotional and academic wellbeing was prominent in their integration into the campus and classroom environment. Both Erica and Monique indicated that their peer support network helped them develop different study skills as well as motivation to continue focusing on being better students even in times where they were frustrated.

In addition to making connections with peers, according to several research participants, getting involved in student organizations is also a way to foster relationships on campus. Suzanne observed,

> And with them (Latinas Unidas Organization), it made it e- it was like you found your s- your spot in a big campus. It didn't feel so much like I was alone anymore and I can walk through a campus and wave to so many people.

Suzanne highlights the further need to forge relationships with peers that have similar cultural backgrounds. Through campus organizations, several participants felt they had developed strong relationships with peers that they not only connect with on a personal level, but also on an academic level. They in-turn have leveraged these relationships to further their academic pursuits.

Not all the participants felt campus organizations helped them connect to their campus, though, as Sabina elaborated,

> I uh, I'm in ATSM right now, Athletic Training Sports Medicine, but it's because the program requires you to be an active member. So yeah. It's j-, it's kind of eh. Like I haven't built relations in, relationships in there either because like I'm shy and everything and usually they're the, like, I don't know it's not a lot of like communicating 1-on-1 together, it's just like you hearing the announcements and stuff.

Although Sabina indicated that this organization does not encourage the formation of connections with others, she acknowledged that joining a more interest-based group may be more helpful. She said, "So like I think I need to be like and join a group that's like more interest base, not just like major based."

Friends

All of the participants talked about how friendships they developed on campus helped them academically. However, one caveat was that having similar experiences with their group was important. Sabina described it well:

> But sometimes it's necessary in order for you to succeed as long as you make more connections in college too, like-minded people, people that are sharing the same experiences as you because it'll help you grow as a person.

When discussing her acceptance to an academic program in the journalism field, Suzanne concurred, stating,

> Like I was telling the dean, I was like I did not do any of this by myself. I had people helping me. So whether they're professors, whether they're other organization leaders or just my friends, I, I do try to surround myself with people I want to be like who are doing things that I like and I'm interested in.

Many of the participants talked about the importance of forming communities with their peers. Some of the participants even discussed feelings of alienation they felt when interacting with peers who did share their academic inclinations. For example, Sabina talked about how she felt finding peers dedicated to being academically successful would help her be more academically successful:

> Like I feel like if I made more peer relations like that I'd be even more, more successful. Like people though that, like are willing to s-, wanting to succeed and not just like wanting to go out and all the time you know. Like actually wanna be in the library and study.

Erica discussed how she has witnessed the difficulties her peers who do not get involved in the campus community face:

> I've heard a lot of conversations and stories from my classmates or just from friends that they said that they just stayed stuck in their room for a whole semester and they didn't go out. They didn't talk to anyone or anything of that sort. So it was like their own little bubble. They would just go to class, come back to the room, go to class, to back to the room, get something to eat, go back to the room. And they didn't really like get to talk or anything like that.

Erica admitted that because she lives in a Living Learning Community dormitory, she felt protected from isolation and included in a community that promotes academics:

> So then we all take that class together, then we form study groups, we sit down next to each other, we all go to the professor and talk together so it's like that, that little community that we travel around together. Which is really good.

Erica found that college without the comradery of friendship is difficult at best. Protecting herself from isolation was a critical component to her success.

Faculty/staff

Almost all of the participants voiced appreciation for a personal connection with faculty or staff. In fact, most of them, when directly discussing their academic success, mentioned faculty or staff. For example, for Yuli, her connection with a faculty member, Dr. Carp, was instrumental in helping her establish her academic path. Although not all participants have forged a direct bond with a faculty member like Yuli, they each still acknowledged that an academic agent, in most instances a faculty, member have impacted their academic journey. Erica summed up others' experiences: "Um, but so far,

most of the professors are really helpful when it comes to just like, just to the students because they care about their students in general."

Similar to developing connections with friends, not all of the participants felt connections with faculty. Sabina described her reticence in reaching out to professors:

> I feel like it's, it's just super intimidating. Like because first of all, like being first-generation student, like these are people with educations and like with like they've gotten like a bachelor's degree or a master's degree. And like you've never, I've never really talked to someone that's, that has those degrees, you know, like yes teachers.

Sabina's reluctance to establish relationships with faculty based on her perceptions that their education level is a barrier to their abilities to understand her struggles, highlights the need for open dialogue between students and faculty.

One thing that Suzanne pointed out, however, is that the onus is on the student. When asked about advice she would give to other students to achieve academic success, she said, "I know everyone always says, talk to your professors but if it wasn't for my professors, I wouldn't have found out about any of these opportunities." Monique explained that she found it easier to connect with professors when she was struggling in their class. She expounded, "I found that it's like eas- it's very easy to like talk to professors and be their friends when you're struggling in the class." However, when she encountered a professor who let her know he understood students' intimidation she felt more comfortable approaching him. An approachable faculty member is an important component not only in academic success when struggling in a class, but in the overall trajectory of the student throughout their academic and into their professional careers.

Support networks and connecting with academic agents were wider than faculty. Sabina and Erica valued their Student Support Services coaches' role in their academic success. Erica elaborated,

> And talking to him [her SSS coach] is like, you know, you need to go all the way and like continue and go talk to the professors, go talk to-go seek help, you-you're tutor here, go get another tutoring help like, and it has, it has helped me.

Although Sabina's academic coach also provided similar supports as Erica's, Sabina also talked about how her coach's support extended beyond academics:

> So like when we have our meetings, it's not just about academic stuff, it's about like how I'm doing emotionally and everything. Like how I'm handling not being home and like have I built more relationships and like how I should like get more out of my comfort zone, what I should do to like push myself a little bit further and like she encourages me like even though I think I can't do more, she's like says like no like you're doing amazing like I think you could do more of that.

In both instances, having access to an individual who provides advice on how to not only achieve academic success, but also demonstrates concern for the participant personally, is instrumental in making them feel a sense of comfort and belonging on their college campus.

Maintaining Academic Priorities

Institutional resources not only contributed to the participants' academic success through direct services, but also provided the opportunity for the participants to develop interpersonal relationships with academic agents who work within these programs. The college offers free tutoring, academic coaching, and personal counseling to all its

students. The participants either indirectly and/or directly acknowledged their value. Table 7 provides an example of how each participant utilized campus resources in "Maintaining Academic Priorities."

