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JOINING THE ACADEMIC CHORUS: THE SUCCESS OF FIRST-GENERATION FEMALE STUDENTS AT PRIVATE FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A DISSERTATION

submitted by

SALLY A. BUCKLEY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

LESLEY UNIVERSITY
Date of Graduation May 19, 2012

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents who came of age during The Great Depression in families facing significant challenges just to survive. The son of immigrants, a steel mill foreman, and proud veteran of World War II, my father never realized his dream of pursuing education beyond high school. Yet, despite his lack of formal education, not only did he share his love for lifelong learning with me, he also taught me the value of persisting to completion with even the most challenging of tasks. My mother, who was of Native American descent, was forced to leave school after completing the tenth grade to help support her siblings and parents. Her compelling stories of poverty include childhood memories of not being able to afford shoes and of sharing broth and a loaf of bread for dinner among her parents and 4 siblings. She knew hunger and the shame associated with poverty's noticeable effects intimately, yet she possessed the amazing ability to see and appreciate simple beauty in the world and the people around her. Despite the fact that she was very bright, capable, and had remarkable artistic talent, she always felt extraordinarily ashamed of the fact that she did not complete high school. She taught me how to be resilient and to approach life with humility, compassion for others, hope, and determination.

The harsh reality of my parents' lives sharply limited their life choices. Hoping never to see their only child suffer in a similar life of poverty or shame, they instilled in me their strong belief that a college education is the key to the American Dream; the pathway to a better, more secure life filled with opportunity. I cannot imagine that I could have reached this level of education without their encouragement and insistence. I miss them both dearly and wish they could know how much their sacrifices have meant.

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Second, I'm extremely grateful to the women who participated in this study. The study would not have been possible without them. I appreciate their time and willingness to share their amazing stories of success with me. I admire their determination, courage and resilience.

Third, I'm grateful to my colleagues at Curry College for their support. Most of all, I'd like to thank President Kenneth K. Quigley, Jr. His confidence in my work over the many years we have worked together has meant a great deal to me. Without his support, I could not have contemplated entering a Ph.D. program. Dr. David A. Fedo, former Vice President and Academic Dean, was always very encouraging and supportive as well. I'm also grateful for the encouragement and support of Dr. David Potash, current Chief Academic Officer at Curry, whose understanding helped me to manage the tremendous challenge of balancing my Curry work with that of my Ph.D. program. In addition, Dr. Diane Webber has been my mentor from the start, always there with advice and guidance and even free books. There are many other friends and colleagues at Curry who offered understanding and support along the way. I am grateful to all of them.

And, finally, I'd like to thank my family. My husband and best friend, Michael, has been not only my greatest source of encouragement; he has been my partner throughout the entire Ph.D. journey. Challenging our already very demanding work and family schedules further with my entry into a Ph.D. program was a commitment we had to make together. He joined me wholeheartedly not only by dedicating more of himself to our family responsibilities, but also by partnering with me in soul searching and sharing all the moments of self-reflection and re-adjustment that occurred during what was a truly transformational learning process. He listened and listened - and listened - while together we began to see through a critical lens. We reconstructed our understanding of the world and our lives. For his unwavering support, unconditional love, and willingness to walk beside me through this difficult but rewarding process, I thank him from the bottom of my heart.

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences of first-generation female students at four-year private institutions of higher education. Improving student retention and degree-completion rates has been a long-standing goal of the higher education community. Despite the attention devoted to student retention since the 1970's, only half of the students who enroll in institutions of higher education obtain a degree within six years of initial enrollment.

This study considers the experience of college success, interpreted as degree completion, at four-year private institutions of higher education of nine first-generation female students. The results of nine in-depth interviews illuminate the effort and commitment to success it took for this small group of women to overcome significant barriers in their personal lives and in the education systems they navigated. This research depicts the complex context created by the intersection of the personal, family, social, and economic aspects of the participants' lives.

Their pathway to college, including their college search and choice process is problematic; uninformed about the differences in quality and other characteristics across institutions of higher education as well as the associated costs. The study’s results highlight that our education system falls short of facilitating a successful transition from K-12 to higher education for the participants. The results also illustrate the participants' college experience as challenging, isolating, taxing, uncertain, and filled with stress. They are motivated, however, to succeed even in the face of the most daunting barriers because earning a college degree means something very significant to this group of women; it represents a way out of their uncertain and difficult life circumstances.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

I first heard the term "first-generation college student" over fifteen years ago while substituting for a colleague at a "Student Retention Committee" meeting. I was quite new to work in higher education at the time with little formal training in higher education practices and only modest exposure to college student success literature. I didn't know it at the time, but the discussion that was to take place in that meeting would turn out to be pivotal for me.

Not long into the meeting, I realized the term "first-generation college student" referred to students whose parents did not attend college. In my personal and professional experience, labels had not usually served to support those upon whom they were imposed. Instead, I had seen labels used to set false or low expectations and/or to limit the choices for those who were labeled. Nonetheless, I remained hopeful that this case would turn out differently. Eager to participate in discussion on an issue that had suddenly sparked my interest, I waited anxiously to hear more. The presenter went on to say not only that first-generation students had certain background characteristics in common so that it made sense to consider them as a group, but further that the combination of those characteristics made it possible to predict their low likelihood of success in higher education. She stated that the low success rate was due to the many individual deficits resulting from first-generation students' backgrounds which created obstacles to their success.

I took exception to the prediction that first-generation students were destined for failure based solely on what was being interpreted as their own individual shortcomings. I felt compelled to share with the speaker the many individual stories of success and perseverance among first-generation students I knew of first hand. The situation caused me to reflect on my own life. I was, after all a first-generation student, the child of parents who knew nothing about attending college and who certainly did not have the means to help me to do so. A World War II veteran and high school graduate, my father worked as a foreman in a steel mill and my mother, a tenth grade completer, as a housekeeper at a local motel. We lived in low-income housing, including a housing project in the poorest section of town where pain was visible on people's faces, where few escaped the destiny of reliving their parents' trying lives, and where everyone else, even other kids from the same poor section of town, looked down at us. I was among many others in my elementary school for whom there weren't great expectations; a high school student who endured the embarrassment of wealthier friends' parents forbidding them to visit my home because of the negative perception of the neighborhood in which I lived.

The label placed upon me due to my low-income family situation was not the only one. I grew up in a place and time when there were clear, precise, and differing expectations for young girls and boys. In my elementary school, for example, boys were carefully directed to one side of the playground, girls to the other. We were not allowed to enter or exit the building through the same doorways. The girls were required to dress neatly in knee-length skirts and dressy buckle shoes. We played collaborative games of jump rope, while boys, who enjoyed the freedom of more practical clothes, were

encouraged to compete in baseball or other sports. The invisible line of segregation drawn distinctively down the middle of the playground was closely monitored by teachers assigned to patrol it. Crossing the invisible line was not allowed under any circumstances; any breach of rule was met with certain and stern reprimand.

Such division so carefully controlled seemed unnatural to me. I played baseball and other competitive games with the boys and girls from my neighborhood outside of school. I wondered why so much effort was spent not only on separating us by gender, but also on emphasizing sameness within each group. The pressure to conform was tremendous. For those who were unable to do so, the social consequences were dire. So, while it felt stifling to conceal my differences and to silence the expressive and inquisitive aspect of myself in school and in many other aspects of my life, I managed to tolerate the situation because I discovered a way to channel the expression of my soul through the performing arts, including training in voice and dance. The performing arts, most often dance in this case, offered one of the few organized physical activities offered to young girls during those times. And, even though I was cast in stereotypical roles in dance, I reveled in the artistic, creative and expressive outlet it provided as well as the physical challenge of it. The performing arts have continued to provide a meaningful outlet of self-expression for me to this day. I mention it here because it provides context for my use of the chorus metaphor in this paper.

Reflecting on my own past during the "Student Retention Meeting", I was compelled to ask whether there was something missing from the story being told, to say that there must be more to learn about this group, more to say about them as human beings, about their extraordinary efforts to succeed and about the potential need for a

different institutional approach that shouldered more responsibility for students' success or failure. The presenter responded by saying her comments were based on the student retention literature she had studied. Not being very familiar with the literature, I had no formal basis upon which to dispute the authority of the voices in the literature. So, regrettably, even though I felt compelled to push harder, I retreated, realizing that I was not ready to participate fully in such academic discourse. Like the untrained dancer stepping onto the stage to join a well-rehearsed chorus, I was out of step. In that pivotal awakening moment, however, a door had opened.

After that day, I became very involved in many aspects of student success through my work in higher education. As my passion grew, I became familiar with college student success literature. I built college transition programs, improved services, and much more. I began to see the larger historical, temporal, social, economic, and political context in which higher education operates. Eventually, I realized that my personal view based on my own experience and observations was just one perspective among multiple lenses through which to view first-generation students' experiences. I began to understand how my early life experiences had influenced what I later came to understand as feminist thinking and deep interest in socially constructed roles based on gender and social class. More importantly, I realized how little my experience alone could teach me; how biased it was without seeing it critically within the context of a broader and more thorough understanding. Still, I remained deeply concerned in the ensuing years of my professional life about the fact that I continued to see individual student deficits called out as the sole reason for a lack of educational success among first-generation college

students. At the same time, I could not deny the large numbers of them I saw leave college without a degree.

Thus, driven in part by my passion to learn more about the larger forces at work within and surrounding our education system along with my strong desire to contribute to the literature about the success of first-generation students, especially female first-generation students, I engaged in this qualitative research study as part of my doctoral studies. Here, it is my intention to endeavor to open a door, to create a pathway, a space where the voices of first-generation female students can be heard, where their individual stories of success can be highlighted, the essence of their experience illuminated, and where my now trained academic voice can join the higher education chorus.

Purpose and Goal of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the essence of the lived experience of success in higher education of first-generation female college students in traditional undergraduate four-year college programs at private institutions. The primary goal of the research is to understand the participants' interpretation of the experience, not to prove absolute truth, or to generalize. An additional goal is to contribute to the literature related to student success in higher education.

Statement of the Problem

The ability of the current U.S. education system to facilitate the successful degree completion of current and future college-going populations is uncertain. Much of U.S. higher education reports low degree-completion rates. On average, less than 40 percent of those who enroll at four-year institutions will graduate within four years and only about

57 percent of them within six years, while an average of only about 30 percent at two-year institutions will graduate within three years (National Center for Education Statistics [N.C.E.S.] , 2011). The more selective the institution is at admission, the higher the graduation rate; the four-year graduation rates at all four-year institutions range from 27 percent at the least selective institutions to 83 percent at the most selective (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Ginder, 2011).

The number of students affected by U.S. higher education is large. More than 20 million students were enrolled at the post-secondary level at U.S. institutions of higher education in the fall of 2009; about 63 percent of them at four-year and 36 percent at two-year institutions (N.C.E.S., 2011). In addition, there has been tremendous enrollment growth in higher education in recent decades. For example, the total number of students enrolled in U.S. higher education rose from 13.8 million in 1990, to 15.3 million in 2000 and to 21 million in 2010, which is higher than in any prior year (N.C.E.S., 2011). The overall enrollment is projected to increase to 24 million in 2020 (N.C.E.S., 2011).

To measure student success and institutional effectiveness in U.S. higher education, a major focus has been placed on student persistence-to-degree completion. Student persistence-to-degree-completion is typically measured at several points along the pathway to graduation by determining the rate of return to an institution for the second year for first-time, first-year, full-time entering cohorts of students and the rate of their graduation within four, five and six years of initial enrollment. Although there are many other aspects of the college experience that may lead to students succeeding in a variety of ways, since a fundamental outcome of entering post-secondary education is to obtain a credential, when I refer to student success in this paper, unless otherwise

specified, I mean degree completion. Of course, I'm assuming that degree completion represents, among other things, college-level academic achievement, mastery of expected learning outcomes, and personal and social development normally associated with college experience, all of which are intended to prepare students for their lives after college.

The importance of student success in U.S. higher education is clear at individual, institutional, national, and global levels. At the individual level, earning a bachelor's degree is increasingly necessary to survive in today's information-based economy (Callan, 2000). Many jobs that exist, especially those with an income level high enough to support a family, and many of the jobs that will be created in the coming years will require more than a high school education (Kelly, 2005). In addition, college graduates enjoy higher occupational status than non-graduates. They are less likely to be unemployed. They tend to enjoy more autonomy in their work. Their job performance tends to be better. And, their earnings are higher (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). The benefit of degree completion for first-generation students is even greater. Degree attainment for first-generation students is believed to level the field in terms of work after college. It breaks the pattern of tracking into jobs created by socio-cultural and economic barriers (Horn and Nunez, 2000; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Student success, including the rate at which students complete their degrees in higher education matters greatly to the institutions themselves since it is a measure of institutional effectiveness. Institutions of higher education operate in an increasingly consumer-orientated and highly regulated environment, which has created a necessary shift toward transparency, demonstrated integrity of programs, measurable learning

outcomes, and the necessity to provide evidence to support any claims or promises made to students. Outcomes, therefore, are highly visible and used increasingly by consumers, accreditors, and regulators to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the institutions. These changes have increased pressure on institutions to ensure that their student persistence rates, among other measures and key indicators, remain at acceptable and competitive levels.

According to Carnevale (2005), student success in higher education is critical at the national and global level. In the face of economic challenges including an enormous budget deficit, the future of the U.S. economy in many ways rests on the ability of our education system to produce a workforce well equipped to navigate, innovate and succeed in a competitive global market. Some predict that we could lose our position in the global market if we don't take immediate steps to increase student success in higher education.

To understand the issues surrounding degree completion rates, also called college graduation rates, it's important to be aware of how they are determined. The calculation of college graduation rates is typically done from an individual institution's perspective. This standard method does not, therefore, take into account students who transfer to other institutions and complete their degrees elsewhere. A recent report indicates that about one-third of all students who enter either a two or four-year institution will transfer to another institution (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2010). The fact that so many students now transfer between institutions is often used to explain the low graduation rates at individual institutions, suggesting that students are not dropping out of higher education completely, but simply moving between institutions.

In an attempt to investigate national degree completion rates, taking into account transfers between institutions, a recent study considered students who entered postsecondary education for the first time in 2003 and whether they had earned any credential by 2009 from any institution and/or if they were still enrolled at that time at any institution (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, and Shepherd, 2010). Unlike the standard method of calculating graduation rates individual institutions only mentioned above, this study accounted for students who moved between institutions. Any credential ranged from an educational certificate to a bachelor's degree.

The results showed that 15 percent of the original cohort was still enrolled and 35 percent had left higher education with no credential, with about 50 percent having earned some credential by 2009 (Radford et al., 2010). Thus, even when tracking student persistence in higher education across institutions, only about half of all those who had entered had earned any type of degree or certificate within six years of their initial enrollment. In the same study, of those who entered first at a four-year institution, 58 percent had received a bachelor's degree, 5 percent received an associate's degree, 2 percent received a certificate, 12 percent were still enrolled somewhere, and 24 percent had left higher education with no degree (Radford et al., 2010). Nearly a quarter of all students who entered four-year institutions left with no degree and 40 percent had not earned the bachelor's degree they intended to earn (Radford et al., 2010).

Adding to the complexity and urgency of the already-existing problem of low degree completion rates is that demographics are changing to include an increasingly diverse population of students, such as low-income and minority students, and who, on average, tend to have even lower degree completion rates than their some word needed here peers (Horn,

2004). Contributing to the changing demographics are increasing numbers of immigrants. In 2001, one in five children in the U.S. was the child of at least one immigrant parent. It's projected that by 2040, they will number one in three (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In fact, non-Hispanic whites are projected to be outnumbered by ethnic minorities by the year 2050 (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2005). The increasing numbers of students whose success has not been effectively facilitated by the existing system of higher education intensifies the need for the system to respond by changing strategies to ensure greater student success rates.