Table 7

Maintaining Academic Priorities

	Maintaining Academic Priorities
Erica	"Mmm, there's some events that I attend to and they kind of help me. So there's this one event where it's like, how to-to get A's in the semester, like, doing things to get A's for all your classes, get the 4.0 kinda thing. And it does help because they do relate to that, like first-gen kind of aspect, where it's like, it's going to be harder for us to understand and like take in all these stuff, um, these are some steps to guide you to it."
Monique	"But then I was like, Eh, you know what I can do, I can do me. So like I need these tutors."
Sabina	"And I think also the food pantry because like a lot of students, I know that because me and myself personally I struggle with like knowing when you're going to eat, you know or like spacing out your meals like a certain way and like especially for meal swipes, like always calculated to see if you'll have enough to get through the semester and not have to add more or like seeing how many times a day you can eat without going over your budget or with having enough money leftover or just making it through the semester."
Suzanne	"Tutoring, the writing center. I use that […] it's more one on one and you get a full hour with one tutor. And they look over your paper and they help you."
Yuli	"They (Student Support Services) had ah, free private tutoring, so that helped my freshman year with like math, and reading, and stuff."

Academic supports such as the Campus Learning Center (CLC) offered by the institution as well as the academic agents within these programs were mentioned by all participants. Monique stressed the importance of knowing "your resources." She gave an example of her own habits: "Like I use the tutoring services, I used CLC lab, I used as SI sessions, I used everything […] I try to repeat that so that I can do better for other tests." Suzanne also espoused using CLC and the Writing Center on campus:

> And CLC, I used their resource for my statistic class last semester and got an A. (laughs) I got a 4.0 last semester but, um […] The writing center, I found out about, about the writing center ‘cause my boss told me, why don’t you try to writing center? What one you had to schedule an appointment for but it’s more one on one and you get a full hour with one tutor. And they look over your paper and they help you.

Not all participants felt their home institution did a good job of informing first-generation students about all of the resources offered on campus. Sabina explained her perception that

> there’s a lot of first-generation students that don’t know about it at all, don’t know the resources that, that are available for them […] there’s still a lot of resources I know that are out there that I could use, but like, I don’t know, like they don’t give us that information, like okay you can find it here, you can find it here.

Much of what the participants stated emphasized the need for institutions to review the resource options available to these students and, at a minimum, better and more frequently communicate the availability of these resources to students, especially first-generation students. Many times, this information can be lost in what seems like an avalanche of information to incoming students.

Summary of Chapter

In this chapter, I provided detailed vignettes of each participant. These vignettes not only serve as a presentation of the data, they are centered on the perceptions that each participant held about how interpersonal relationships have shaped and continue to shape their academic journey. In the within-case analysis, three predominant categories (family,

peers, and academic agents) of support and influence emerged in answering the research questions exploring their perceptions. I organized these findings by research questions. All the participants referred to a family member as indirect or direct support and encouragement. Once they arrived on campus, finding an emotional and social support network (e.g., peers, organizations, academic agents) was imperative to their developing and maintaining academic priorities and their integration into the postsecondary culture. Lastly, although overall the participants felt their home institution provided support structures, they also felt their institution could do more to make sure those who are unfamiliar with college are more aware of all the resources offered. All are equally vital to a student's success, and it can be concluded that without one, a student may not achieve academic success. I concluded the chapter with a cross-case analysis where I identified four categories that were common across each participant: importance of funded programs, familial support, connection on campus, and maintaining academic priorities. In the next chapter, I discuss the connections across these categories and connect them back to theory and past research.

V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the perceived influence of interpersonal relationships in the academic experiences of self-identified traditional-age, first-generation college women. Rather than taking an asset-based approach when researching the various support structures that promote student success, research instead takes a deficit-based perspective on college students focusing on the barriers that hinder them; thus, college women and their experiences in higher education are often overlooked as there is an emphasis on their male counterparts because men matriculate and persist at lower rates than women. College matriculation and persistence are two of the most heavily researched topics in higher education; however, most of the research in this area is quantitative and focuses on the deficits of this student population. This study fills a gap in the research, by taking on an assets-based approach by focusing on the experiences and needs of college women. This insight could not only promote a more assets-based approach to understanding the college experience of the targeted population of my study but could, in turn, drive successful initiatives for all students. I relied on data from traditional-age, first-generation college women who matriculated to college and are persisting in order to determine the role of interpersonal relationships in their academic experiences and successes.

The research questions were as follows:

1) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women perceive the roles of interpersonal relationships in their decisions to pursue higher education?

2) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women perceive the roles of interpersonal relationships in their current academic successes at their postsecondary educational institution?
3) How do traditional-age, first-generation, undergraduate college women describe the roles of the postsecondary educational institution they attend in fostering interpersonal relationships that support and encourage student successes?

The purpose of the study was, first, to understand the interlocking components that built the participants' college-going decisions and persistence story. Second, the aim was to compare the differences in interpersonal relationships factors, through the lens of gender: Do college women believe that interpersonal relationships are crucial to their academic experiences and successes?

In this chapter, I summarize the findings and then discuss their implications in light of the relevant literature and the theoretical framework that guided the study. I also explore implications for college campuses and suggestions for future research.

Summary of Findings

Although generalizations cannot and should not be made among the participants, the nuances and distinctions between them as it pertains to being first-generation college women are noteworthy. However, before summarizing my findings, it is also relevant to note that although this study and the research are my own, part of conducting a hermeneutical phenomenology is working together to craft the study. Therefore, the findings within this study are a co-construction of the participants' perceptions as well as my own. The four core findings of this study are as follows:

- Interpersonal relationships with family are a vital component of college-going decisions and academic successes.
- Interpersonal relationships with sources outside of the family, who are able to provide information needed about higher education are central to the college-going and persistence processes.
- Interpersonal relationships on campus with academic agents (e.g., career services, faculty interactions, personal counseling, etc.) are important, but not made explicit by the participants' home institution.
- Interpersonal relationships are instrumental in providing the social and academic support structure needed for successful social integration into higher education.

Through a phenomenological approach, the experiences of each participant were reflected upon in order to examine and cast light upon their individualities and similarities. In an effort to highlight the nuances and differences between the participants and their perceptions of the influence of interpersonal relationships on their academic decisions and successes, their identities as they pertain to culture/race, first-generation, and gender, are discussed in the sections below.

Cultural/Racial Identity

Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that an individual's cultural and racial background shapes their identities, and therefore, should not and cannot be discounted in the higher education setting. Cultural capital frameworks, which includes familial capital, demonstrate that familial and cultural experiences add value through the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired at home and brought into academic settings (Liou et al., 2009; Ozuna, 2017; Yosso, 2005, 2006). It was not my intention to examine

the influence of cultural/racial identity on the participants' formation of interpersonal relationships; therefore, none of my research questions or instrumentation I developed and used represented this influence. However, the participants made multiple identity claims in regard to their cultural/racial identity similar to the identity claims they made about their first-generation status. Most participants acknowledged their own cultural backgrounds in some manner and how it influenced their identity and willingness to form relationships within the college environment. Specifically, Erica, Suzanne, and Yuli referenced the influence of what they referred to as their "Hispanic" (for Erica and Yuli) or "Mexican" (for Suzanne) culture. Erica detailed how her reluctance to seek out support structure stems from the expectation that where she is from, there is an belief that you work hard independently to achieve success, and only seek out help from others as a last resort. For Suzanne, religion was a prominent factor in her culture. Suzanne explained that when she would discuss feelings of stress or frustration with her family, her mother would tell her she would pray for her. Suzanne perceived this as a calming mechanism.

Interestingly, four of the five participants all pointed out the diversity on their college campus. For example, Monique discussed how it was not until she came to college that she had interactions with white people. Moreover, Erica explained how she enjoys getting to learn about others' race and culture and uses this as a way to make friends. Suzanne, on the other hand, stressed the importance of remaining connected to her 'Mexican' identity and sought out campus organizations specifically for Hispanic/Latinx students. Regardless of whether the participants stated or implied an identity conflict based on race or culture, they made identity claims about their racial/cultural identities on their college campus when it came to forging relationships

with both peers and academic agents. The participants' identity claims establish that there is prominent intersectionality among the various capitals (e.g., familial, social, navigational, etc.) that make up Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth construct, and they should be examined collectively.

First-Generation Identity

Although gender was intended to be the focus of my study, through my discussions with the interview participants, it became apparent that their first-generation status was and is an integral part of their academic identities, and influenced how they understood themselves and interacted with others. Each participant discussed their family and recognized some degree of interdependent dynamic with their families. Their connections and interactions with family, whether positive or negative, played a prominent role in the participants' decisions to not only pursue higher education, but also to achieve success while at college. For example, Monique, Sabina, and Suzanne stated that they perceived there to be some degree of expectation from family members to attend college and be successful. Of note, in addition to receiving encouragement from some family members, Monique also indicated that not all family members were supportive of her academic journey. However, the manner in which the participants regarded their first-generation status with family was different from how they remarked upon it with respect to their interactions with peers on their college campus.

When discussing interactions with peers and academic agents on campus as well as their knowledge and use of institutional resources, the participants seemed to view their first-generation status as a hindrance. Depending on who they were interacting with, the participants either perceived themselves to be disadvantaged or equal. For example,

each participant talked about feeling that their continuing-generation peers did not fully understand the hardships the participants were facing because of their first-generation status. In particular, Yuli detailed how although her peers and her often studied together, she felt her peers did not fully 'get it' when it came to the various pressures and responsibilities Yuli had as a first-generation student.

In an effort to merge the influence relationships at their home institution had on their first-generation identity, each participant developed her own coping mechanism. For instance, all participants mentioned becoming involved in a campus organization in order to meet individuals whom they felt they could connect with on an academic and emotional level as a first-generation student. Despite their need to connect with other first-generation peers, most participants did acknowledge that they did had some relationships with continuing-generation students. Conversely, Sabina admitted that she was very reluctant to form relationships with individuals, including faculty and staff on campus, whom she does not explicitly know are first-generation. The participants' status as first-generation was a salient component of their identity and willingness to connect with others on campus. Ultimately, their understanding of their first-generation status heavily influenced their identity and interactions with others.

Gender Identity

When discussing their lived experiences and perceptions of interpersonal relationships, the participants all made an identity claim about some aspect of their identity, especially about characteristics that were more salient to them, such as their first-generation status. Although all participants referenced another woman (e.g., mom, grandma, faculty member) as a primary support structure, intriguingly, gender identity,

was not addressed or discussed by the participants unless pressed. This was interesting as I had made the assumption that gender would be a prominent factor in shaping their interactions with others and the development of themselves in higher education. In truth, Erica was the only participant to directly address her gender identity at her college. Being a woman in the STEM field, influenced Erica's perception and conception of gender primarily because most of her classroom peers were men. Erica talked about how it was important to her to not be the only woman in the classroom. Contrarily, Monique, who is also pursuing a STEM degree did not reference her gender identity until I pointed it out, even then she did not make an identity claim about gender or its impact on her inclination to form relationships.

Intersectionality of Identities

My perception is that because the participants did not view themselves as having just one identity, they were not as focused on their gender identity. Instead, the participants' identity claims were based more on the intersection of their gender, culture/race, and first-generation identities. They viewed themselves as women, Hispanic/Mexican, and first-generation college students. Perhaps, because four of the five participants did not perceive to have faced any stereotyping or difficulties based on their gender, they were less attuned to its influence on their development of interpersonal relationships.

The formation of identity is a complex function in an individual's life, and within this, gender, culture/race, and academic status hold an essential purpose and encompass a learned identity that is shaped, negotiated, and managed as we interact with others and our environment (Erikson, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Tinto, 1975,1987, 1993; Wood,

2004; Yosso, 2005, 2006). Each participant viewed interpersonal relationships and their influence on cultivating their academic success differently. Although some participants had similar social interactions and experiences, how these interactions influenced their identities and impacted their identity claims of who they were within group memberships was different. The participants reflected on different aspects of their identities and associated positive and negative meaning based on their experiences demonstrating that relationships were influential in certain aspects of their identity development.

Discussion

This study took a different approach than most studies focusing on going to college and academic decisions. Most examine these decisions from a deficit perspective of why men are not enrolling nor persisting in college at the same rate as women (Buchmann, 2009; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Ross et al., 2012; Yakaboski, 2011). From those studies, researchers have concluded that women are more successful than men in college because they are more likely to socially and academically integrate into the campus community (Conger & Long, 2010; Jacob, 2002; Jones, 2010; Leppel, 2002; Sax, 2008b). These findings have led some college administrators and admissions officers to consider the need for preferential admissions practices and retention programs and organizations for men (Ewert, 2012; Gose, 1999; Kingsbury, 2007; Whitmire, 2006). The motivation for my study was understanding how interpersonal relationships influence the college-going decisions and academic successes of self-identified, traditional-age college women, and how these women felt their current institution met their need for these relationships once they arrived on campus. To fully investigate this matter, it was imperative to unveil the persistence factors that supported the students in their college

journey. Regardless of any differences personally between the participants, they all recognized the importance of interpersonal relationships in their academic decisions and successes. What was most clear in this study was their college attendance and persistence were the result of an interweaving of various relationships with individuals and programs that assisted them with navigating the college-going process.

In the following section, I will discuss how my findings apply to my research questions, as well as the potential impact to both secondary and higher education.