Also contributing to the critical need to focus on student success in higher education is that the stakes of dropping out without a degree, which occurs in 20 percent of students who borrow, are increasingly due to a mounting student debt load (Gladieux and Perna, 2005). Costs rose 32 percent at public and 24 percent at private institutions from academic year 1998/99 to 2008/09, after adjusting for inflation (N.C.E.S., 2011). In addition, the federal government's shift away from grants toward loans as the primary way of financing in higher education has contributed to the increased debt at the individual student level, which has been especially challenging for low-income students (St. John, Paulsen, and Carter, 2002). Further, depending on the institution, financial aid packages may fall short of covering financial need, frequently leaving students with gaps between the cost of education and the amount of their financial aid awards, which has had a negative impact on low-income students' ability to remain enrolled (Fitzgerald, 2003; Hartle, Simmons, and Timmons, 2005; O'Brien and Shedd, 2001; Olivérez and Tierney, 2005).

About half of all students enrolling in post-secondary institutions borrow. Of students at four-year public institutions 57 percent borrow and have an average debt of $14,400. Of

students attending four-year private institutions 69 percent borrow, with an average debt of $17,125. Those who attend four-year institutions are more likely to borrow than those attending two-year institutions with only 30 percent of two-year students borrowing an average of $5,760 (Hartle et al., 2005). Further, students are frequently unsure and do not understand the cost of attending college. As the level of income decreases among parents, so does their ability to estimate and understand the cost (Choy, 2001, 2002). Unfortunately, to manage the cost of attendance at college, a large number of students use credit cards. In fact, 60 percent have at least one. Many students are able to use credit cards to their advantage. However, for some students, credit card balances grow beyond their means to make the payment due. This often leads to them working many hours in addition to attending college full time, which has an impact on their ability to succeed and even to remain enrolled (Kattner, 2001).

One response to low degree completion rates and the need to focus on student success in higher education is an extensive body of student retention literature since the 1970's. Within that body of literature is strong agreement that student success in higher education, measured in a number of different ways, is closely correlated with student engagement. Kuh (2009), who is well known in higher education for his work related to The National Survey of Student Engagement and for his research related to student development, campus cultures, and assessment, indicates that student engagement is typically defined as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). In addition to student persistence-to-degree completion, which has most often been the focus of outcomes of high student engagement, some of the other desired outcomes of productive student engagement

supported in the literature are: adjustment to college (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn, 1999); the accumulation of social capital (Harper, 2008); the development of intellectual and cognitive skills (Anaya, 1996; Baxter Magolda, 1992); transferrable skills and practical competence, such as decision-making abilities (Kuh, 1993, 1995); and positive self-images, psychosocial development, and constructive racial and gender identity formation (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Harper and Quaye, 2007; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper, 2003).

There is growing concern, however, that much of the student retention literature is based on the study of a more homogeneous group of enrolled students than today's increasingly diverse population. Some suggest that many of the assumptions underlying the literature are most applicable to traditional-aged, full-time, residential students and not as much to students from more diverse groups, such as low-income, minority, or first-generation students (Bensimon, 2007; Harper and Quaye, 2009; Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2006), who is one of the most frequently cited theorists in the student retention literature, reflecting on the body of literature, suggests that there is much to do to clarify how to facilitate student success in different settings and with students of diverse backgrounds. Others make similar observations, noting the paucity of research focused on specific subgroups of students (Kuh, 2009; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

Thus, higher education theorists and practitioners are beginning to realize that they can no longer assume the programs and structures that seem to work for some students ought to work for all students. They are recognizing that moving to the next level of understanding of student success requires acceptance of the fact that many

students live at the intersection of multiple complex and interacting variables which may influence their level of success, such as being low-income, first-generation and minority. The complexity of their lives, therefore, might not be easily understood by looking simply at one or two aspects of their backgrounds or experience or by focusing on characteristics that have been interpreted in the past to be indicative of individual deficits that correlate with failure.

One group of students for which a lack of studies is recognized in the literature is that of first-generation college students (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, 2004; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Ting, 1998). When compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students are far less likely to complete a degree (24% vs. 68%) (Chen, 2005). Precisely how many of the students enrolled at U.S. institutions of higher education are first-generation students is not known. Kojaku and Nunez (1998) estimate that, nationally, 47 percent of all entering college students are first-generation students. Considering only four-year colleges, Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, and Yeung (2007) reported that first-generation students comprised about 18 percent of students at public four-year colleges and 13 percent at private four-year colleges in 2005. Saenz et al go on to reveal that these figures represent a decline from 43 percent at four-year publics and 31 percent at four-year privates in 1971. This decline is attributed to the increasing number of educated people in the U.S. While the proportion of first-generation students has declined, it should be noted that they still represent a large number of enrolled students, however. Increased levels of success for first-generation students may contribute to an increase in the overall success rates in higher education.

As noted in the Literature Review section of this paper, previous research makes a convincing case that there are commonalities among many in the larger group of first-generation students. Since there is also evidence of differences among subgroups of first-generation students, however, some contend that new research on first-generation student college success must look more deeply within the larger group of first-generation students to concentrate more closely on student subgroups (Gandara and Maxwell-Jolly, 1999; Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005; Manuel, 2001). The characteristics of first-generation students consist of numerous intricacies and intersecting variables. For example, even within subgroups of the larger groups typically called Hispanic or Latino, Gandara and Maxwell-Jolly (1999) found differences in college performance between them. Researchers, therefore, must be mindful not only of the potential differences among subgroups of first-generation students, but also of the rapidly changing composition of the overall group of first-generation students. The composition of that group may have been quite different 20 years ago than it is today or may be in the future.

While there are many possible ways of breaking down the group of first-generation students for more targeted study, this study focuses on women who are first-generation college students at four-year private institutions of higher education. There appear to be only a few studies where gender is considered as a factor among first-generation students. For example, while gender is not the main focus of their research, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) considered gender among first-generation college students using a national dataset. Females in the group were found to be less likely (9.4 percent) than males to persist to the second year. Also, when compared to continuing-generation females, being female was found to have a negative influence on persistence only in the

first-generation group. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) cite the need for further research. Another study found that, even though first-generation female students performed better academically than men, they dropped out at similar rates (Manuel, 2001). Leppel (2002) looked at factors influencing persistence for men and women and found that gender has a negative impact on academic success among women who are not socially integrated and who have external commitments that compete with academic demands. Other studies reveal that being a female first-generation student may be linked to academic difficulty (Bui, 2002; Inman and Mayes, 1999). The findings of these studies point to a need to dig more deeply into the unique experiences of the females that are part of the larger population of first-generation students.

Research Question

The main research question of this study is: What is the essence of the lived experience of first-generation female students at four-year private institutions of higher education?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The following Literature Review is broken into three sections. The first provides a review of the literature regarding first-generation college students. I provide a broad review of the literature in that section, which highlights the major areas of focus within that body of research. The second section is a review of adult development literature. A major outcome presumed to result from participation in higher education is the intellectual, personal, psychological, and social development of students. The review of adult development theory provides a larger context within which to understand the college experience of first-generation female students. And, the third section offers a review of literature regarding low-income women in higher education. This section focuses on barriers to success that must be overcome by women in that group. Since first-generation students tend to come from low socio-economic backgrounds, understanding the impact of this particular aspect of their lives contributes to our understanding of their college success (Choy, 2001, 2002; Hurtado and Pryor, 2006; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

First-Generation College Students

The term first-generation college student is most often used to describe students whose parents' highest level of educational attainment is no more than a high school diploma (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001, 2002; Horn and Nunez, 2000; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al, 2004; Saenz et al, 2007). The main focus of the research regarding first-generation students has been placed on identifying commonalities among them related to their backgrounds, characteristics, and enrollment patterns. A major

finding of the research is that first-generation status alone has a negative impact on college access and the likelihood of degree completion (Berkner and Chavez, 1997; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001, 2002; Horn and Nunez, 2000; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez, 2001) as do many of the other commonalities identified (Berkner and Chavez, 1997; Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001, 2002; Horn and Nunez, 2000; Inman and Mayes, 1999; Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1996; and Volle and Federico, 1997).

First-generation students have been found to successfully complete degrees far less frequently than their continuing-generation peers (Chen, 2005). Chen's (2005) analysis of a national data set of 1992 high school completers revealed that of first-generation students who had enrolled in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000, 43 percent left college without a degree by 2000 and 24 percent had earned a bachelor’s degree. In contrast, 68 percent of students whose parents had a bachelor’s degree or higher had attained a bachelor’s degree, and 20 percent left without any credential. At four-year institutions, first-generation students left at a higher rate than their continuing-generation peers (29 percent vs. 13 percent) and are less likely to earn a degree (47 percent vs. 78 percent).

Of course, college success can begin only after students actually enroll. According to Berkner and Chavez (1997), whose research is based on the analysis of a national data set of 1992 high school graduates, first-generation students are less likely than other students to enroll in college when compared with their continuing-generation peers within a year after graduating (47 percent vs. 85 percent).

Kojaku and Nunez (1998) found that first-generation students' enrollment at two-year and less institutions was overrepresented. While 47 percent of students enrolling in postsecondary education were first-generation students, first-generation students comprised 73 percent of entering students at less-than two year institutions, 53 percent at two-year institutions, and only 34 percent enrolled at four-year institutions,.

The level of academic preparation upon college enrollment is one factor believed to influence whether students succeed in higher education. According to Choy (2001), first-generation students tend to be marginally or underprepared for admission at four-year institutions. Key to such preparedness is taking rigorous courses early on, particularly algebra and other advanced math. First-generation students who have successfully completed such gate-keeping courses by around the eighth grade have much greater chances of enrolling, persisting, and graduating from college (Horn and Nunez, 2000).

Adding to the complexity of their situation is that in addition to their first-generation student status, first-generation students tend to come from families of lower socioeconomic status (Choy, 2001; Hurtado and Pryor, 2006; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Hurtado and Pryor (2006) found that while 29.4 percent of the first-generation student freshmen enrolled in 2005 had a family income of $25,000 or below, only 9.2 percent of continuing-generation enrolled freshmen students fell into that income level. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found that almost one quarter of the first-generation students they studied were from families with incomes in the lowest income quartile. This compares with only five percent among their continuing-generations counterparts.

How well prepared students are varies by parental education and family income (Chen, 2005; Gladieux and Swail, 1998). For example, in a 2005 press release regarding the incoming class that year, College Board reported that pre-calculus had been taken by 37 percent of the first-generation students compared to 54 percent of those whose parents went to college. It had been taken by 52 percent of the students whose family income was above $50,000 and by 40 percent of those students whose family income was below that figure. Many of the students who are underprepared attend K through 12 schools where they will not likely be encouraged to prepare well for college and where such courses may not be readily available (Gandara and Maxwell-Jolly, 1999; Horn and Nunez, 2000).

Further, the decision-making process to attend to college is influenced by a student's early educational experiences. In fact, as soon as the eighth grade, first-generation students tend to have lower expectations than other students about their highest level of education when compared with students whose parents attended college, including the fact that far fewer first-generation students believe they will attend a four-year college or beyond (55 percent vs. 91 percent) (Berkner and Chavez, 1997). By their senior year in high school there was little change; far fewer first-generation students expect to earn a bachelor’s degree (53 percent vs. 90 percent) (Berkner and Chavez, 1997). This finding supports other research which indicates that first-generation students tend to have lower educational aspirations (Inman and Mayes, 1999; Terenzini et al, 1996; Volle and Federico, 1997).

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) suggest, however, that rather than individual characteristics alone, it is the intersection of interrelated characteristics with parental educational attainment that creates unique circumstances and challenges for first-

generation college students. Pike and Kuh (2005) suggest that the relationship between the parents' educational level, educational aspirations and level of engagement is indirect and more directly related to the fact that first-generation students tend to live off campus and to have lower educational aspirations than their peers. Since parents of first-generation students lack experience with college preparation, they are not likely to encourage students to take rigorous college preparatory courses (Horn and Nunez, 2000). While there may be many factors which present particular obstacles to the college planning and application process, such as a lack of access to the internet (Vargas, 2004) or language barriers (Tornatzky, Cutler, and Lee, 2002), Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) point to the importance of parental involvement in the planning and decision-making process. They indicate that the most significant factor influencing whether students, including first-generation students, aspire to and plan to enroll in college is strong encouragement and support from parents.

In addition, students who have achieved at high levels academically are more likely than others to receive positive encouragement to prepare for and go to college (Horn and Nunez, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999). Since first-generation students tend to achieve at lower levels, they are less likely to receive such encouragement (Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation students, however, are less likely to expect to enroll in higher education and to earn a bachelor's degree even when they have achieved at high levels (Berkner and Chavez, 1997).

First-generation students typically report receiving less of both encouragement and support from their parents (Horn and Nunez, 2000; Terenzini et al, 1996; York-Anderson and Bowman, 1991). Some indicate being discouraged from going to college

from family members (London, 1992). According to Volle and Federico (1997), many first-generation students who come from low-income families, may be expected to contribute financially to the family by working following high school. In addition, parents of low-income students are often unavailable due to heavy work schedules to attend informational sessions and to take advantage of other school resources (Tornatzky, et al, 2002). As a result, parents of first-generation students are unlikely to take all steps necessary for students to attend college, even when the students are academically qualified and aspire to attend (Berkner and Chavez, 1997; Choy, 2001; Volle and Federico, 1997).

Students whose parents possess “learning capital” (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, p. 590) have advantages that facilitate access to higher education. Therefore, even when parents of first-generation students do become involved, because they have not attended college, they typically lack experience with the college planning and application process. As a result of their lack of learning capital, these parents may be unaware of relevant information about the process of choosing and applying to college, including not understanding costs and available financial aid funding (Choy, 2001, 2002; Vargas, 2004). Parents may lack any understanding of the economic and social benefits of earning a college degree (Volle and Federico, 1997). First-generation students do not report receiving any more help with the college planning or application process from school officials than other students (Choy, 2001; 2002). This could in part be due to the fact that the schools many of them attend may not have the resources to do so (Vargas, 2004).

When they do decide to attend college, first-generation students' college choice process may unnecessarily limit their choices and lead them to attending less selective

institutions with low graduation rates which may actually negatively impact their chances of earning a degree (Berkner and Chavez, 1997; Pascarella et al, 2004; Vargas, 2004). Rather than considering the many factors that may make an institution a good fit for them academically, their choices tend to be influenced heavily by their concern about cost of attendance and the availability of financial aid (Berkner and Chavez, 1997) as well as, the time to degree, ability to work while enrolled, and proximity to home (Nunez and Curccaro-Almin, 1998). They, therefore, miss out on any potential advantage that attending a more selective institution might have provided for them.

First-generation students are also less likely to enter higher education immediately following high school than continuing-generation students (54 vs. 82 percent) (Swail and Perna, 2000). Students who delay entry tend to persist at lower rates (Berkner and Chavez, 1997; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

In addition to the process of college choice and enrollment, the initial academic, personal, and social transition to college is believed to be important to college success, and crucial for first-generation students, who may find the process even more challenging than other students (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo, 1994). For example, since first-generation students tend to take fewer rigorous high school courses, they are typically less prepared than other students and, therefore, face greater academic challenges (Chen, 2005; Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton et al, 2001). First-generation students also tend to have weaker reading, math, and critical thinking skills (Terenzini et al, 1996).