Research Question One: Pursuing Higher Education

For the participants in this study, interpersonal relationships greatly affected their pursuit of higher education. The academic and emotional bonds developed with their familial network came in many forms, including cultural beliefs, and their family's willingness to be involved in the participants' academic journeys. These findings are all consistent with the literature (Engle et al., 2006; Ishitani, 2006; Kelly et al., 2012; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What was interesting, is that for some of the participants, their parental figures openly understood the hindrance their lack of education level placed on the participant, and instead of relying on the participant to forge their own pathway to college, they helped the participant make connections with others who could fill this void in their academic trajectory.

Parental encouragement and their involvement in the participants' college-going decisions came up in all conversations. In most instances, it was one parent who encouraged or expected the participant to go to college and obtain a college degree. This expectation was communicated to the participants with direct comments; the family expected their student to obtain the education they did not. Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993)

ascertained that family involvement is a key component of emotional support and that these components play a prominent role in student retention. However, although studies such as Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted the importance of familial support, the parents' influence is downplayed within the findings, which is contrary to what I found in my study. The participants in this study maintained that although their parents were not able to help with assignments, their emotional support was still very much needed and relied upon.

Where prior research (ASHE, 2008) indicated that students typically no longer rely on their parents for support once they enter college, studies such as Kelly et al., (2012) discounted this argument by maintaining that the encouragement of the familial support networks remain important to students even after they arrive on their college campus. Responses from my participants support literature that links college attendance and familial encouragement. For example, Sabina continually praised her mother for supporting her in her academic trajectory and maintained her reason for pursing higher education and primary reason for persistence was to make her family, especially her mother, proud of her. These sentiments were further corroborated by Suzanne, who discussed how much it meant to her that her parents expressed how proud they were of her even in situations where they did not fully understand her academic journey. The participants in my study praised their families' involvement in their academic journey, and in most instances were appreciative of their families' continued support even after they left for college.

According to McCarron and Inkelas (2006) first-generation students who lack a familial support system, or have family unwilling to invest in their education, not only

experience a culture shock when they arrive on campus, but are also less invested in their own education, which, includes an openness to forging relationships with academic agents. These findings are consistent with the findings of my study. In the case of Yuli, when discussing her academics during high school and her parents' involvement, she explained how she went through a difficult time that resulted in truancy and failing grades, and how her mother failed to notice. This inattention resulted in Yuli being less invested in her own education. It was not until several of her high school teachers showed concern for Yuli's emotional and academic well-being and began to have conversations with her about her future that she began to put forth effort into pursing college. The support of these academic agents and knowing that they truly cared about her future played a pivotal role in her decision to go to college rather than moving to another country to be with her father and brother. Although not all participants mentioned the support of others, such as a high school academic agent, as having impacted their college-going decisions, the participants who did mention these individuals indicated that it is not that the academic agents did not have a primary influence on them, but that the academic agents echoed their families' support of the need to obtain a college education.

Regardless of the emotional support and encouragement offered by familial networks, the process of navigating the academic and financial process of attending college can be daunting for all college students, but much more so for first-generation students (O'Connor, 2002). In particular, the financial aspects of college are a hindrance (Horn & Berger, 2004). All of the participants in my study specifically discussed the difficulties they faced with applying for financial assistance as they transitioned from high school to college. For instance, Yuli and Suzanne both detailed how their parents

struggled with navigating the financial side of college, and how advisors in federally funded programs, such as TRiO and GEAR UP, were able to assist. Similarly, Monique and Sabina heavily relied on advisors in these programs to help them with the college application and FAFSA programs. And, in almost all instances, although their families were unfamiliar with how to handle the financial process, their families were willing to attend financial outreach courses in which an advisor familiar with the process could help them overcome this barrier. This finding is important because although having positive support from family may alleviate some of the adversities experienced with attending college, first-generation students are faced with yet another disadvantage as they navigate the various forms and policies of colleges and federal student aid programs.

One area where my findings did differ from the literature was the importance of familial education level. Much literature (Comer, 1995; Cooper et al., 2000; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Inman & Mayes, 1999; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Nunez, 1998; O'Connor, 2002; Reynolds & Gill, 1994; Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Thayer, 2000; Thomas, 2002) discusses the difficulties first-generation students face as they prepare for postsecondary education because their family does not have the experiential knowledge to pass on to their child as they begin the transition. In the case of several of the participants in this study, their parental figures understood they were no longer able to help the participant, and sought out guidance from other sources (e.g., academic agents) who could assist. For instance, Erica detailed how both of her parents did not complete either primary or middle school. Although they were not able to assist Erica academically, her parents did seek out programs, such as summer camps, where Erica could still have these experiences and gain the college knowledge and skills necessary to

be academically successful. Similarly, Suzanne mentioned how her mother sought out teachers when Suzanne was in elementary school and did not get picked as an honors student. Suzanne described how in an effort to help her excel and garner the skills and knowledge for academic success, her mother encouraged her to attend a smaller, early college school where she could get more one-on-one attention.

This finding is both consistent and inconsistent with the literature as although literature does stress the importance of parental education level, it also highlights the importance of familial involvement in the education process. In the situation of both Erica and Suzanne, their parents knew they did not have the level of education needed to help them academically excel; therefore, they sought out assistance through educators to find programs and resources that could assist them.

For these participants familial encouragement and involvement was a key reason for attending and remaining in college. Furthermore, in instances where their familial network could not help them, making connections with individuals in programs such as TRiO was even more significant to their academic journeys. As my study shows the notion that the families of first-generation college students are a liability to them academically is a discredited notion, as the participants reported that their decision to go to college and the desire to be academically successful was due to familial inspiration.

Research Question Two: Attending Higher Education

For first-generation students, social isolation is a concern. For this particular cohort, research shows that ensuring they have peer-to-peer contact is important for social integration (Reid & Moore III, 2008). According to Tinto (1975),

> social integration, like academic integration, involves notions of both levels of integration and degrees of congruency between the individual and his social environment. In this instance, social integration occurs primarily through informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college. (107)

Students who integrate both socially and academically are more apt to become academically successful (Tinto, 2012; Yazedijian et al., 2008). Consistent with the literature (Bergerson, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Schultz, 2004), the participants in this study all mentioned feelings of stress and isolation when they first arrived on their current campus. For instance, when Monique first arrived on campus, she described feeling isolated, sentiments that Suzanne echoed. This finding is noteworthy because research shows that for college women in particular, friendships are learning relationships, and peers are more likely to influence their academic identities and choices (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Hackett, 1985; Martínez Alemán, 1997; Shashaani, 1997; Syed et al., 2011).

The positive impact of interacting with peers and academic agents on campus and their influence on the academic successes of the participants came up in all conversations. All participants shared a similar story of how forming relationships with peers and academic agents definitely improved their academic lives (e.g., forming study groups, sharing study strategies, help seeking, etc.). Sabina, for example, described how peer support made studying enjoyable, she said, “So, she (a peer/friend) helped a little bit more wanting to go to like, not being so lonely at the libraries and stuff and like actually enjoying my time at the library and studying.” Erica too found studying with peers to

make the process more enjoyable. This finding aligns with scholarship (Bui, 2002; Dennis et al.,2005; Friedlander et al., 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010), that as students, particularly first-generation college women, transition to college, peer support becomes a primary predictor of college grades and adjustment; more so than familial support. For the participants in this study, peers played a prominent role in their developing and maintaining academic priorities.

In addition to support from peer interactions, the participants also indicated that interactions with academic agents on campus also contributed to their emotional and academic well-being. This is relevant as developing bonds with faculty and staff as well as involvement in study centers such as CLC all play an important role in the success of first-generation students (Nunez, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005). From the participants responses in this study, it is clear that interactions with academic agents affected their academic and social integration. For instance, in the case of Suzanne, she discussed mimicking the behaviors of a professor she viewed as a mentor in an effort to make additional connections at a conference she attended. Additionally, Yuli talked in length about how her mentor, Dr. Carp, has supported her emotionally on a personal and student level. Her relationship with her mentor was instrumental in not only helping her navigate the hidden curriculum of higher education, but also with forging her academic and career path.

Not all participants were comfortable reaching out to faculty. In the case of Sabina, she felt that due to their education level, faculty would not fully understand her plight as a first-generation college student. Sabina's assumption about faculty is not unusual for a first-generation student. According to Terenzini et al., (1996) first-

generation students often feel faculty are less “concerned with student development and teaching” (p. 17). It is worthy of note, that although Sabina did not feel comfortable forging relationships with faculty members, she did develop a close relationship with her academic coach. Despite her reluctance to forge relationships on campus, Sabina acknowledged that making new relationships are important for emotional and academic support. This was a sentiment echoed by all participants. This contrasts research that indicates that first-generation students do not understand the academic benefits of expanding their social networks (Gatto, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Schultz, 2004). This is worthy of note, because it shows that even when the participants understood the value in reaching out to faculty specifically, they were still reluctant to do so.

All of the participants believed that interpersonal relationships with others, whether it be peers, academic agents, or involvement in support programs, were critical to helping them navigate their way on campus as well as contributing to their academic successes and decisions. Research is replete with findings that stress the importance of social and academic integration in ensuring student success (Reason, 2009; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Tinto, 2012). In line with this research, the participants overall indicated that they felt that they had a support network in place that helped them personally and academically and credited these relationships as “resources” for academic assistance.

Research Question Three: Institutional Resources

The ability to successfully transition, integrate, and adjust to the college environment has been identified as a significant factor of academic persistence (Tinto, 1987). Academic success is highly dependent on becoming integrated into the college environment (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). A supportive environment, which

includes counseling services, campus activities such as clubs and organizations, as well as a myriad of other programs and offices, in which a student feels as though they belong is crucial to the development of an academic identity as these resources not only provide support to students, but also afford them the opportunity to form interpersonal relationships with the academic agents who work within these areas (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000; Wegner, 1998). The findings in my study are consistent with the importance literature places on providing a positive environment in which students have readily accessible resources and individuals available to them for assistance. Findings showed that once the participants arrived on campus, integration and academic priorities began to work in tandem with the need to forge interpersonal relationships. The participants all indicated they valued the on-campus support systems, which not only consisted of peers, faculty, and staff, but also resources such as the institutional learning and tutoring center, TRiO, and on-campus organizations they had become involved with.

According to the participants, having a support system in place while they were on campus played a key role in their academic successes. What makes this unique is previous studies (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005) found that first-generation students did not have the same awareness of the importance of utilizing on campus resources or how to become engaged with campus activities. However, for Monique, not only was she aware of the importance of using campus resources effectively, it was an absolute necessity. She specifically referenced the relationships she had made with tutors, coaches, and counselors as a result of using resources. For Suzanne, although she too used resources such as the institutional learning and tutoring center, and The Writing Center, being involved in campus organizations and having faculty interactions helped

her feel like she belonged and promoted campus involvement. Similarly, Yuli is also active in an organization designed for first-generation students, and praised the faculty and staff support her organization receives. Although the findings may have been different if the participants were part-time students or had never lived on-campus, all participants spoke of the need of utilizing programs and the individuals who work within the programs, including campus organizations, offered by their institution for support and guidance. Unlike past research, these findings revealed a nuanced understanding of support which means that first-generation students do understand that academic success is dependent upon taking full advantage of the resources, which includes connecting with academic agents, that are made available to them.

One aspect that almost all participants mentioned was that their home institution needed to do more to educate students, especially first-generation students, on the programs and support systems offered and in place. Sabina and Monique both explained how they at first were not aware of Student Support Services, which they both credited an academic coach within this program with assisting them in their academic endeavors. Sabina specifically discussed that the careers office was also a resource she wishes had been further explained to her. Despite feeling that the institution could do better about explaining other resources available on campus, when talking about the resources they were using, the participants were satisfied with the support programs, clubs, and organizations offered on their campus. This is important because academic success is often built upon student satisfaction; therefore, finding a support structure in which students can connect with an academic agent promotes academic success.

Implications and Recommendations

By employing a phenomenological approach to examine the perceptions of first-generation college women, the present study exposes the complexity in their need for interpersonal relationships. One of the most critical findings of the study is that the emotional, social, and academic support needs of first-generation women are diverse. To address their diverse needs for supportive interpersonal relationships, I am proposing several implications and recommendations for practice and research in the areas of academia that are most crucial as they transition into higher education. These areas include the educators and administrators within secondary education, higher education, and developmental education. Although the women I collaborated with had similar sentiments in the ways they related to their first-generation peers in terms of how interpersonal relationships have influenced their academic journeys thus far, not every participant had the exact same perception and experience about how these relationships guided their journey. Based on the findings of my study, it is my overarching recommendation that educators and administrators should stop neglecting the needs of first-generation college women by making assumptions of what they perceive to be a homogeneous group, and instead, directly ask this student population what types of support would be most beneficial to them as they progress in their academic careers, not only as students but as holistic individuals.

Implications for Secondary Education

The findings of this study have implications for secondary education, and more specifically, for federally funded programs aimed at college readiness. The findings of this study show that as first-generation college women are transitioning to higher

education, it takes a collection of individuals and support programs to ensure they have the college knowledge and support structures they need in order to make informed decisions. Support for college matriculation is multi-faceted. Affective and informative support are both important in making these decisions. The participants in my study all indicated that familial support was a primary factor in their decisions to pursue and excel in higher education. However, when it came time to navigate the admissions and financial processes associated with attending college, their families were unable to provide contributory support. According to the participants, the assistance of staff members in programs such as GEAR UP and TRiO as well as academic agents within secondary education institutions were instrumental in helping the participants navigate the college-going process.