Prior academic preparation alone, on the other hand, does not necessarily lead to success in college (Chen, 2005). Chen (2005) found that even when controlling for previous academic

preparation and performance, first-generation students had lower grade point averages than continuing-generation students throughout their college enrollment. They withdrew and repeated courses more often; 12 percent for first-generation students and only 7 percent for continuing-generation students. At private non-profit institutions, first-generation students are more likely than other students to be taking remedial courses. First-generation students also tend to lag behind other students in regard to the number of credits they earn, starting in the first year of enrollment (Chen, 2005). In addition, Richardson and Skinner (1992) found that first-generation students find navigating the college environment challenging and they lack time management and study skills.

Tinto (1993) suggests that rather than preparation, first-generations students' lack of success in college is more likely to be due to their experiences during college. Similarly, Pike and Kuh (2005) found that first-generation students seem to be less engaged than other students, which is believed to have a negative impact on their ability to integrate with the college environment. Their lack of integration is evidenced by the fact that they spend less time involved in activities associated with college engagement, such as interacting with faculty, studying, and accessing support services (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al, 2004; Richardson and Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al, 1996), despite that first-generation students are even more likely than their peers to benefit from such involvement with peers and faculty or extracurricular activities (Filkins and Doyle, 2002; Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al, 2004; Terenzini et al, 1996).

According to Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998), first-generation students face unique challenges regarding their cultural adaptation on campus. They often experience

issues regarding belonging and fitting in due to the confrontation with cultural differences. How well they are able to navigate the transition across different cultures influences their ability to succeed in college (Casey, 2005, Lara, 1992; London, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Terenzini et al, 1994). The need for first-generation students to depart from the typical patterns and relationships in their lives is significant (Terenzini et al, 1994). Research indicates that first-generation students face unique challenges, for example, regarding separation from friends and family, which may cause their relationships to become strained (Tinto, 1993; Somers et al, 2004). As first-generation students attempt to navigate the complexities of their relationships with family and friends they may experience guilt, isolation, among other difficult feelings (Lara, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson and Skinner, 1992). Due to their conflicting situation of straddling their previous lives and the new environment in college, they may not be able to participate fully in all that the campus has to offer (Rendon, 1992).

In addition, first-generation students are not likely to see faculty and the rest of the campus as supportive (Pike and Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al, 1996). Also, according to Bui (2002), they tend to worry more than other students about failing and about financial aid. They are more likely to report that they are attending college so that they can help their families financially after graduation, that they are less informed about social events at the college, and that they spend more time studying than other students.

Contributing to the apparent lack of engagement among first-generation students is that they are more likely to be working full-time while enrolled than continuing-generation students (33 percent vs. 24 percent) (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). The need for first-generation students to work is tied closely to finances and financial aid.

Increased financial aid, particularly grant-funded aid, increases the likelihood of success for first-generation students (Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005; Somers et al, 2004). First-generation students are more likely to identify with and integrate into the work world and to see work as a priority over course work (Billson and Terry, 1982). Students who work full-time while attending college full-time tend not to do as well academically as other students. They are also less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities, have less interaction with peers and faculty outside of class, and less likely to develop friendships (Pascarella et al, 2004). These behaviors are likely to make first-generation students appear to be less involved in activities typically associated with student engagement.

Discussion. In summary, the literature demonstrates that first-generation students, as a group, share many common characteristics, enrollment patterns, experiences while enrolled in college, and college outcomes. While it is certainly valuable to note the commonalities emerging from the literature, as stated previously, the population of first-generation college students is large and increasingly diverse requiring caution when generalizing about the group as a whole. Choy (2001) suggests that since we cannot change first-generation students' parents' level of educational attainment we ought to research how it is related to other aspects of the students' experience which we know influence their ability to succeed in higher education. Doing so will help us to find ways to increase their likelihood of access and success in college. Looking more closely at the actual experiences of subpopulations within the larger group of first-generation students may provide greater insight into variations across their experiences and highlight opportunities to positively influence the likelihood of success among them.

Adult Development

Introduction and context. As stated previously, a major outcome presumed to result from participation in higher education is the intellectual, personal, psychological, and social development of students. The following review of adult development theory provides a larger context within which to understand the college experience of first-generation female students.

More so than in the past, young people in the age group between 18 and 25 are being singled out as a distinct group with common characteristics; not yet adults, but no longer adolescents. They're referred to by various names, such as "emerging adults" (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2006) or "thresholders" (Apter, 2001). Their life situation is sometimes referred to as a "quarterlife crisis", a time steeped with inadequacy, confusion, stress, and insecurity (Robbins and Wilner, 2001).

Exactly when a person is thought to become an adult varies across human development theories. While some theorists have tied mounting developmental expectations and related stages or phases closely to chronological age (Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978), others have described development as occurring in periods of life (Erikson,1982), frequently associated with what is viewed as progression to the next socially expected task in predictable stages or phases and an ongoing progression toward separation and autonomy. Still others propose that becoming an adult is a more fluid and lifelong process, not pre-determined in phases or defined by the accomplishment of tasks, but instead subject to the individual's agency in self construction of his or her life course within the social and historical context in which she or he lives (Caffarella and Olson, 1993; Greene, 2005; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Nonetheless, it appears to be

common among adult development theorists to define a person as an adult beginning at age 18. Since the participants in this study fall between the ages of 18 and 23, it makes sense to explore their developmental experiences in the context of adult development theory and not that of adolescence (Clark and Caffarella, 1999).

Adult development is complex and multifaceted. There is an immense amount of literature about it, yet; there is no one theory offering an explanation or definition that encompasses all aspects of adult development. As a field of study, adult development is young, having emerged in the twentieth century. Reduced to its most basic characteristic, development is often associated with change that occurs over a period of time (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Tennant and Pogson, 1995). It is also frequently described as a continual attempt to attain balance or stability (Clark and Caffarella, 1999; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

Achieving change and/or realizing balance imply that there is movement from one state of being to that of another as a result of a process. Most theories of adult development attempt to explain the process of development by constructing frameworks derived from sets of organizing principles or themes. Thus, adult development theories are essentially lenses through which we may consider certain aspects of development and ideas around which we may cultivate a discourse. These theories usually fall into one of the following two categories of development: cognitive or intellectual functioning or personality and social roles (Tennant and Pogson, 1995). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) and Clark and Caffarella (1999) constructed their reviews of adult development theories with an approach consisting of four major areas of focus: biological, psychological, sociocultural, and integrative. I will use a similar approach. However, unlike the authors

just mentioned, I will not attempt to cover all four major areas of adult development here or even to go into great depth into any one area or framework. I will focus mostly on personality and social role development. I will also highlight theories of women's development. Therefore, this is a selective survey rather than a comprehensive review.

Review of theoretical frameworks. ***Psychological framework.*** Concentrating mostly on how individuals are believed to develop internally as a result of either external influences or internal processes, the major focus of the psychological framework is on intellectual, cognitive, emotional, moral or social capabilities and functioning as well as the interrelatedness of all aspects of development from the earliest stages of childhood through the later stages of adulthood (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

The psychological framework consists of multiple models which may be grouped into the three categories that dominate the literature: stage or phase theories, life or transitional theories, and relational theories. Often suggesting that development occurs in a defined chronological progression, stage or phase theorists are among the earliest and most widely cited. Life events and transition theories as well as relational theories have emerged to receive more attention in the literature over the past twenty to twenty-five years. Life events or transition theories offer an alternative view to the phase or stage model. They focus on those aspects of psychological development as they are influenced and shaped by external events and situations in which the individual participates. The relational theories share the common tradition of seeing relationships with others as being at the center of psychological growth and development (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

Stage or phase theories. Some psychological models view development as evolving through a series of stages or phases, each highlighting aspects of psychological changes

occurring in periods defined by the achievement of individual growth over time. There are several well-known theories in this model (Erikson, 1982; Gould, 1978; Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984; Levinson, 1978; and Loevinger, 1976). The particular overall focus and/or the specific type of stages described in these theories vary as does the perspective on what causes movement between stages, but they have in common that each stage or phase is marked by the attainment of a type of predictable element of change or achievement of a goal associated with that stage and that they typically view the stages as being universal. For some, such as Gould (1978) and Levinson (1978), the stages are tied to chronological age. For others, (Erikson, 1982; Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984; and Loevinger, 1976) the stages are not necessarily tied to a specific age, but still indicate movement toward desired developmental goals.

One of the most well-known and influential theories in adult development, Erikson's (1982) theory of psychosocial development, is an example of stage theory. Expanding on Freud's stages of psychosexual development (Tennant and Pogson, 1995), Erikson describes psychosocial development in eight stages. The goal of each of the eight stages is to resolve a crisis. The potential exists for either a positive or negative resolution of the crisis. Failure to successfully resolve the crisis at a given stage can result in challenges related to that stage reappearing as problems at some point in the future. Erikson's (1982) eight stages or psychosocial crises to be resolved are:

1. Infancy from 0 to 2 years, Trust vs. Mistrust
2. Toddler from 2 to 3 years, Autonomy vs. Shame, Doubt
3. Preschool from 3 to 5 years; Initiative vs. Guilt
4. School age from 5 to 13 years, Industry vs. Inferiority

5. Adolescence from 13 to the 20's, Identity vs. role confusion
6. Young adulthood from the 20's to the 40's, Intimacy vs. isolation
7. Middle adulthood from 40 to 60, Generativity vs. stagnation
8. Middle adulthood 60 years and on, Integrity vs. despair.

In the stage of early adulthood between the ages of 18 and 35, for instance, the goal is to achieve intimacy, the negative alternative of which is isolation. A positive outcome at any stage is preferred, resulting in a stronger, more highly developed and autonomous individual.

In contrast to Erikson, Levinson (1978) focuses more heavily on the influence of boundaries created by external forces, such as family and society, on the internal process of development. Influenced by Jung (Tennant and Pogson, 1995), especially in regard to the concept of time of inner reflection or a crisis in the middle of life, Levinson believes that adults pass through a series of phases marked by life eras which are closely tied to age. His early theory, published in 1978, indicated that early adulthood era begins when careers and families are started. There is an evaluation period at around age thirty, but a mid-life transition occurs at around age forty. At around age fifty, there is a transition to late adulthood. Moving from periods of relative stability to those of transition, the goal of each phase is to achieve a particular concrete task, such as getting married and to move toward greater degrees of autonomy or individuation. According to Levinson, it is through the achievement of these tasks that we live our lives in accordance with who we are to a greater or lesser extent depending on our relationship with the outside world. Levinson concluded that adult life changes are universally scripted by the appropriate timing of them. This theory was based on interviews with men. It wasn't until that

Levinson and Levinson (1996) interviewed women. This resulted in a very similar theory for women except that, instead of their lives revolving around work, they were more centered around family.

Kohlberg (1984), who was inspired by Piaget (1952), focused on moral development. He conducted research to examine moral reasoning which involved presenting moral dilemmas to his subjects and then classifying their responses into stages. Kohlberg (1984) proposed six stages of moral development which emphasized justice and which he believed were tied to ethical behavior and moral decision making.

Pre-Conventional

1. Obedience and punishment orientation
2. Self-interest orientation

Conventional

3. Interpersonal accord and conformity
4. Authority and social-order maintaining orientation

Post-Conventional

5. Social contract orientation
6. Universal ethical principles

These sequential stages that begin at the low level of mere avoidance of punishment and proceed to a much higher level of moral reasoning result in the most highly developed individual progressing to the advanced stages, with only a very few ever getting to sixth stage. Kohlberg assumed that his stages of development were universal for all people.

Gould (1978), consistent with his training from a psychoanalytic perspective, focused on development in adulthood as being tied to overcoming childhood irrational

beliefs and unconscious desires. According to Gould (1978), we retain false assumptions about ourselves that are rooted in childhood misconceptions. To become adult, we must rid ourselves of those false assumptions about ourselves by moving through a series of age-related stages. These stages are broken out as follows: late teens to early twenties; twenties; late twenties; early thirties; and thirty-five to fifty. At each stage, we must confront and overcome a specific set of false assumptions. For example, in our late teens and early twenties we must overcome ideas of belonging to our parents and that they will always protect us. Separation from parents and the false ideas that protect us as children are key issues influencing development under this model. The ultimate developmental goal in this theory is to achieve independence.

Loevinger (1976), a psychologist whose background is in psychometrics, also proposed that individuals pass through a series of developmental stages. In this case, though, the main focus is on ego development. Beginning with the primary task of self differentiation, an increasing awareness and ability to navigate and negotiate with the world around us and its social rules develops. The first is the Self-Protective stage, which is marked by learning to exercise self control in order to avoid punishment. The Conformist stage is second and occurs when children begin to recognize their own self interests in context with those of others. Then the Self-Awareness stage occurs when a sense of moral development emerges. Next is the Conscientious stage where the individual begins to understand his or her own agency in self development. The Autonomous stage is marked by inner conflicts relating to individuality and interdependence on others, which is followed by the Integrated stage where the individual moves past the inner conflicts of the Autonomous stage toward integration with society.

Throughout all of Loevinger's stages, we move toward becoming not only more autonomous, but also toward becoming more self aware and morally responsible individuals. This theory assumes that we are agents of our own destinies where the highest level of development is a self that has achieved balance between self and society.

Kegan (1982 and 1994) more so than the theorists just mentioned, emphasizes the importance of context in individual growth and development. Inspired by Piaget (1952), Kegan specifies five orders of consciousness requiring increasingly complex ways of thinking which are, in Kegan's view, necessary for adults to maneuver through the elaborate and ever-changing demands of their lives. How well the individual may or may not be equipped to meet those demands and the capacity he or she has to incorporate experiences into consciousness is the key to the development of higher orders of consciousness and complex layers of social maturity. According to Kegan, a young child who begins development in the first order has no sense of self as defined by more than its own needs. By the end of the second order, understanding of values larger than our own needs takes shape. Third order thinking involves understanding of abstractions and the ability to infer or understand differing points of view, but those in this order are still responding largely to the demands of their social context. Kegan indicates that most adults do not develop through the fourth order, but those who do are able to see beyond that which their culture is currently demanding. They are able to hold multiple views, even opposing understandings, of the same issue in mind at once. It is at this order of consciousness that we truly become self-defining or self-constructing. For Kegan, the hallmark of development that moves us out of the third stage is the ability to experience

and to see oneself having the experience of thinking. We are able to make a choice in light of our evaluation of our own and the position of others.

Life events or transition theories. Life events or transition theorists indicate that certain events induce and steer developmental change (Bridges, 1980 and 1991; Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman, 1995). Transitions are provoked by life events and in turn shape development. Through this type of theoretical lens of this type of theory, development is not universally identical for all adults. Development varies depending on the individual and on events occurring in their lives. Emphasis, however, is placed on a common link between development and transitions. From this view, throughout their existence people make choices that construct their lives. They are affected by events in their lives. Neugarten (1996) suggests that growth and development does not simply happen chronologically according to age or stage in life, but that it can happen at any time as a result of experiences. There are two basic types of life events, some associated with external forces, such as a recession or war, and others that are more specifically associated with one individual's experience, such as birth, marriage, or divorce (Hultsch and Plemons, 1979). Regardless of the type, the transition is associated with the internal ability to make sense of our experiences and to integrate them into our lives. At what point in time events and roles occur in life affects how they influence individual development. Further, the more significant the event is in a person's life, the stronger the impact of the transition. Events that effect development may be expected, such as marriage, or they might be unexpected, such as a significant economic downturn or the early loss of a spouse or parent.