Having access to federal and state funded programs that provided opportunities to tour college campuses as well as coordinating FAFSA nights was most helpful to the participants. Academic agents within these programs were able to assist the participants with being proactive with college admission, especially, when it came to completing admissions applications, enrolling in student orientation, selecting housing options, and ensuring the student sought out opportunities for grants and scholarships. The academic agents were particularly valuable when both the participant and their family did not understand what the next step in the college enrollment process was.

Recommendations for Secondary Education

Based on the finding in this study that the support offered by funded programs impacts college-going decisions, one recommendation for secondary education contexts is to ensure they are providing opportunities for academic agents within these programs

to enter into their academic communities. In order to ensure that first-generation students are able to continue to successfully navigate college matriculation, it is important that secondary education institutions continue to seek funding and programs that can provide the additional support both students and their families may need. For women, in particular the participants in my study, it was important to them to feel a connection with an academic agent before they fully felt comfortable seeking guidance and were to take advice in navigating higher education. Therefore, in addition to having access to these programs, it would also behoove high schools to be mindful that first-generation students and their families may not know exactly what questions to ask or next steps to take. For this purpose, it is crucial that these institutions are employing faculty and/or staff members who intentionally target this student population, and thoroughly guide them through the college-going process.

Implications for Higher Education

As a whole, first-generation students create a unique challenge to institutions of higher education. The findings from this study show that connecting with academic agents on campus are crucial to both the social and academic integration of college students. The participants universally indicated that they found support through their interactions with faculty and/or staff. Comparable to research in higher education that found that first-generation students' success was connected to their interactions with faculty and staff, the participants in my study had a particular faculty or staff member they viewed as a mentor (Gibson & Slate, 2010). The participants reported that their mentor provided encouragement and highlighted their accomplishments, which made them feel like a valued member of the collegiate community.

This finding in particular is a critical implication for institutions of higher education. The participants indicated that their relationships with academic agents strengthened their commitment to their home institution, which in turn also promoted their academic success. Having access to a faculty and/or staff member they felt emotionally connected to helped the participants successfully transition to college and cope with the personal and academic struggles they encountered during their transition. However, some participants felt intimidated to approach faculty. This can be problematic as research shows that faculty-student interactions result in developmental gains for first-generation students (Filkins & Doyle, 2002; Giancola et al., 2008; Orbe, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 2005). This poses the question of how to reduce this experience of intimidation and increase interaction with faculty (Gatto, 2009).

Recommendations for Higher Education

For the women in this study, it was important that their informal mentor was also first-generation or that they could connect with them on an emotional level. The study participants acknowledged they felt a stronger connection to academic agents when they shared a common background or when the agent showed some form of interest such as remembering their name or finding time to help them with the hidden curriculum. Many institutions of higher education have developed formal mentoring programs for targeted populations such as minority males; however, they fail to offer comparable programs to women, even when they are members of an at risk population such as those defined as first-generation. Therefore, based on the findings in this study, and higher education literature, one recommendation for members of higher education is to develop mentoring programs with strong faculty involvement geared toward all first-generation students, not

just populations who matriculate and are retained at low rates. In addition to mentoring programs, it would be beneficial for faculty to detail their own personal and academic backgrounds to their students when able. This allows students to view faculty as more than a degree, but as a person that may have similar experiences to them. Furthermore, when recruiting agents to serve as mentors, it is important that administration solicit individuals from all races, cultures, genders, and educational backgrounds.

Implications for Developmental Education

The findings of this study show that for the participants, having support in place that focuses on their holistic needs is vital to not only their emotional wellbeing, but also their academic success. One of the primary purposes of developmental education is to assist students with a seamless transition into higher education. In order for this to take place, students need support structures beyond just the classroom available to them. Proper support structures not only address students' academic needs, but should also address the development of their academic identities as well as foster mature interpersonal relationships (Higbee, 1995). All participants in my study highlighted how they utilized programs such as CLC and Student Support Services to assist them with their academic endeavors. However, in addition to receiving tutoring support, while utilizing these programs, specifically Student Support Services, the participants were also able to develop emotional relationships with peers and academic agents. The participants in turn utilized these connections to form study groups and develop diverse study strategies they used in the classroom. Many of the participants stated they at some point tried the study and note taking techniques their study partners found effective, if they noticed those methods produced positive academic results.

Recommendations for Developmental Education

Literature within the Developmental Education field is sparse when it comes to addressing the role of practitioners and educators in supporting the social integration and academic acculturation of the student body. Based on the findings of my study, scholars in the Developmental Education field need to be mindful of their role in assisting students with successfully integrating into the campus community not just the classroom. The participants indicated that when they first arrived on campus, they felt very overwhelmed, and finding a space or group where they belonged as well as resources available to them was crucial to them becoming academically successful. By ensuring that programs that address the emotional needs of students in addition to their academic needs are central to student success.

One manner in which developmental education can assist with students' needs for interpersonal relationships is through academic coaching. All participants referenced interactions with an academic coach within Student Support Services; this may be in part due to the recruitment measures I employed through TRiO. Academic coaches should ensure they are having open conversations with students about both their academics, and their emotional state. One of the purposes of academic coaches is to focus on the students' needs holistically. For students to be comfortable in approaching academic agents on campus, coaches need to be having two-way personal conversations with students. For the participants in my study, having access to academic agents who they knew were also first-generation were important.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are few qualitative studies about the experiences and perceptions of women and their needs when entering into and persisting within higher education. Most research on the gender gap in higher education focuses on men. With the perceptions and needs of college-going women being different than their male counterparts, it seems research that focuses on the academic and emotional needs of women as they matriculate to and attend higher education would be beneficial.

In addition to the need for more research on college women as a whole, it is important that scholarship recognize that not all women are the same. Institutions of higher education are made up of a diverse group of women coming from different demographics such as age, ethnicity, and family status. The findings in this study reveal that forms of capital can be an asset in shaping students' academic identities as well as play a prominent role in the way students navigate their transition to college. In particular, students' cultural wealth can contribute to their ability to form relationships that assist in their academic success and may help them overcome barriers and succeed despite marginalization (Ozuna, 2017). With these different populations comes the need for research that addresses the unique experiences that result from such differences (Dupre, 2011). Therefore, it is recommended to develop literature that uses diverse theories to demonstrate how concepts of culture/race, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect.

Furthermore, although it was beyond the scope of this study, it would be interesting to compare the responses of the participants within this study to those of their non-traditional counterparts. How do first-generation, non-traditional college women

perceive interpersonal relationships to have influenced their decisions to return to college? How do the academic and social experience vary between first-generation, non-traditional aged college women and first-generation, traditional-aged college women, and does one group achieve higher academic success than the other?