Bridges's (1980 and 1991), theory is one example of a theory proposing that people develop through the process of transition. That process begins with moving beyond or ending attachment to something in the past, then passing into an interim phase where we haven't quite accepted the new way of doing or thinking, to eventually incorporating the new way into our lives. Under this model our position in these phases is fluid, not necessarily sequential.

Sugarman (1996) also proposes that individuals develop by transitioning through life events. Sugarman outlines seven stages associated with transitions. They are:

1. Immobilization - feeling of being stuck
2. Reaction- experience of an extreme emotional reaction to change
3. Minimization – denial or minimization of the impact of the pending event
4. Letting go – separating from the past
5. Testing – we investigate new possibilities as a result of the change
6. Searching for meaning – making an effort to incorporate or learn from the event
7. Integration – becoming comfortable with the change

Schlossberg et al. (1995) described a process of transition involving three phases where individuals basically move in, through, and out of transition. They also stressed that how well a person may be equipped to manage transition in terms of relative strengths and weaknesses, available resources, and their ability to strategize is not only important, but crucial to their successful development.

Relational theories**.** Unlike theories described in the previous two models, the formation of relational theory has been built to a large extent on the experiences of

women (Clark and Caffarella, 1999). The principal basis of relational theory is that growth happens within the context of relationships. Each person becomes a more developed and a more active individual only as she is more fully related to others. Our sense of who we are is rooted in the motivation to enhance the way we relate to others. This view differs from many developmental theories which tend to revolve around the main goal of development being independence and autonomy which has been considered to fit with a male developmental model (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1993; Jordan, Walker, and Hartling, 2004; Miller, 1976 and 1986; Miller and Stiver, 1997).

Gilligan's (1992 and 1993) work focuses on the moral development of women. Drawing on Chodorow (1978), a feminist psychoanalyst and sociologist whose thinking was heavily influenced by object relations theory, believes that our egos are formed as a result of the early relationship with our mother. According to Chodorow (1978), the male child is able to separate more easily than the female child from the mother because he identifies with the father. The female child, caught up in resolving the complex process of separation and connection with the mother, however, struggles with ego development and the achievement of independence mostly due to her strong and lasting identification with her mother. The result of this, according to Chodorow, is not the negative failure to develop depicted by Freud, but just a different outcome for the two sexes, with females experiencing a greater sense of empathy and connection. Therefore, just as they grow within their relationship with the mother, they experience growth in relationship and connection with others.

Once an associate of Kohlberg (1984), Gilligan (1992 and 1993) conducted research which indicated that females are likely to take a path toward moral development that differs from the path taken by males. While males' moral decision making is based on justice, females' moral decision making is based on responsibility in relationships and caring. Suggesting three stages of moral development for women called preconventional, conventional, and postconventional, she found that the tendency to lean toward one way or the other is based in identity formation early in life. The ultimate developmental goal for women is to find balance between meeting one's own needs and those of others. Women must come to recognize that making a decision is making a choice and that they can accept responsibility for doing so. Gilligan also focused on the materialization of voice as a central concept in women's development. Gilligan's theory provides a framework of moral development that allows women the opportunity to be seen as moral and well-developed human beings, while taking into account the likely differences between the moral development of men and women.

Expanding on Gilligan's (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Gilligan, 1993) work in their well-known book, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) conceptualized women's intellectual growth and development of the self as related strongly to the manifestation of an individual voice in the context of relationships with others. They proposed five knowledge areas: Silence; Received Knowledge; Subjective Knowledge; Procedural Knowledge; and Constructed Knowledge.

Additional work in this model has been done at the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, Belenky, 1996; Jordan et al., 2004; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, Surrey, 1991) which

views empathy as a cognitive and emotional activity that enables the person in the relationship to experience the feelings of the other and at the same time, through this process of connection, come to understand her own feelings. This theory involves three key elements: the development of the ability to be empathic, the developmental process of mutual empathy, and the result which is mutual empowerment and self-knowledge. There must be a reasonable balance of power in the relationship and the individual must feel that her experience has been recognized by the other person involved for growth to take place. Relationships grounded in mutuality do not lead to an increase in the activities of one individual, alone, but to the empowerment of all the people involved. How well we are socialized to develop mutually empathic relationships is influenced by our cultural belief systems.

The more recent work in the relational model recognizes the value of both separation and connection in development and seeks to understand the intersection and balance between the two (Jordan et al., 2004). There is an additional understanding that the relationship exists not just at the individual level, but at societal and other larger organizational levels. An imbalance of power in relationships can result in the negative outcome of disconnection. Dominant parties in relationships often trivialize, deny, or are even consciously unaware of the imbalance of power and thereby deny the feelings or the voice of the non-dominant party. By addressing the relationship or that which connects us, instead of focusing on ourselves as independent and autonomous beings competing for independent goals, as Christina Robb (2006) indicates, "this changes everything". Examining the connection itself is seen as the key which may lead to the development of a mutually empathic relationship and eventual healing (Jordan et al., 2004).

Sociocultural framework. From a sociocultural point of view, individual change and development are contextual (Bee, 1997; Neugarten, 1996). Social and cultural forces create the basic impetus for developmental growth. The social roles we assume and the particular cultural and historical context within which we exist determine the expectations and normative timing of when we are expected to reach certain points in the developmental process.

There are many aspects of social influences affecting individual development to be considered. We all take on multiple social roles, such as that of a parent, student, teacher, sibling, and spouse. However, there are some roles which are of particular importance because of the strong overarching social and cultural expectations imposed on the individuals in those roles as well as the defining nature of them. For example, how we see ourselves and how we are seen in terms of gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and race or ethnicity can have significant implications in our lives. The timing and manner in which we are expected to behave, interact with others, achieve, and the socially appropriate choices we might have available to us are just some aspects of our lives that could be affected (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Tennant and Pogson, 1995). Therefore, it is not enough to realize the mere existence of complex and overlapping social roles or whether individuals adapt to them or not from an individual or psychological framework. It is equally, and perhaps, even more important to understand the context, origins, and underlying structure of social, cultural, economic, historic, and political forces that may seek to create and perpetuate social roles, social clocks and social systems.

Since the purpose of writing this section of this dissertation is to identify a framework within which to understand the development of the first-generation, female students who participate in my research, it makes sense to examine the socio-cultural aspects of their lives as it provides context for their development. First-generation female college students are typically members of marginalized groups, such as being low-income, minority and female, whose development may be affected significantly by often invisible structures and forces potentially working to keep them in their socially constructed and normed place. Illuminating those structures and forces in this section acknowledges the strong relationship that I believe exists between psychological development and the context in which it occurs. Drawing from relational theory, considering the two as separate does not allow for clear examination of the relationship.

According to Brookfield (2005), critical theory examines social, political, and economic structures and the power dynamics resulting from them. It examines knowledge and knowledge construction from a critical point of view. For example, deconstructing knowledge may involve unpacking that which has been accepted as truth, questioning it, examining it, and considering it in new ways. “To think critically is mostly defined as the process of unearthing, and then researching, the assumptions one is operating under, primarily by taking different perspectives on familiar, taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviors” (Brookfield, 2005, p. viiii). Systemic oppression and the role of dominant cultures are often a focus of critical theory. Exploring power dynamics in social systems may help us to understand their potential influence on individual development. One place where such power dynamics plays out is in our schools (Brookfield, 2005; Torres et al., 2003).

Critical pedagogy may be seen as a translation of critical theory into the practice of teaching. Freire (1998) and hooks (1994), for example, are well-known for their writings in critical pedagogy. Viewing schools as part of the dominant social system that seek to maintain the status quo, they call for active teaching for social justice to help students move from a place of internalized oppression to one of awareness and social action. Freire (1998) characterized lecture-style teaching of students without encouraging active engagement in knowledge construction a “banking” system of education whereby teachers deposit information into students. An alternative to this type of teaching is one that encourages active engagement of students to share a variety of perspectives and that empowers them with knowledge they need for effective social activism.

Unequal power structures often provide privileged status to the dominant group and an oppressed status to others. Individual development occurs within the context of those structures. It is influenced by the expectations and assumptions associated with the place one holds within the structure. Miller (1976) says:

> A dominant group, inevitably, has the greatest influence in determining a culture’s overall outlook – its philosophy, morality, social theory, and even its science. The dominant group, thus, legitimizes the unequal relationship and incorporates it into society’s guiding concepts (p. 8).

While it is imperative to understand how oppressive philosophies, structures, and practices might influence individual lives, if we are to understand human development, it’s also essential to understand how individuals interacting with those philosophies,

structures, and practices internalize them and incorporate them into their identities. Greene (2005) says the following:

> Identity is about continuity and distinctiveness, recognizable by self and others. Furthermore, often, in describing the identity of self or others, the emphasis is not on individuality but on commonality with a group or category of others. In this way, a person's identity as a woman may be both distinctive and, in some sense, identical to that of other women through shared membership of the category "woman" (p. 98).

Social identity may exist without personal identity. In other words, socially imposed expectations and/or assumptions are often made about individuals based on their social class, gender, or some other aspect of the context of their lives rather than on the individuals themselves. The assignment of one's place in the social order precedes and then feeds into personal identity development on an ongoing basis. For example, if one is born a boy or a girl, attitudes about how that individual will be expected to behave may form simply based on sex at the time of birth (Burr, 1998). In the case of Oliver Twist, used below to illustrate the point, the ragged clothes he wore shortly after birth quickly defined his social identity.

> What an excellent example of the power of dress, young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him to his proper station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same

> service, he was badged and ticketed and fell into his place at once – a parish child, the orphan of the workhouse, the humble, half-starved drudge – to be cuffed and buffeted through the world, despised by all and pitied by none (Dickens,1969, p. 26).

In addition to powerful sociocultural influences on personal identity development, according to Sheila Greene (2005), it should be emphasized that the process also involves self-awareness and reflection with the individual as an active participant. The construction and ongoing preservation of personal identity includes the integration of social identity as well as dynamic interaction of the self with the context in which she exists. Some shaping by biology, history, and environment exist, but the individual is constantly reinventing herself, constructing herself in a dynamic and open-ended system of development. Neugarten (1996) sees the adult as "self-propelling", meaning that individuals invent their futures and reinvent their histories through constant interactions with the biological and social aspects of their lives. She describes the life cycle as "a succession of social roles" and the personality as "the changing patterns of socialization" (p. 98).

Gender identity is one major aspect of development to highlight. How we assume our identities as gendered beings has been explained in several ways. Social learning theorists, such as Burr (1998) believe our identities are formed through a process of socialization during which we are encouraged to imitate the role models typifying desired behaviors and qualities for that role. Culture determines appropriate behaviors for men and women, including a vast array of matters such as employment, educational attainment, parenting, and social interactions.

Freud explained that it is through the resolution of the oedipal complex males separate from the mother to form an identity similar to that of their fathers, while girls end up identifying with the mother (Chodorow, 1978; Greene, 2005; Holmes, 1996; Miller and Stiver, 1997). Chodorow (1978) later defined this process in terms of attachment for girls and separation for boys. In Chodorow's case, in contrast to Freud, instead of anatomy, the center of psychological gender development is on family structure and the relationship with the mother. As stated earlier, Chodorow (1978) believes that females develop in a lasting connected relationship with the mother, which is in contrast to that of males who experience an easier and earlier process of separation from her.

Drawing on Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1993) suggests that because of the way that boys and girls are socialized they experience relationships and dependency differently. According to Chodorow (1978), women's issues of femininity don't depend on separation from the mother like the boys' do. There is no need, therefore, for her to separate from the mother to achieve the process of individuation. Gilligan (1993) reviews Chodorow's thoughts on gender identity development like this:

> Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation (p.8).

In addition to how gender identity is formed in the early years, its influence on adult development is also important. Consider Bem (1993), who states that individuals acquire gender identity and associated understandings of appropriate behavior through a socially

structured process. This process intentionally locates individuals in social situations that encourage the repetition of desired role-related practices. Citing our cultural acceptance of male dominance in relationships, Bem indicates that by the time we reach adulthood, we have internalized our place in relationship to others. This process creates a framework or schema through which we see the world and ourselves. Bem's theory might be compared with Kohlberg (1984) who indicates that individuals go through stages of gender identity development ultimately to reach a point where their identity with one gender is constant. While gender has an impact on our lives through adulthood, both theories locate the identification with one gender in childhood.

Josselson (1987 and 1992) proposed four statuses or characterizations of women's identity development. Foreclosures are women who have accepted their traditional roles. Identity Achievers have formed identities that are independent and separate from what might have been culturally expected. Moratoriums seek new experiences by experimenting and exploring. Identity Diffusions feel powerless, have trouble forming relationships. They tend to be anxious and to withdraw. Both Gilligan (1993) and Josselson (1987 and 1992) focused principally on critiquing or enhancing existing theory, such as that of Kohlberg (1984) and Marcia (1980). Note that the outcome of their work emphasized that women grow in connection and affiliation with others.

Other research (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Hancock, 1985; and Peck, 1986), which included both men and women, continued the examination of the potential differences between men and women's development in adulthood. Clark and Caffarella (1999) noted four central themes emerging in the literature on women's development:

- the centrality of relationships in the self-concept of women across age cohorts;
- the importance and interplay of roles such as spouse, mother, and worker to the development of women;
- the dominance of role discontinuities and change as the norm for women over linear sets of expectations and milestones; and
- diversity of experience across age cohorts (p. 33).

These emerging themes imply that women's experience does not fit well with traditional models of adult development which portray development as linear and progressing toward autonomy. There were only a few concepts coming out of those earlier models that seem relevant to women's development. They are: "periods of stability and transition" are part of adult life and "identity and intimacy" are important to women (Caffarella and Olson, 1993, p. 143). Women's lives otherwise appeared to be fluid with ever-changing and interacting roles, expectations and patterns. Women across cohorts experienced quite varied developmental expectations. Thus, there is no clear picture of what adult female development should look like. Throughout their lives, though, the role of relationships and connectedness appeared as central to development. Caffarella and Olson caution against making generalizations on their findings, citing limitations for doing so based on the formulation of their review and in the studies themselves.

In addition to gender development, racial and ethnic identity development is central to adult development. Multiple theoretical models have attempted to explain racial and ethnic identity development, such as those presented by Cross (1991) and Helms

(1992). Research has focused on some racial and ethnic groups more than others, leaving a need not only for more work with individual groups but also with those who have multiple racial and ethnic identities (Torres et al, 2003).

Typically race has been associated with physical attributes, such as skin color; ethnicity more to an individual's association with certain cultural and perceived value systems. It is now understood that race and ethnicity are social constructs. As mentioned previously, historically, in the United States, the dominant racial and ethnic group has been that of the white middle class. Social norms are structured around this dominant group's values. White identity is usually unconscious and invisible. It plays out in attitudes and behaviors, which helped to create and maintain the oppression of diverse groups in the United States. Such oppression results in the marginalization of those who are not part of the dominant white culture. The danger to development is in repeated exposure to systems maintained by dominant groups whereby the negative attitudes will be internalized in the subordinates (Miller, 1976; Rothenberg, 2007; Torres et al, 2003).

According to Rosenberg and Kaplan (1982), power, prestige, and respect are often tied to an individual's place in a stratified society. When there are differences in socioeconomic statuses, other differences are also assumed. Bee (1997) indicates that, in the United States, we are often filtered into social classes based on the combination of our level of education, income, and occupation. She points out privileges and advantages for those in the higher statuses and the limitations and obstacles faced by those who are considered to be of lower status, all of which has an impact on the ability to achieve beyond the level of family members of previous generations as well as on the relative quality of life.

Individuals who come from diverse racial, class, or cultural backgrounds must find a way to negotiate and integrate their identities between those parts of their lives and their role in the mainstream. Conflict between two aspects of their lives may develop as they attempt to integrate their backgrounds with their experiences (Torres et al, 2003). The systems in which people are socialized may influence the way in which they perceive their external realities and the ways in which they perceive themselves. For example, there are varying degrees of socialization in the culture among minority ethnic groups as well as varying degrees of encouragement for children to assimilate into the mainstream across various ethnic groups. Individuals also may differ in how well they are prepared to deal with stereotypes and discrimination. Sleeter (2002, p. 40) sums this idea up well: "The relationship between cultural beliefs and individuals, and between cultural beliefs and institutions is reciprocal; both levels influence one another." How being a member of a certain racial or ethnic group affects an individual's racial and ethnic identity development varies. For example, for some, who the United States defines as members of minority groups in legal terms or whose identity as part of a certain group based on appearance, conscious awareness of that identification is mostly unavoidable. The impact on identity development of this conscious awareness can result in the interplay between both positive and negative experiences related to being identified in certain ways. On one hand, the impact of belonging to a community with shared cultural beliefs and engagement in related activities can positively impact development. Conversely, negative connotations, messaging, and treatment of racial or ethnic groups by others are likely to have a negative influence on identity development. In this regard, differences translated into underlying assumptions are more important than any actual physical or visible

differences (Clark and Caffarella, 1999; Rosenberg and Kaplan, 1982). Phinney (1990) describes ethnic identity development as a process of resolving both the negative treatment by dominant groups and the dissonance between belief and value systems which she believes is common to members of all ethnic minority groups. Clark and Caffarella (1999) suggest that the resolution of the two issues "may depend on the strength of the individual's cultural experience" (p. 43).

Integrative framework. From an integrative point of view, it is recognized that, while it may be helpful to isolate certain dimensions of adult development in order to study them, ultimately adult development is far too complex to explain it in such simple terms. For example, the previous section regarding identity development and social roles may be oversimplified by the fact that it in many ways neglects to take into account the complex intersection of those roles and all that is associated with them (Torres et al, 2003). It often does not fully acknowledge the complexity of the individual as an agent in his or her own life. Many theories do not fully address underlying questions related to the extent to which sociocultural and other life circumstances influence individual development and to what extent they define us and restrict our choices and development. The integrative framework acknowledges the dynamic relationship existing between various aspects of development. It focuses on the intersection of multiple intricately interwoven characteristics of development and the influence that one has on the other (Clark and Caffarella, 1999).

> People are always multiply positioned socially and culturally. Therefore, understanding how these various contextual factors influence development is not

> enough; we must also gain a clearer picture of how the intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity affect how adults develop (p.6).

Adults live within relationships with other people that influence their lives and their choices. All of this happens within a social and historical context that strongly influences people's lives.

Time. Some theorists have considered time as an integrating feature of development (Baltes, 1987; Neugarten, 1996). Greene (2005) indicates that all human beings exist in time, with a past, a present and a future. We are shaped by past events and by our interpretations of them as well as our expectations of the future. "Time is both central to our being and our becoming" (Greene, 2005, p. 15).

Three different types of time are typically considered: social, life, and historical time. Social time is concerned with behaviors considered culturally appropriate at different points in the life cycle. Age-related influences, which are often associated with chronological age, are frequently tied to physiological changes. Social clocks are culturally constructed to manage and maintain social structure. They are influenced by cultural shifts and changes and, therefore, may vary by cohort. Social clocks have a powerful influence over expectations associated with acceptable behaviors at various points in the life span. For example, when one is expected to join the workforce, attend college, marry, or to have children is associated with socially acceptable behavior. Some of these expectations are tied to the biological clock and others are "socially enshrined" (Greene, 2005, p. 127). Consequently, as Neugarten (1996) suggests, not managing one's

life in accordance with these expectations can cause considerable stress for the individual.

Historical time or the specific point in history in which one lives is the third type of time explored. Differences in the experiences throughout life can be associated with generational cohorts. Some examples of circumstances that may have a significant impact on cohorts are available medical care, educational opportunities, technology, economic variables, and wars. For instance, women across several cohorts in the United States have experienced huge differences in their opportunities to engage in the pursuit of higher education. Such opportunities have evolved from being non-existent to preparing women to be good wives and ladies to the full involved we enjoy today at all levels of higher education. Thus, people from different generations are exposed to varying social contexts which have an impact on their lives in different ways (Clark and Caffarella, 1999). In her critical review of women's development theories, Sheila Greene (2005), points out the importance of locating women in social and historical time in order to understand their experiences and emphasizes the connection of social change in the bigger picture with individual lives that are constantly changing. She argues against early development theories that are fixated on the past as a determinant of future development, indicating the following:

> Backward-looking theories divert attention from the importance of understanding the nature of women's life course change and the multiple influences on that change. They fix and universalize the origins of female personality and limit the scope for change. So, when the focus is on first relationships, political and

discursive contingencies are disregarded. When a theory is deterministic in this way, the role of chance, emergence and agency is not considered (p. 144).

Separation and connection. Separation and connection are repeating themes in theories of development. And, while the subject of this review is adult development, it is important to realize that many adult development theories have at their roots assumptions about development in infancy and childhood, and the continued influence they are perceived to have on behavior, personality, and development in adulthood. Intimacy and identity are two major areas where this appears to be especially true. In many of the major theories mentioned (Erikson, 1982; Levinson, 1978, for example), attachment is most often seen as an obstacle to overcome. The relationship between attachment, intimacy, and autonomy is also the basis for Attachment Theory, which suggests that adult relationships are based on the early experience of separation, intimacy, and attachment (Holmes, 1996). These assumptions regarding attachment or identification with the mother can be traced back to Freud (Holmes, 1996). Greene (2005) argues that even the more recent theories of women's development have failed to be free of such underlying assumptions and they, therefore, have not taken into account fully the temporal location of women's development. Greene advocates for a completely new point of view that doesn't force women's development to fit into previously developed restrictive schemas.

For example, Gilligan (1993), whose theory of identity development was outlined earlier, draws on Attachment Theory to explain why previous theories based on mostly male developmental experiences don't necessarily apply to females. Consequently, like Chodorow (1978), Gilligan's theory and the work of those at the Stone Center have at the

core a framework for early development based on attachment versus separation that is traceable back to Freud. While Chodorow (1978) offers a variation on Freud's model, this framework as restrictive (Greene, 2005). Recent work on women's development has taken a critical step forward by including women in its research, but it really asks that women's experience be allowed space in already existing frameworks of development (Greene, 2005). "The limitations of these theories are worrying in that despite their avowedly woman-centered perspective, they continue in many ways to perpetuate an extremely restricted version of women's lives, focused on heterosexuality, reproduction, and relationships" (Greene, 2005, p. 72).

Greene (2005) criticizes the adoption of psychoanalytic theories as the basis for women's psychological development because of what she sees as the essentialist and fatalistic aspects of them. Since the emphasis for healthy development is positioned at the time of her early relationships with her mother and father and a continual struggle with phallic symbols, the woman's developmental fate is pre-determined. There is no space for her to grow and change throughout her life. A possible alternative is that the woman is positioned as a self in time will full agency for identity development that is not pre-determined by her early relationship with her mother (Greene, 2005). Considering gender identity, then, it is not fixed in childhood by the age of three as some theorists suggest (Bem, 1993; Kohlberg, 1984) nor is it fixed as a result of the early connection with the mother as Chodorow (1978) suggests. It may vary from person to person and within the same person from time to time depending on the person and the context.

There is also a lack of attention to culture in developmental theory according to Greene (2005). She states:

> One might choose to argue that the self or selves of women are to a greater or lesser extent gendered and that, given the configurations of contemporary Western society and the construction of gender difference within it, many women will, in comparison to men, place more emphasis on relationship and connection (p. 104).

Then, referring to the work of Belenky et al. (1997), Greene (2005) points out that many oppressed groups assume an approach to knowledge similar to connected knowing. Since women have been an oppressed group, the connected nature of their behavior and development coming out in their research may be a result of their response to oppression rather than the result of their development in connection as Chodorow (1978) indicates. Further, Greene (2005) states that the display of a great degree of attention and sensitivity to the needs of others is typically a feature displayed by those without power. She believes this potential alternative explanation for women's behavior and orientation toward connectedness, which is not contemplated in relational developmental models, should be considered. While those at the Stone Center acknowledge a need to include men and those of culturally diverse backgrounds in the research (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, Surrey, 1991; Jordan et al., 2004), Greene's (2005) points go beyond inclusion of men in research based on existing theoretical frameworks to the questioning of fundamental assumptions.

Narrative. The biographical interview has been widely used in psychological research. Individual case studies are common. The narrative approach, however, differs in that it is the individual's construction of meaning in their lives and the researcher's ability to interpret and come to know them through the story that are central (Reinharz,

1992). The story can be seen "as a metaphor for human life" (Clark and Caffarella, 1999, p. 77). The stages of human life "are echoed in one another" (Bateson, 2000, p. 246). Drawing on central ideas of feminist research, a narrative approach to understanding human development is based on the premise that we make meaning of our world through storytelling (Greene, 2005). The story is a structure that we use to organize human experience. It attempts to explain life as it is lived or seen by the individual living it from the inside rather than on observable behaviors. In the case of women, it is based on her experience as a real person and her lived experience of the world. The researcher allows space for the marginalized voice of women to be heard from her point of view. As we develop, we construct a personal narrative. Narratives can be seen as text that is open to "deconstruction and interpretation" (Greene, 2005, p. 68), not merely a story of the individual's life, but rather a narrative that has been formed based on the individual's perspective and discourses to which she has been exposed.

The story then places the individual's life in context of all aspects of the person's life, taking into consideration cultural, social, and historical factors. The story is not simply a factual tale or an account of events, but rather it includes the individual's interpretation or the meaning of events based on that person's own experience of the world. It is reflective and retrospective. Bateson (2000) suggests that the relative developmental significance of the choices we make and actions we take may often only be understood in retrospect and she illustrates this point well:

> The most important covenants in life, whether in childhood or in adulthood, are accepted without understanding what fidelity to them will mean, for meaning never ceases to evolve with age. The Hippocratic Oath; the vows of citizenship

> and office; and especially the vows taken in marriage cannot be made with full understanding (p. 137).

This point implies movement back and forth through the story, that the narrative is ever-evolving and developing as new experiences add meaning to the interpretation of past experiences. Narrative may be limited for the following reasons. Memory may be flawed. We are taught that we should always be working toward a better self. Since we are provided with appropriate examples of life stories for women, we may construct our life stories in a way that becomes appropriate. Also, developmental theory is based on the premise that history determines the future. So, the interpretation of our stories, even by us, can be influenced by this belief (Greene, 2005).

At the beginning of this section, I said that when development is reduced to its most basic characteristic, it is often associated with change that occurs over a period of time. When theory explains development based on the underlying assumption that the outcome of experience at a fixed point in time in early childhood determines development in adulthood, it essentially traps the individual so that she cannot change over time. “It is the case, then, that biological, historical and social forms of determinism have widespread currency as explanations of the genesis of female behavior” (Greene, 2005, p. 140). Greene criticizes developmental psychology (2005, p. 141):

> Although developmental psychology claims to be about change in time, it is all too often trapped by the discipline’s desire to fix the human being and deal with her as though she had properties which can be described and understood in a timeless, context-free framework.

As an alternative view of development that involves the examination of ongoing change with the individual as an active participant in exchange with the environment, moving and changing in time through active interpretation of experiences. Since all we ever have is the biased perspective of living in the present, anticipating the future, and reflecting on the past, a theoretical framework that involves consideration of context and provides space for constant re-evaluation makes more sense to me than one that is fixed (Greene, 2005).

Theories in Context

It is important to stress the point that all the theories mentioned in this section are ideas resulting from inquiry into human development. Mainstream ideas, including deeply held beliefs about groups of people, often gain currency in theories that then, in turn, may be used to validate the original idea. For example, throughout history, from the earliest biblical stories of women's social and personal stature in relationship to men, women were viewed not only as different, but inferior, less important and less moral than men, with expectations for deviant and subservient behavior (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Gilligan, 1993; Solomon, 1985; Stanton, 2002). Theories of development created through that lens depicted women's development as such. As mentioned previously, Freud, for example, explained differences in women's development by focusing on differences in male and female anatomy. He saw men's developmental path as normal and, in contrast, women's different developmental path as a failure to develop fully (Crain, 2000). Thus, the flawed underlying thinking upon which these early theories were based limits their meaningful application to the lives of women and others who do not fit the socially constructed norm.

Thus, we should examine theories of human development by considering them within the context in which they were developed and with the understanding that knowledge is always evolving. As Goldberger says, “Theories are stories and authors of theories are storytellers”, (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, Belenky, 1996, p. 1). Stories or theories of human development like all other stories and those who articulate them are influenced by the social and historical context in which they are conceived and understood. Stories change over time in the “telling and retelling” of them (Goldberger et al., 1996, p.2). The construction of our theoretical schema, therefore, is an ongoing process. One theorist builds upon earlier theorists’ ideas and/or perhaps introduces completely new and opposing ideas which results in revising, shifting, and bringing to light new ways of interpreting experiences and information. These points are especially significant in regard to understanding women’s development.

Pioneering theorists such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997), Brown and Gilligan (1992), Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1993), and, Miller (1976), realized the importance of critically examining theories as they related to women's development. They illuminated bias in human development theory, among other things pointing out that major and foundational theorists such as Piaget (1952), Kohlberg (1984) and Erikson (1982) based their theoretical assumptions on the study of male subjects and in many ways dismissed women’s experience. Some theorists later responded to such criticisms by revising their theories. For example, Kohlberg (Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer; 1983) revised his thinking about moral development to include women’s experiences, concluding that there are two different ways of thinking about morality.

Levinson and Levinson (1987) is another example of a theorist who revised his thinking by later doing research with women and writing about his findings.

As stated previously, development theories often attempt to explain change in people's lives. Understanding change often translates into the tendency to look for patterns and timelines of change, which can all be socially determined. The internal and external forces that influence adult development are inextricably entwined. How we are socialized and the social roles we assume or that are assigned to us and the resulting opportunities and barriers we find before us can influence our individual development significantly (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Rothenberg, 2007; Tennant and Pogson, 1995). So, although changes in adult development theoretical thinking have progressed to be more inclusive of diverse experiences of development, the incorporation of diverse points of view continues to be part of the ongoing discourse within the study of adult development (Caffarella and Olson, 1993).

As time has passed and the study of adult development has progressed, historical and contextual hindsight has illuminated theoretical shortfalls. Complexities related to underlying theoretical assumptions continue to be uprooted offering the opportunity for critical examination to expose bias and limitations that were previously not recognized, acknowledged, or understood. The narrative development of contemporary theoretical thought around theories of adult development seems to be moving away from a positivist quest for an overly simplistic series of stages assumed to be common to all individuals in all cultures at all times toward a more postmodern approach that includes an understanding of the limitations created by the construction of theory and interpretation of human experience within an ever-changing context. It seems to be moving toward

openness to accepting the many layers of complexity created by the dynamic interchange between and among both the internal interactive processes of the individual regarding all aspects of development as well as the incorporation into those processes the results of the individual's interactions with the external environment. By moving in this direction it creates space for diverse experiences of development. Instead of measuring everyone against artificial ideas of normal, the meaning of developmental change for men and women from varied backgrounds and orientations can be embraced. It moves us away from a destiny that is predetermined toward one where there is freedom of choice in constructing our lives.