The academic and social experiences of first-generation students is also different than their continuing-generation peers. This study revealed that as first-generation students begin the transition process into higher education, they rely heavily on relationships with others besides their parents to assist with that process. Based on the findings of this study, one area that warrants more research is providing training and assistance on how the parents of first-generation students can improve their levels of support in the enrollment and financial aid process. Additionally, it would be interesting to also research the perceptions of the families of first-generation college women and understand their perceptions, because for the participants in my study, family was a strong factor in their college-going experiences.

According to the participants, once they arrived on campus, interactions with peers and academic agents played a prominent role in filling their academic and emotional needs. Specifically, the participants recognized the vital role of academic agents in their successes. However, participants admitted they were reluctant to initially seek out relationships with academic agents, primarily faculty, due to their lack of college knowledge. This speaks to the need for faculty to understand the different aspects of students' identities and how these influence campus engagement and academic successes. With research showing the importance of relationships with faculty and staff in student

success, it is important to research how those within higher education, specifically faculty members, can promote the development of and strengthen these relationships.

Conclusion

This study was designed to examine how traditional-age, first-generation college women perceive interpersonal relationships to have influenced their academic choices and successes. The findings revealed the important dynamics between having interactions with others and the role they play in the complex phenomenon of going to college. Although past research mentions the positive influence of interpersonal relationships on college matriculation and persistence, most educational research focuses on the causes of student failure.

According to the participants, developing connections with others while on campus was a vital component of their academic and social integration. Although the relationship between the participants and their families was prominent in helping the participant forge their path when it came to going to college, when they arrived on campus, they turned to friends, peers, or college faculty and staff when they needed guidance. College attendance is a transformative process; these participants not only learned what they were being taught in class, but they also learned how to cope and succeed from the support systems they created within their campus community. The support systems they created provided them the opportunity to develop the social and academic skills needed in order to achieve academic success.

As is shown in the prior research in education, psychology, and sociology that is cited throughout the previous chapters, we know that academia does not always support students in the same manner. This study has better informed us how traditional-age, first-

generation college women view the influence of interpersonal relationships on their college-going decisions and academic successes. Though future research is needed regarding the increasingly diverse student population, this study provides insight into how women perceive their needs for emotional and academic support. By being given the opportunity to tell their stories to address this phenomenon, the participants in this study helped to begin filling the void of women's voices in educational research and to inform the university of ways to support their academic development.

In closing, as I began to explore the lived experiences of first-generation college women, I came to the conclusion that the participants, like myself, and perhaps like other first-generation college women for that matter want two things: to be heard and to be provided the support we need in order to succeed. Institutions of higher education maintain that they appreciate and support diversity on their campuses; however, many students do not truly feel as though they are valued by administrators and faculty and are not understood by their peers. College is a place where students develop holistically. Therefore, it is important that all student populations receive the support they feel they need in order to be successful. This includes student populations that academic literature and graduation rates insinuate do not need the same level of support as those populations who may not persist at the same rates. The women in this study entered their university as uncertain students who had to rely on themselves to find and form interpersonal relationships, which they perceive help them excel academically. The efforts they put into forging these relationships is a responsibility that colleges should share with their students.

APPENDIX SECTION

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent

Study Title: Traditional age, first-generation college women: The influence of interpersonal relationships on their academic experiences

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Hewett
Email: eh25@txstate.edu
Phone: 512-245-8482

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about how traditional aged, first-generation college women view relationships with other individuals (family members, friends, educators, etc.) have influenced their academic choices. The information gathered will be used to explore how traditional aged, first-generation college women perceive interpersonal relationships to have influenced their academic success. You are being asked to participate because you have identified as a traditional aged, first-generation college woman.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in the following:

> Up to three 90-minute interviews. Interviews will take place over a six-week period between the end of March and throughout April 2019. In an effort to be considerate or your time, I will attempt to collect all interview data in one 60-90 minute interview; however, the interview process could take up to three 60-90 minute sessions. All additional interviews beyond the first interview session will be a mutual agreement between you and me.

We will set up a time for you to meet one of the investigators at a public location (e.g., coffee shop, restaurant, etc.) of your choice; however, the location must be central to the university campus. You will then participate in the interview for a total of no more than 90 minutes.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in up to three brief interviews over a six-week period between the end of March and throughout April 2019.

Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes. During the interviews, you will be asked to describe (a) how you view the role of relationships with other individuals (family members, friends, educators, etc.) influenced your decision to pursue higher education, (b) how you view the role of relationships with other individuals (family members, friends, educators, etc.) influenced your current academic success at your postsecondary educational institution, and (c) how you would describe the role of the university you attend in fostering relationships with other individuals (family members, friends, educators, staff etc.). The interview will be audio-recorded, and the researcher may take notes as well.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

Although there are no foreseeable risks or discomforts in this study, you may choose to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, including your involvement with TRiO and/or other Student Support Services programs. In the event that some of the survey or interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel discomfort after participating and you are a Texas State University student, you may contact the University Health Services for counseling services at list 545-245-2208. They are located at 5-4.1 LBJ Student Center, 601 University Dr. San Marcos, TX 78666.

BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may assist higher education personnel with better understanding the needs of support structures related to the interpersonal relationship of traditional aged, first-generation college women.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team, and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION

If you actively participate in and complete all requested interviews (no more than three) you will receive a $25 gift card to the university bookstore for your time and participation. Compensation will <u>not</u> be provided if you do not actively engage in and complete all requested interviews, which will not exceed three interviews.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Elizabeth Hewett: 512-245-8482 or eh25@txstate.edu.

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on [date]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

Your participation in this research project may be recorded using audio recording devices. Recordings will assist with accurately documenting your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording:

Yes _____ No _____

Printed Name of Study Participant	**Signature** of Study Participant	Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

APPENDIX B

Email Recruitment Notification

To: [Use this line for individual addresses or your own address if BCC line is used]
From: [Principal Investigator]
BCC: [Use this line when sending the same email message to multiple addresses]
Subject: Research Participation Invitation: [Research project title, topic or key words]

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved or declared exempt by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

I am a doctoral student working on a dissertation about the experiences of traditional aged, first-generation college women. You have been selected for participation in this research study because you are currently enrolled as a student at Texas State University. The study is intended to better understand how traditional aged (between the age of 18-22) first-generation college women perceive relationships with others (e.g., family members, friends, educators, etc.) to have influenced their academic success. If you are not a traditional aged (between the age of 18-22) first-generation college woman, please disregard this email.