Maxine Greene (1988) discusses freedom in her book *The Dialect of Freedom*. She makes the distinction between liberty and freedom with liberty merely providing the space for freedom. To be truly free she suggests people have to understand and know that they can see themselves and their situations as different. They must know that they have the power to make choices. Otherwise, we restrict our own freedom of choice not only by accepting the socially constructed limitations around our roles, but by allowing them to filter our own views of the world and the options we have available to us. The choices we make often determine what experiences we'll have, which in turn influences how we develop. To ensure freedom, as Maxine Greene describes it, and to ensure that women and others continue to be empowered as agents of their own developmental potential, careful understanding of how theoretical frameworks of adult development gain prevalence in our everyday lives is essential. Sheila Greene (2005), calling for more research specifically in women's development that focuses on "diversities of pathways" (p. 144) writes:

> Situating women in time, with time, helps us to see that when we talk about development we are talking about emergence and about possibility. Inevitably, we are talking also about constraints – the constraints of history, place and the demands of the mortal body. However, what we can dismantle are the unnecessary constraints such as limiting theories about women's life course commitments and about their capacity for change. The manner in which our lives are dictated by the political and social structures of our society is also open to challenge and to change (p. 144).

"Emergence" and "possibility" are empowering words that seem to aptly describe a human process of change that occurs over time.

The Manifestation of Barriers to Success for Low-Income Women

The ladder of success is best climbed by stepping on the rungs of opportunity. - Ayn Rand

Introduction. As Ayn Rand (1905-1982) suggests, each rung on the ladder of success may be thought of as an opportunity, and therefore, to achieve success, each step on the way up is to be embraced. Anyone who has climbed a ladder knows it is far better to do so when the ladder consists of sturdy rungs, when it is resting squarely against a solid structure, and when someone you trust is anchoring it firmly at its base. How high the ladder extends, the variable strength, skill, and confidence one has to climb the ladder, and how firm the ground is upon which the ladder stands all influence the likelihood of a victorious ascent.

Prevalent thinking in the United States supports the premise that we all have equal access to the same ladder and, accordingly to the same opportunities for success, even if we have to start at the bottom (Delpit, 2006; Jones, 2006; LePage-Lees, 1997; Shipler, 2005; Sleeter, 2002). Upward mobility, therefore, is attainable for all in our seemingly classless system of meritocracy. The only thing separating those who succeed from those who do not is their relative motivation to climb the ladder. Consequently, all we have to do is choose a successful trajectory by accessing the ladder through hard work and determination.

According to this popular viewpoint, since achieving success is a matter of choice, it follows that those who do not succeed must be irresponsible or somehow personally lacking in ability or the desire to scale the ladder. bell hooks (2000), a feminist and social activist, illustrates the outcome for the unsuccessful like this, “To be poor in

the United States today is to always be at risk, the object of scorn and shame."(p. 45). Also inherent in this viewpoint is the idea that if the poor do not succeed, it is nobody's fault but their own. Conversely, the success of those who do well is seen as attributable to their individual efforts. Those who do not easily succeed are often defined as personal failures and labeled as special, different, deficient, at risk, and/or disadvantaged (Delpit, 2006; Jones, 2006; LePage-Lees, 1997; Shipler, 2005).

According to Adair and Dahlberg (2003), embedded in this widespread belief system is the assertion that educational opportunities equalize access to the ladder. Since education systems are microcosms of the larger society, however, they are shaped by overall economic, social, and political beliefs, policies, and activities. Thus, our education systems, too, are likely to be infused with a pervasive ideology of meritocracy. Critical examination of our education systems and the educational outcomes for various student groups, in fact, reveal that, based on income, gender, and race, the opportunity for academic success is not equal for all groups (Adair and Dahlberg, 2003; Gilbert, 2008; Shipler, 2005; Sweet, 2001). Students of low socio-economic status are less likely to graduate from high school than their wealthier peers with only 44 percent versus 80 percent graduating (Wirt, Choy, Provasnik, Rooney, Anindita, and Tobin, 2003). Furthermore, in terms of participation in higher education, the gap between affluent and lower income students has actually increased (Callan, 2004). By age 26, 60 percent of students from families of upper socioeconomic status will have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, while only 7 percent of students from families of lower socioeconomic status will have done so by that same age (Ingels, Curtin, Kaufman, Alt, and Chen, 2002). These outcomes imply the existence of inequities in our education systems that impede

the success of some students while facilitating the achievement of others (Adair and Dahlberg, 2003; Gilbert, 2008), which actually contributes to the perpetuation of social stratification (Gladieux and Swail, 1998). Social stratification refers to the ranking of individuals within society based on certain characteristics, such as wealth. Socioeconomic status, which signifies the location of an individual or family within that stratified system, is a strong indicator of preparation for college (Burleson, Hallett, and Park, 2008).

Holyfield (2002) supports an alternative to the unexamined acceptance of the meritocratic point of view. She suggests that if we use a sociological framework to examine poverty and social stratification, we will be forced to acknowledge patterns in the high occurrence of poverty among women and children, who principally make up the poor in the United States, and that large sectors of society are more likely than others to be poor. Since my dissertation work focuses on first-generation female college students who are often poor and working-class women, exploring the salience of social class as it relates to their success makes sense to me.

For the reasons just stated, I attempt in this section to use a sociological lens to explore the circumstances of poor and working-class women's lives which create barriers to their success. I will not, however, conduct an exhaustive literature review of sociological theories. I focus on work that looks specifically at the circumstances of poor and working-class women's lives and the barriers to success they encounter, especially as they relate to social stratification.

Defining class. Socioeconomic status is social construct. It is a way of categorizing a person or family's standing in society based on such factors as education level, social class, income level, and job type (National Center for Education Statistics [N.C.E.S.], 2007). According to Holyfield (2002), sociologists who study class differences in the contemporary United States typically define class by considering income, occupation, and education. She adds that when combined with gender and race, those three conditions principally determine our place in the social structure.

According to Gilbert (2008), while acknowledgement of social stratification can be traced back to ancient philosophy, Marx (1998) and Weber (2003) heavily influenced subsequent theorists whose work make up the body of modern sociology. Gilbert (2008) indicates, however, that the American class structure is very complex and constantly evolving. For example, the changing role of women in the workplace has confounded the way that the social class of families was typically determined based on the husband's occupation, education, and income.

Other, contemporary writers, who also take a sociological point of view when studying how the existence of social class in the U.S. is not only denied but also that many people are completely unaware of their role in it, and how it plays out in everyday life, agree with Gilbert that understanding the meaning of social class in the United States is difficult and complex (Dodson, 1999; Shipler, 2005). For instance, Keller (2005), noting its complexity, struggled to define class in contemporary United States. He offers the rather simplistic definition below:

> At its most basic, class is one way societies sort themselves out. Even societies built on the idea of eliminating class have had stark differences in rank. Classes are groups of people of similar economic and social position; people who, for that reason, may share political attitudes, lifestyles, consumption patterns, cultural interests, and opportunities to get ahead. Put ten people in a room and a pecking order emerges. (p. 8)

Keller's definition leaves me wondering how various people are sorted into classes and why. It does not address possible dynamics at play within the social system. While perhaps a good starting place for further inquiry, his definition seems too simplistic.

Like Keller, hooks (2000), a social activist and feminist whose commentary highlights how class issues play out in everyday life, also points to shared views and behaviors among those within a given class status, but she goes beyond social structural location to the more meaningful personal level. She suggests that class status provides a framework through which we experience the world. To illustrate her point, she quotes from Rita Mae Brown's *The Last Straw*:

> Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act. (p. 103)

This description speaks to something much deeper than sorting, something richer than a pecking order. It is in alignment with the nature of social class as described by Pierre Bourdieu (1991).

Bourdieu (1991), a French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher, is well-known for his approach to understanding social class and related power dynamics. He suggested that there are four types of capital: “social, economic, cultural, and symbolic”. He stresses social stratification and agency in both the development of and the replication of class status. In other words, while he recognized differences across class boundaries, he believed that change could take place as a result of individuals or groups challenging and redefining the status quo.

Bourdieu’s work included noting differences in “tastes” across class boundaries. Specifically, he indicated that the upper class have certain tastes for the aesthetic and luxury to match their lifestyles and the members of the lower class have taste for that which they need to survive, reflecting the reality of their lower status. One could, therefore, distinguish members of various classes by exploring commonalities within social fractions. He indicated that these distinctions are developed through the process of early socialization and are largely, but not solely, based on economic means which can be converted into cultural capital. Cultural capital involves the embodiment of social skills, tastes, language, and habits that define an individual’s place in society. Those falling into various social class categories share similar perspectives as well as cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic preferences, otherwise known as cultural capital.

Bourdieu (1991) believes that the dominant class defines that which is highly valued through a process of assigning “symbolic capital”. Those within all social classes in the system accept as valuable that which is defined by the dominant class. Those in the lower classes, by virtue of accepting their symbolic place in the system and living out their lives as such, help to support the structure’s existence. Through this process the

dominant class exerts the power to control by the implicit, and even unspoken, understanding of social status. The entire system replicates itself through the acceptance of the role definitions and value assigned by the dominant class.

Schwalbe (2008) also indicates that the reproduction of inequality is more complex than the mere replication of social location or a status. Consistent with Bourdieu (1991), Schwalbe (2008) suggests thinking of class as a process rather than a status. The process plays out through the enacting of relationships. Over time it is how people interact and relate to each other which sustain class status of individuals and class boundaries in a society. Based on the meaning and value people give to things "…people create tangible realities by acting on definitions of reality" (Schwalbe, 2008, p. 105).

It is clear that social stratification is a much more complex issue than income level or the mere categorization of people based on a combination of variables or perceived tastes. The inequalities, attitudes, and beliefs associated with class boundaries, which translate into attitudes and actions in the everyday lives of individuals and are largely denied to exist in our culture, are not straightforward or even known to the very people who take part in the process, but they are not without serious consequence either. In fact, the implications for people in various class statuses are profound (Schwalbe, 2008). So, what does this all mean in practical terms? What are the effects of class stratification in the contemporary lives of poor and working-class women in United States? What role does being a woman who is a member of one class or another play in determining access to and success in higher education?

The journey to class consciousness. To understand the implications of class status and its impact we must first admit to its existence. While sociologists may be clear on class boundaries, I include some mainstream writers here to help illustrate that the common denial of the presence of class stratification in the United States renders the journey to class consciousness for most of us murky. In many ways, because of the invisibility of working-class and poor individuals resulting from denial of class stratification, their association with class status is not easily recognizable. Further, if they remain invisible then those who benefit from the inequities cannot be forced to acknowledge their own privileged status or held accountable for their role in the suffering of others (Schwalbe, 2008). For those who are more fortunate, admitting the existence of class stratification would mean for some that they would then have to acknowledge their own place of privilege and accept responsibility for their role in the less fortunate place of others. hooks (2000) speculates that middle-class and even working-class people turn their backs on the poor and their needs for basic necessities as a defense mechanism. Because of the negative attitudes toward those at the lowest social levels, others fear being associated with them in addition to fearing the intensity of their own vulnerability to poverty. The increasing complexity of our society, including globalization and advances in technology, along with the accessibility of consumer goods makes it increasingly difficult for most of us to recognize the effects of class boundaries. In addition, the lines of division often appear blurred by intersecting variables, such as sexism and racism. For example, hooks (2000) admits that after reflecting critically on the process of discovery she experienced to reach an understanding of discrimination and oppression, she realized that classism had been eclipsed by a concentration on racism and

sexism. She believes now, however, that classism is an even more significant issue because it cuts through the boundaries of racism and sexism. Jones (2006) went through a similar struggle to reach an understanding of social class, and agrees with hooks about its salience. She points out that our society is willing to embrace open discourse about racism and feminism, along with other political and social topics, but there is little access to discourse about classism. Further illustrating the point is Keller (2005) who also went through a process of discovery to realize the importance of class. While working on a series of newspaper stories for *The New York Times,* an inquiry which began about race, ultimately he realized he could not deny either the existence of or the negative implications of classism. He writes of class: "…it was clear that the subject of class was more formidable-vast, amorphous, politically charged, largely unacknowledged" (Keller, 2005, p. ix).

Accounts of such journeys to class consciousness are interesting. In each case the writer indicated moving from denial of the existence of social class stratification, to an implicit understanding of it and then to the more explicit by examining his or her own social locations as well as hearing the stories of others. A deeper understanding of the meaning of class status was gained by the authors just mentioned by going beyond overarching sociological theories to examining the everyday lives of people of lower class standing and how they are affected by social, political, and economic dynamics (Dodson, 1999; Holyfield, 2002; Keller, 2005; LePage-Lees, 1997). To move to this new level of understanding, they first had to become receptive to admitting that there could be differences across class lines, including, most importantly, their own. Thus,

acknowledging that social stratification exists is the first step toward understanding the complexity of class status and classism.

The power of silence. The internalization of mainstream meritocratic beliefs through the process Bourdieu (1991) called "symbolic violence" further serves to silence the poor and working class at the macro level. Symbolic violence is a power dynamic in the social system which results in the lower class members accepting their place and acting accordingly. Thus, through such acceptance and silence they collude in the process of their own domination (Schwalbe, 2008). In a meritocratic belief system, we believe we rise or fall on our own merit. As a result, we are not only blind to other forces that may be in play to define and maintain our social location; we are also unlikely to protest. hooks (2000) indicates that this phenomenon is sometimes called "class genocide" (p.2) because it involves denying the existence of one's own class.

Power is a dynamic that plays out in relationships (Jordan et al., 2004; Miller, 1976 and 1986). This is true at both the individual and the macro level. How power is levied varies depending on the relationship and who has the power. One way that power is exerted in relation to social class is through the use of silence. Jones (2006) points out that it should not be assumed that any silence is void of communication. In fact, silence is a powerful tool. The way we communicate, including language practices and texts, is steeped with ideological beliefs and perspectives. "…silences are filled with unspoken language, images, affect" (Jones, 2006, p. 56). Issues regarding classism are often learned implicitly, conveyed through silent messages of disapproval or omission.

According to Rothenberg (2007), attitudes based on underlying belief systems, such as racism, classism, or sexism, influence where individuals are believed to belong within socially stratified systems. These attitudes are not only conveyed to the individual through individual acts, but they are also institutionalized. Institutionalized beliefs and attitudes permeate organizational philosophies and systems. They are reinforced with each interaction the individual has within the system. Repeated exposure to those attitudes and beliefs in turn influences the socialization and personal identity development of individuals. The individuals operating within them may come to accept the institutionalized attitudes as their own through a process of internalization. Once this occurs, they are not only restricted by the structure of the system they operate within, they also restrict their own options by operating within the underlying belief systems.

One example of where such beliefs may play out is in our education system. For instance, if most of the teachers in our education system are white, as Sleeter (2002) points out they are, and the system is controlled by the white dominant group in our society; the same group who tends not to see themselves as part of a group or to recognize institutionalized oppression, then it stands to reason that the system they maintain would reflect their beliefs. It would follow that the system would be set up to facilitate success for students who are part of the dominant group. With a pervading philosophy of meritocracy in the United States, which includes denial of any systemic oppression, the focus on young people in school and other activities is also on their own personal performance. The burden of performance is placed on the individual rather than on the structure of any system in which they are participants. If they fail to meet the expectations or standards set by these systems that create the school standards or

activities, they are looked upon as individual failures. Those who succeed are seen as worthy of reward and power. Students who come from backgrounds that are not consistent with the white middle class mainstream, such as first-generation students, are often faced with trying to negotiate within systems that do not meet their needs, are inconsistent with their cultures, including language barriers, and that too often interpret their experience as negative because it is different. So, the young African-American student who is attempting to negotiate S.A.T. tests or the young woman who is searching for female role models in U.S. history with which to identify, may find that the system is not structured to meet their needs, to empower them, or to foster a strong sense of identity or self-worth. The outcomes of institutional policies and practices and the individuals who operate within them may reinforce the internalization of negative identities through the messages they convey to students, indicating that they are different and don't belong. Thus, individual acts of discrimination are not needed to contribute to the negative impact on the person's identity formation because through the accumulation of negative experiences in a system designed to maintain the status quo, individuals learn to internalize the stratification of their ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, or class. Christine Sleeter (2002) summarizes it well:

> Race is one axis of oppression in the U.S.; social class and gender are equally important axes. About 90 percent of our teaching population is White, and most teachers, as Whites, are members of the dominant racial group. As such, most never have been victims of racism nor have experienced racial minority communities in the same way people of color do. Whites draw on their own experience to understand inequality, and their interpretation of that experience

> usually upholds their belief that the rules of society apply roughly the same to everyone. Have and have-nots rise or fall by their own merit or effort, for the most part (p. 36).

Sleeter (2002, p.43) goes on, "…stereotypes arise as a consequence of barriers, then are used to justify barriers." In other words, when we believe that there is no difference in opportunities between groups, we are then justified in believing that all students are part of the dominant culture and they do indeed have the same privileges.

As Olson (2002) says, "It is important to distinguish between prejudice and privilege. Whereas racial prejudice is negative action directed against an individual, privilege is passive advantage that accrues to an individual or group" (p. 81). While many privileged individuals may not be actively prejudiced, they often are unable to see their part in the system that creates advantage for them. Their strong buy-in to and internalization of the philosophy of meritocracy and that the system is open to everyone plays a major role in their inability to see it. The inverse may be true for individuals who do not have the advantage of privilege. In either case the internalization of belief systems has an impact on how we see ourselves and others.

Social stratification keeps marginalized groups at social, political, and economic levels of the least privilege in our society, while those who are part of the mainstream continue to stay in the most privileged positions. Understanding the relevance of social stratification to the context of their development is particularly important. Apple (1985) describes the complexity of the situation this way:

> The crisis, though clearly related to processes of capital accumulation, is not only economic. It is political and cultural/ideological as well. In fact, it is at the intersection of these three spheres of social life, how they interact, how each supports and contradicts the others, that we can see it in its most glaring form (p. 2).

According to Delpit (2006), whose culture is valued, whose voice is heard, and who gets the best education is all determined by who has the power. Tatum (1997) suggests, since it can be difficult for white people to see themselves as part of a group, it can be especially difficult for them to understand that they are part of this dominant culture of power. They are accustomed to seeing themselves as individuals, which is consistent with the philosophy of meritocracy. Understanding racism requires the ability and willingness to see one's own place of power and privilege. Sleeter (2002) supports this idea by clarifying that our perceptions are limited by the position we hold in society. To illustrate how white privilege can have an impact on even a person's everyday life, in *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, Peggy McIntosh (1990) lists fifty of what she perceives to be the "daily effects of white privilege" (p. 2). For example, number one on her list is: "I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time." McIntosh translates the idea of white privilege succinctly into everyday life experiences. If not pointed out, the items on her list may seem so basic to the white person's construction of social order, so taken for granted, they could simply be overlooked.

In *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit (2006) offers five aspects of power that she believes are common themes in what she calls the "culture of power" (p. 24). They are:

- Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
- There are codes or rules for participating in power, that is, there is a culture of power.
- The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
- If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
- Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence (p. 24).

The enactment of power in the classroom, according to Delpit (2006), includes a wide range of issues including everything from the choice of textbooks to the fact that one person or group can determine another person's intelligence or to what degree that person is considered to be normal. The codes or rules Delpit mentions include the way that people communicate and the way that they present themselves. Those students who are from families whose cultures are not consistent with the white middle class culture of the school tend not to do as well academically as those who do come from that background because their culture is different and, therefore, they operate with a different set of codes and rules. Delpit believes that communication breaks down between people from different cultural backgrounds because information is passed to one another implicitly and unless one understands the rules, the communication loses its meaning. Delpit

believes that we can teach students and others what the rules are of the dominant culture and that this will enable students of other cultures to operate more successfully within the dominant culture existing in the schools. Finally, in regard to the last item on her list, those who are not in the dominant groups are most likely to be more aware of the dominant group's power partly because the dominant group has the authority to "establish truth" without regard to the feelings of the non-dominant group (Delpit, 2006, p. 26). Drawing on relational theory, denial of the existence of the relationship of power leaves the subordinate group unable to address it openly. Without being able to address the relationship or the connection between the groups and its impact on the individuals involved, the real issues which are embedded in the connection between the groups will go unresolved with the focus remaining on the separate groups and individuals within them.

Jones (2006) provides examples of how silence is used in oppressive ways at the individual level which is based on her observations and experience in the elementary school classroom. Teachers who do not understand the experiences of children who are from backgrounds different from their own may not know how to react to their stories. Jones indicates that because there is no language to describe experiences other than those of the middle class, the reaction from the teacher is often silence. The silence itself often sends the message to the student that her story is socially inappropriate. Since the student's story is not acknowledged it is communicated that it is not valued, the result is that the student is silenced. Even subtle reactions or non responses can silence the student and make her feel worthless. If her story is not worth sharing because it does not fit with

mainstream experiences and ideals, then it should not be told. Many messages about class are unspoken.

Jones (2006) also indicates that lessons related to what is socially appropriate are often passed down intergenerationally. As a defense mechanism, families may teach their children to be silent about certain aspects of their lives in order to fit in. For example, children who live in undesirable neighborhoods may be judged because of where they live. Others may imply or say outright that they don't want their children going into the dangerous neighborhoods in which they live. They will likely remain silent when hearing such remarks so as to not reveal where they live. These lessons become deeply ingrained and reinforced early in the lives of children (Jones, 2006). In addition, both Jones (2006) and hooks (2000) described similar childhood experiences where they felt silenced in situations because they knew other children were being treated better than themselves simply based on their low social class status. Children who grow up in working class or poor families learn to keep their comments to themselves when classist actions or comments occur in their presence. In other words, they silence themselves at the personal level (Adair and Dahlberg, 2003).

Luttrell (1997), who studied working-class women returning to adult education to complete high school, found that they often left school in the first place because of the negative manner in which they were treated. Luttrell's work uncovers a culture in secondary schools indicative of racist and classist behaviors, which resulted in unsuccessful relationships between the girls and the schools and which negatively affected the girls' self images, educational aspirations and outcomes, and therefore upward mobility.

Jones (2006) indicates that since those in the poor and working classes are silenced, there is no language to share their experience. They have no voice in political, social, and economic discourse. For example, there is no space for discourse about getting the basic necessities for those who cannot afford them (Jones, 2006). Shipler (2005) points out the irony of this situation since the poor and the dependent are the ones who need government the most in our society. Group resistance of power would require a coordination of efforts at a large scale through “networks of communication” (Schwalbe, 2008, p. 134). Since there is no room for such discourse and since the poor and working class are left without the power of a voice, there is no opportunity to build such networks, and, therefore there is no power or organized mechanism through which to resist (Schwalbe, 2008). Thus, in everyday life, they are silenced at the public level as well as at the individual level.

The burden of shame. Shame is the insidious partner of silence. Operating covertly to strengthen the effect of symbolic violence, shame develops at the individual level (Bourdieu, 1991). Through the process of internalization those of low social status accept society’s expectations of them and the belief that their lack of success is due to their own individual failure. In effect, they may silence themselves by developing feelings of shame and inferiority about their own existence (Jones, 2006). Shame is clearly a barrier that must be overcome. But, overcoming shame would likely mean overcoming the sociological conditions operating to create its existence in the first place. This is no easy task given the power and magnitude and high incidence of messages reinforcing its validity and the lack of opportunity for group resistance.

One vehicle through which such powerful messages are sent is the media. People of all social classes in the United States are bombarded by a media that promotes consumerism and equates success with a materialistic lifestyle. The media certainly has played a large role in normalizing middle-class life. The poor are absent from images in the media and when they do appear, they are often demonized (Jones, 2006). hooks (2000, p. 72) describes consumerism as "a vehicle through which the evils of class difference are transcended". She says this because she believes people at all class levels have bought into the concept that the possession of or ability to obtain material goods and services has erroneously become entangled with our perception of what it means to be free. To illustrate her point, she offers the following quote from Aillah Eisentein's *Global Obscenities* (hooks, 2000):

> Consumer culture and consumerism are woven through a notion of individualism that seduces everyone, the haves and the have-nots alike. Consumerism is equated with individual freedom. Transnational media representations construct consumerist culture as democratic – open, free, where anything is possible. Its underbelly-poverty, hunger, and unemployment – remain uninteresting to mainstream media. (p. 72)

Jones (2006) points out that popular children's literature, including books they read in school, also send the same messages. Thus, the daily lives of middle-class children are filled with messages reinforcing their cultural belief system, which includes the idea that their success is due completely to their own abilities and efforts, allowing them many opportunities to internalize positive self images. Simultaneously, those who cannot afford the goods or attain the status required to live that "normal" life constantly

receive messages indicating that not only are the expectations low for them, they are not worthy and they are part of a group of people who have failed (Dodson, 1999). And, even though, the system is set up to keep them in their place, they are constantly reminded that their lack of ability to scale the ladder of success is really their own fault (Dodson, 1999). The acceptance of a middle-class lifestyle as the norm along with such individualistic ideals and the denial of any underlying factors that enhance or deter the likelihood of success results in feelings of shame for those who cannot attain such a lifestyle. For example, providing an example of how shame plays out from her own experience hooks (2000), shares that her mother refused to acknowledge their financial situation out of shame. The internalization of shame is an unfortunate aspect of a meritocratic belief system (Dodson, 1999).

Jones (2006) discusses the meaning of poverty along with its relationship to shame, indicating that the term poverty is used without understanding of its true meaning in the United States. She shows how our beliefs about the poor contribute to their feelings of shame. She says:

> *Poverty* is a term that is often thrown around in the United States without thinking about the *construct* of poverty, or the *effects* of poverty, or *how poverty is lived* by young children who attend school every day. Poverty is carried on the backs of children as they wear clothing that is two sizes too large, too small, and faded or stained. Poverty is located within the bellies of children as they come to school looking forward to free breakfast and lunch. Poverty, like all social class positions, is attached to the appendages of children as they use their bodies to express themselves nonverbally, travel from place to place, and engage in

> physical interactions. Poverty is spoken by children as they use language in particular ways with particular intonations. Poverty is marked on the psyche of children as they perceive the material world, use caution in their interactions, and read the judgments around them made by others, all while denying they are poor. *These* are some of the reasons why poverty is not easily overcome. Living in poverty shapes our physical, social and psychological beings. To overcome poverty may possibly mean to overcome oneself. (p. 23)

The quote illustrates the extraordinary breadth and depth of poverty's effects. It makes personal a reality that is much easier to accept or ignore when it is not personal. It also clarifies the enormous hurdle which must be overcome in order to change people's lives. Clearly, financial resources to meet basic needs would be a step in the right direction, but real change will require much, much more. Changing deeply ingrained belief systems is a lofty goal that will take time.

The materialization of class status. The consequences of differential class status manifest tangibly in people's lives in a variety of ways. Underlying beliefs are reified and play out invisibly in intertwining aspects of individuals' lives over and over, constantly reaffirming their validity at both the personal and the public level. As Holyfield (2002) points out, while poverty is a social phenomenon, it becomes translated into personal problems in people's everyday lives. For example, those at lower socioeconomic levels face obstacles to the following: economic mobility even when considered intergenerationally; gaining attendance at our most selective colleges; the ability to provide opportunities for educating and caring for children; and better health care; as well as longevity. Such inequalities matter in nearly every aspect of our lives from comfort to

safety and health, to how long we live, and what opportunities we'll enjoy (Dodson, 1999; Gilbert, 2008). The effects of inequality in our society are, therefore, profound. It's important to keep in mind, as mentioned in the previous section, that while some people will suffer from inequality, others will benefit from it. Poor and working-class women share similar aspects of vulnerability to the consequences of inequalities. Specifically, barriers to educational success faced by the women in this group can be traced to the circumstances of their lives, which for many reasons do not always arm them with the repertoire of tools necessary to succeed. Rather than advantage, their situations offer many detriments and barriers which emerge in many forms and are discussed further in the sections that follow.

Barriers. Their lives, entangled at the intersection of sexism and classism, and often, racism, women of low socio-economic status face unique and multifaceted challenges or barriers (Holyfield, 2002; LePage-Lees, 1997; Shipler, 2005). As described in previous sections, these barriers are often erected through the process of class stratification (Delpit, 2006; Holyfield, 2002; Sleeter, 2002). Therefore, money alone or the lack of it does not necessarily create or resolve the barriers. LePage-Lees (1997) conducted a two-year study with women who were high academic achievers and who were identified as disadvantaged as children and who have overcome barriers to succeed. Her goal was to better understand their relationship to disadvantage and discover what aspects of their educational and family life experiences make some young women succeed while others do not.

LePage-Lees (1997) recommends rather than labeling women based on their belonging to various categories of need, we should instead identify different types of

barriers. It is then, she believes, that individual reactions to those barriers and the needs associated with them can be better understood. Since each woman may react to the challenges in a variety of ways, depending in part on her particular situation and individual personality, recognizing the barriers and then working with individuals is one way to approach overcoming the barriers.

LePage-Lees (1997) draws a distinction between two different types of barriers: one is related to concrete needs while the other to psychological consequences of the encounters with barriers. Concrete needs are linked to issues such as a lack of money, transportation, health care, medical supplies, or language barriers. In other words, they are needs that can be addressed with concrete responses. However, examining the psychological effects of barriers involves digging deeper, looking beyond the concrete aspect of the need. LePage-Lees (1997, p. 120) calls this understanding the "thickness of the barrier" or the depth at which a particular barrier affects a particular person. She describes barriers as having multiple layers. Offering the example of the student who is in a wheelchair and cannot climb a staircase, she explains that the concrete need can be met by providing an elevator. The psychological aspects of the barrier take into consideration how the psychological reaction to the consequence of not being able gain access to the desired location is experienced by the individual. A delay in gaining access may result in an inability to fit in, a lost sense of self-reliance and feelings of insecurity, for instance. To look this deeply, she says, we must get to know each person as an individual. We must listen and allow her to have a voice to begin to see and understand the depth of the barrier. This idea resonates strongly with me. An understanding of overarching sociological theories related to systems of social stratification is extremely important.

Learning to understand the context, connections, and conundrums created by their overwhelming infusion into everyday lives, however, is equally important. A focus on how these women's lives are lived into and through the middle of the consequences of those larger political, economic, and social issues as they manifest themselves in subtle and not-so-subtle ways tells the real-life story and true meaning of social stratification and classism. It is on this personal outcome of the social class barrier where the effects of socially and culturally constructed class barriers are encountered and suffered.

Money matters. It seems almost too obvious to state that a lack of money among poor and working class women is an obstacle to their success in education, but what might not be so obvious is the many ways in which that is true. The federal poverty guideline for a family of two ranges from $15,130 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). This equals a weekly gross income of about $291; a salary that hardly seems adequate to meet basic needs. According to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2011) approximately 27 percent of children live in homes headed by single parents. A large majority of single parent households are headed by females with 23 percent of all children living with their mothers, compared to only three percent living with their fathers. Single mother families are more likely to be poor than other families (44 percent poverty rate compared to an 21 percent rate for all children between the ages of 0 and 17) (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011**).** This phenomenon is often called the feminization of poverty, indicating that this high rate of poverty among women and children does not occur by chance, but rather it results from the translation of oppressive social beliefs into policies and practices.