The purpose of this research study is to better understand (a) how do traditional aged, first-generation, undergraduate college women view the role of relationships with other individuals (family members, friends, educators, etc.) in their decision to pursue higher education, (b) how do traditional aged, first-generation, undergraduate college women view the role of relationships with other individuals (family members, friends, educators, etc.) in their current academic success at their postsecondary educational institution, and (c) how do traditional aged, first-generation, undergraduate college women describe the role of the university they attend in fostering relationships with other individuals (family members, friends, educators, staff etc.) that support and encourage student success, which is why this study is focused solely on traditional aged (between the age of 18-22), first-generation college women. At the start of the survey, for validation purposes, you will be asked if you are a traditional aged (between the age of 18-22), first-generation college student, who identifies their gender as feminine; if you are not, you will be directed to the end of the survey.

Those selected for the interview portion of the study will be asked to partake in up to three 90-minute interviews. Interviews will take place over a six-week period between the end of March and throughout April 2019.

Benefits and Risks of Participation There are no direct benefits for the study's participants; however, this study will provide university faculty and administration with an opportunity to reflect on the needs for interpersonal relationships amongst traditional aged, first-generation college women, and may allow for the development of institutional programs and resources to assist with meeting the needs of this student population.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. Although there are no foreseeable risks or discomforts in this study, participants may choose to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, including your involvement with TRiO and/or other Student Support Services programs. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. By clicking the survey link, you are consenting to participate in this study.

Confidentiality Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Incentive S**urvey participants, who meet the research criteria, and provide their contact information indicating interest in the interview (question 20 of survey), will be put into a drawing for the chance to win a $25 Amazon gift card. Survey participants do not have to agree to the interview portion of the study in order to be eligible to win the $25 Amazon gift card. Individuals who have already completed the survey will be eligible for the $25 Amazon gift card drawing.**

Interview participants who qualify for and actively participate in and complete all requested interviews (no more than three) will receive a $25 gift card to the university bookstore for their time and participation.

If you would like access to the findings of this study, you may contact the Primary Investigator (Elizabeth Hewett) at (512) 245-8482 or eh25@txstate.edu. To ask questions about this research please contact me, Elizabeth Hewett, at (512) 245-8482 or eh25@txstate.edu.

Follow this link to the Survey:
https://txstate.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eroYA6V1VeVVsTX
This project 6359 was approved by the Texas State IRB on March 26, 2019. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

APPENDIX C

Participant Screening Survey

What is your gender/sex?

For this study, first-generation refers to a college student whose parents or legal guardians do not have post-secondary experience. Are you a first-generation college student?

Yes
No
To be classified as a full-time student, you must be enrolled in a minimum of 12 hours during the semester. Are you enrolled as a full-time student in the university?
Yes
No
Are you an undergraduate student?
Yes
No
Not counting the hours in progress, how many hours have you attempted?

Not counting the hours in progress, how many hours have you completed?

A traditional-aged college student is a student who is between the ages of 18-22 and goes directly from high school into college. Are you a traditional-aged or non-traditional-aged student to this university?

Traditional-aged Student
Non-Traditional-aged Student
What is your race/ethnicity?

If you meet the necessary criteria for the research student, the researcher would like to contact you. Please provide your campus email or other most frequently used email address.

Interpersonal relationships are connections between two or more people. The context can vary from family, friendships, relationships with peers, school faculty or staff, neighbors, or others in your life.

Who, if anyone, would you say has influenced your decision to pursue higher education?

If someone did influence your decision to pursue higher education, in what ways did they influence you?

What is their gender/sex?

Now that you are in college, is there someone at your university who socially and/or emotionally supports your academic efforts and successes (e.g., faculty member, staff member, counselor, peer, mentor etc.)? If so, tell me about this individual?

How did this relationship begin? How did you meet?

Tell me about the types of support they provide you?

In what ways did they provide this support?

What is their gender/sex?

What emotional and/or social supports do you wish were provided by individuals at your campus?

Describe any relationships you may have formed at this university?

What roles, if any, has the university played in the formation of these relationships?

How, if at all, has the university supported opportunities to develop social and/or emotional relationships that positively impact your academic progress?

APPENDIX D

Individual Interview Protocol (60 minutes)

A. Introductory Narrative:

I'm going to ask you questions about how you, as a traditional-aged, first-generation college woman, perceive and understand the role of interpersonal relationships in your academic choices and successes. I have some broad questions for you, but feel free to talk about anything pertaining to your academic life. I may also share my experiences during the interview. Please feel free to ask questions if you would like me to clarify anything during our interview.

B. Interview Overview: The interview should take 60-90 minutes, depending on the length of your responses.

C. Informed Consent: You may pause or stop the interview at any time. You may opt not to answer any questions and still remain in the study. You may also choose to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, including your involvement with TRiO and/or other Student Support Services programs. A pseudonym will be used for your data, and, with your consent, general demographic information is in my write-up. Do I have your consent to include this information?

D. Other Consent: Are you comfortable with me recording this interview?

Topic Domains:

Topic Domain I: Background

INTERVIEWER SCRIPT: The first topic that we will discuss today is about you and where you come from; your history.

Lead-off question: Tell me a bit about yourself.

[Covert Categories: How does this student view academics and academic pathways and supports?]

Possible Follow Up Questions:

1. Tell me a bit about the people you grew up with.

    a. Was there anyone you admired? Why?

2. Describe yourself as a student.

    a. Tell me about your journey here.

Topic Domain II: Interpersonal Relationships and Academics

INTERVIEWER SCRIPT: Thanks for your responses thus far. Now we are going to change directions slightly to talk about relationships or interactions that may have influenced you academically.

Lead-off question: What influences you in academics?

[Covert Categories: people or conversations that contributed to college-going and academic decisions]

Possible Follow Up Questions:

1. Tell me about discussions you have had, either past or present, in regard to education or academics.

    a. What stood out to you about the experience?

    b. How did/do these types of conversations affect you, if at all?

        i. Make you feel?

ii. Act?

2. Tell me what your thoughts are on how the university can support first-generation students.

    a. Tell me about how you went about making relationships on campus.

    b. How have faculty and/or staff supported you?

    c. How have peers supported you?

Topic Domain III: Future

INTERVIEWER SCRIPT: Our final interview topic focuses on advice you would give to potential future students. It is a short section, to make sure we did not miss any valuable information that you might be able to add.

Lead-off question: What would you tell students who have decided to go to college?

a. What about students who identify as women?

[Covert Categories: How they perceive their own campus]

Possible Follow Up Questions: Tell me how you would explain to them what college will be like.

Conclusions:

Thank you for your time and for your honest responses to the questions. Before we conclude this interview, is there anything else you would like to share?

Post Interview Comments and/or Observations

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