The lives of low-income women in the United States are often filled with hardship and uncertainty. They face constant risk associated with their economic status. Many of them continually teeter on the edge of survival. For them, even what might be seen by others as the little annoyances in life, such as a toothache or a car that has broken down, can be enough to derail success (Adair and Dahlberg, 2003, Holyfield, 2002). In contrast to such daily uncertainty, their more wealthy counterparts and their families typically are not burdened or distracted by the need to focus on low-level concerns about mere survival such the attainment of shelter, food, or clothing. Unlike poor women, they have access to adequate nutrition and health care. They can rest assured that they will easily overcome not only routine obstacles, but that their acquired resources will likely protect them from the impact of more serious obstacles as well (Holyfield, 2002) In other words, as Schwalbe (2008) indicates, while money alone may not be enough to equalize social class differences, it is a resource easily transferrable into other types of resources which matter tremendously especially in regard to the quality of life and the choices one has available to them, including the pursuit of higher education.

Several authors (Dodson, 1999; Holyfield, 2002; Polakow, Butler, Stormer Deprez, and Kahn, 2004; Shipler, 2005) cited the current welfare system and its policies in particular as obstacles to women's success. Specific issues noted are the negative attitudes and stigma associated with being on welfare which often results in feelings of shame; the bureaucracy of the system that requires extensive paperwork and appointments in the middle of the day that interfere with work; restrictions on opportunities to supplement income; and unreasonable requirements that force women into low paying jobs which often do not offer healthcare benefits or any future opportunities for advancement. A system that ought to facilitate transition to a better life

and support future success actually often precludes women from attending school. In the absence of adequate and affordable childcare only exacerbates the intense difficulties of their situations. Our welfare system consists of public policy which reflects widely accepted meritocratic philosophies as well as negative attitudes toward increasing numbers of children born to single mothers and sentiment that poor women are not deserving of help (Holyfield, 2002). In addition, popular beliefs include misguided images of women who are thought to be cheating the system and intentionally having babies so that they can collect benefits (Dodson, 1999). hooks (2000) has this to say about the welfare situation: "The denigration of the poor has been most graphically expressed by ongoing attacks on the welfare system and the plans to dismantle it without providing economic alternatives" (p. 45). Rather than lifting women up out of poverty and helping them to move toward more secure and successful lives, it does little more than punish them and forces them into a working poor status (Holyfield, 2002).

Low-income women face unique challenges regarding supporting their children. For example, many find themselves in situations where they must depend on men for support. This dependency makes them vulnerable. Often, in cases of divorce, the man may disappear. They may be left to fend for themselves. Even when child support payments are court-mandated, this does not assure they will be paid in a timely manner, if at all. And, in cases where men continue to live with them, there are some cases when dominant partners withhold financial and other resources. Being so vulnerable leaves these women with no power or resources to change their situations. They and their children may be forced to stay in abusive and neglectful home situations just to survive (Holyfield, 2002).

Many women face unique struggles balancing the competing and significant demands of work schedules that are frequently inflexible with the level of commitment necessary to care for a home and family. While increasing numbers of women are entering the workforce, regulations related to providing a family-friendly work environment existing in many other industrialized countries, have not developed in the United States (Hochschild and Machung, 2012). Further, despite increases in the average amount of work related to home and family men are willing to take on in recent years, women still typically take most of the responsibility for raising children and caring for the household, even when they also work outside the home (Hochschild and Machung, 2012). According to Crittenden (2001), "The standard rationale for the status quo is that women choose to have children, and in doing so, choose to accept the trade-offs that have always ensued."(p. 10). In addition, there continues to be a pay gap among various groups. Women and minorities still earn less than white males, even when holding education constant (Holyfield, 2002, p. 111). Further, women need more education than men to compete for the same jobs. "Most startling, for example, is the fact that among white women and minorities, only white women with advanced and professional degrees earn more than white males with high school diplomas" (Holyfield, 2002, p. 114). So, while education is likely to increase income, it does not guarantee occupational status or pay equity (Gilbert, 2008; Holyfield, 2002).

There are, of course, resources that money cannot buy. Jones (2006) reminds us that "money can't buy a discourse" (p. 29), implying that even having enough money for basic necessities cannot buy a strong enough voice to influence deeply ingrained beliefs held by virtually an entire nation of people. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the

dynamics recognized when we look at the issue of class from a sociological perspective are complex and intertwined in an ongoing process of attitudes, actions, and relationships. So, while a level of income to adequately support oneself is critical to survival, any real change will take much more than money. hooks (2000) describes the situation like this:

> Class is much more than money. Until we understand this fact, the notion that problems in all our lives, but most especially the lives of the indigent and the poor, can be solved by money will continue to serve the interests of a predatory ruling class while rendering the rest of us powerless to create meaningful changes in our lives across class (p. 157-158).

hooks' comments emphasize the idea that adequate income is just one aspect of a much larger solution, albeit a significant part of the solution. Therefore, even in cases where a poor or working-class woman is able to acquire an income level that moves her into middle-class status, she will still face many challenges associated with her initial class status (Gilbert, 2008; Holyfield, 2002;).

Childhood and motherhood. The effects of socioeconomic status permeate every aspect of a child's life. The all-encompassing nature of its results is part of what makes the understanding of it and any remedy for the barriers it creates or the problems it causes so complex. For example, the intergenerational aspect of socioeconomic status alone makes the issue extremely complex. Relative advantages and disadvantages of class status in regard to educational success begin early in children's lives. Children whose mothers have good prenatal care during their pregnancies are more likely to do well in

school (Gilbert, 2008; Holyfield, 2002; Shipler, 2005). Good nutrition is also a factor in normal cognitive development and educational success (Holyfield, 2002; Shipler, 2005). So, literally children who come from families where adequate nutrition and care are available have an educational advantage over their less wealthy counterparts beginning before birth.

In addition, women's early experiences in their families and in school can be connected to their later success (Jones, 2006; Lareau, 2003; LePage-Lees, 1997). For example, Lareau (2003) studied working-class, poor, and middle-class families. She found stark differences in family life and child rearing philosophies across classes. Lareau called the middle-class approach to child rearing "concerted cultivation" and the working-class and poor approach "accomplishment of natural growth" (p. 2-3). While the middle-class parents appeared to be highly engaged in interactions with their children and teaching them to make choices about their lives, working-class and poor families were not as often involved in conversation or in general with their children. The lines of authority were more clearly drawn for them with little room for negotiation. In addition, middle-class children spent a great deal of time in organized activities with parents arranging their schedules around those activities. In contrast, the working-class and poor children spent most of their free time involved in less structured activities with relatives and in free play time. The working-class and poor parents struggled more with getting through the basic routines of their days. They had to concentrate harder on attempting to meet the basic needs of their families. For example, some of them worried about stretching food supplies to last until they could afford to buy more and some had to lug laundry to public laundry facilities and depend on unreliable public transportation in

some cases. Working-class children were aware of their families' economic struggles. Working-class and poor parents were less aware than middle-class parents of issues related to their children's school experience than middle-class parents.

According to Lareau (2003) one outcome of the variance between the childhood experiences of the middle-class versus the other children is that the middle-class children emerge with advantages over the others which serve them well in school and throughout the rest of their lives. Middle-class emerge with a "sense of entitlement", negotiation skills, and training in rules that govern interactions with institutions (p.6). They also learn how to manipulate the rules so that they work for their best interest. They become comfortable making requests so that things better met their needs. Working-class and poor children, instead, emerge with "a sense of restraint" (p.6). They are not as likely as their middle-class peers to negotiate. They are more likely to accept authority, although they sometimes resist it.

Research by LePage-Lees (1997) also supports the idea that working-class and poor children grow up less equipped to deal with authority. She found that they grow up being intimidated by it. She indicates that these children learn to get information by reading people rather than by communicating directly. As a result, they have difficulty communicating, are often misunderstood, and feel that they do not have a voice in their educational process.

Another difference in the experiences for working-class and poor students versus middle class is their relative exposure and access to academically successful role models and available networking opportunities (Sweet, 2001). Children of different class statuses

are likely to be exposed to differential role models. A child from poor or a working-class background is less likely to encounter role models from the aspirant social class level in his or her daily life. In fact, unique obstacles often get in the way of identification with those role models from higher class levels (Dodson, 1999; Jones, 2006).

One significant obstacle for girls in this group is the early and strong socialization as mothers. Dodson (1999), Jones (2006), and LePage-Lees (1997) found that girls from working-class and poor families have strong images of themselves as mothers. They begin as young as the second grade taking on housework and childcare duties. They often work as women and behave as women as young as ten years old. Since they are no longer treated as children, they take on the identity of mother at a very young age. Jones (2006) indicated that in many ways this phenomenon intercepted any hope of young girls seeing themselves as anything other than mothers and in effect they were not free to make their own choice about their lives because of it. She points out that even when the opportunity is there for young women to identify with another woman, such as her teacher, their strong socialization as mothers is hard to overcome.

Further, this powerful identification as a mother, along with other factors, often leads to early motherhood among low income women (Dodson, 1999; LePage-Lees, 1997). “Where there is no special support, no money, nor adequate educational preparation for college and career, the role of mother is simply the next tough part of life” (Dodson, 1999, 113). Dodson’s quote emphasizes the hopelessness facing these young women. They see no point in waiting to have children until they are older because they see no better future for themselves even if they do wait. But having a child at a young age will cause additional hardship. “Motherhood is now the single greatest obstacle left in the

path of economic equality for women" (Crittenden, 2001, p. 86). With unrealistic expectations for the level of commitment required to be successful in the workplace, a lack of affordable childcare, and increasing numbers of single mother families, this idea speaks to barriers all women face. Women are expected to work and shoulder the responsibility for caring for children, but unlike many middle-class women, working outside the home is not a choice for low-income women because their income is necessary to the family's survival. Unfortunately, the types of jobs available to lower-class women without a college education come with less security, status, and benefits, such as health insurance (Sweet, 2001, p. 41).

Working-class students often experience a great deal of pressure from their family and friends to focus on work rather than school **(**Polakow, Butler, Stormer-Deprez, and Kahn, 2004**).** This situation can cause students to feel that they need to choose between family and education. Dodson (1999) specifically cites significant diversion of attention away from education toward family work for girls from low-income families:

> If young girls in poor America were able to focus their attention on education, team sports and physical exercise, enriched summer camp, visual and performing arts, early leadership opportunities, and other youth development, they would integrate these experiences into their identity just as more privileged youth do. But they do not have access to most of these resources, and even if they did, they would be unable to take advantage of such opportunities unless they were granted a family-work release (p. 215).

Dodson believes that this theme is a response to pressures that result in families facing financial hardship. “These women try to care for children of an extended family, maintain battered public housing, do housework without basic appliances, grocery shop without a car-the list goes on and on and so do the people” (Dodson, 1999, p. 214). Often parents in these families work long and/or difficult hours to support themselves (Polakow, Butler, Stormer Deprez, and Kahn, 2004). When this occurs in single family households the need for children to participate in the ongoing chores and work to maintain the household and care for younger children is real. The absence of the parent from the home leaves the child or children to care for themselves and each other out of necessity.

In addition to other challenges, LePage-Lees (1997) indicates that the low-income women in her study did not experience a normal “chain of command” in their family lives. Many of the women in her study reported experiences of abuse and neglect. Shipler (2005) also found that many of the low-income women he interviewed reported being survivors of sexual abuse. He explains that sexual abuse often results in the victim’s inability to form trustful, stable relationships later in life. The trauma of the event can be extremely difficult to overcome, creating a void in a space that should be occupied by self-esteem. Shipler indicates that one in four women is sexually abused, but speculates that the incidence may be higher among low-income women. Unfortunately, the defense mechanisms that help children cope with sexual abuse, such as disassociating themselves with the experience, become troublesome when the woman becomes a parent herself. Her disconnection and tendency to get into volatile relationships only serves to perpetuate the cycle of abuse and undermine her success.

The promise of education. Attaining a college degree decreases the likelihood that a woman will be poor (Polakow, Butler, Stormer Deprez, and Kahn, 2004). And, while education does not guarantee occupational status or pay equity, it may hold the key a more secure, less stressful life for many low-income women and their families. It may also provide intergenerational benefits for their children, which may lead to the ultimate breaking down of the cycle of poverty. With so much at stake for the immediate and long-term impact on the lives of low-income women and their families, it makes sense to encourage and facilitate their pursuit of a college degree. But, those who do engage in that process will face unique challenges, many of which are associated with her socioeconomic class.

Impact of early educational preparation. Tied to socioeconomic status is a difference in the quality of schools in middle-class versus the working-class and poorer neighborhoods. The wealthy and the poor tend to be sorted geographically as to where they live within communities. Since many school districts are funded locally, the poorer communities tend to have fewer educational resources and less money available for funding their schools. Schools with fewer available resources are less likely to attract the most qualified teachers. Fewer of the advanced level courses known to be college gate-keepers, such as advanced algebra tend to be offered in these poorer schools. Therefore, the academic achievement of less wealthy children is directly affected by the quality of education they have available to them, which means that if they attend college, many of them will be less well prepared academically than other students (Delpit, 2006; Kozol, 2005; Shipler, 2005; Sweet, 2001). College students who are less well prepared

academically tend to drop out at higher rates than other students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

In addition to funding, change in public policy often has a significant impact on schools in K through 12 schools, which plays out at the personal level for students. One example of this is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB has a specific impact on poorer schools. NCLB made many promises of accountability and equitable solutions. There have been, however, no equitable solutions. In fact, the poorest schools stand to suffer the most. They are the most at risk to be determined in need of improvement, which could actually mean that they lose their funding. So, there is pressure to spend already limited funds on test preparation just to keep the schools open. Thus, the gap between the need and the need that can be met in these poorer schools is widened further. Since student needs cannot be met, this situation threatens to increase dropout rates. Students that are low performing either leave school on their own or the schools encourage them to leave to increase their rates. Qualified teachers don't want to come to schools that have been labeled as failing to meet standards. Consequences for students caught in these systems of failure can be tragic (Meier and Wood, 2004).

Access to higher education. According to Bedsworth, Colby, and Doctor (2006), only 60 percent of America's low-income students (defined as students eligible for free and reduced meals) graduate from high school. One out of three will enroll in college. Only one out of seven will earn a bachelor's degree.

In terms of participation in higher education, there is a gap between affluent and lower income students with 75 percent of 18 to 24 year olds in 2000 from families in the

top 25 percent of income levels attending college compared with only 35 percent from the bottom 25 percent of income level (Gilbert, 2008). As income level increases, so does the likelihood of accessing a highly selective college or university with 71 percent of the students at those elite institutions coming from a social class of upper middle class or higher in 2000 (Gilbert, 2008). Certainly, the availability of educational loans and other funding is critical to low-income students gaining access to higher education, but educational funding alone removes only one obstacle.

Sweet (2001) indicates that students are sorted into colleges and universities of varying levels by virtue of their backgrounds and their abilities to pay. Therefore, economic capital not only influences academic preparation, it influences which colleges students are able to attend. The following quote by Holyfield (2002) supports this claim:

> Colleges and universities, especially private ones, remain elite institutions that act in many ways to perpetuate class divisions. For this reason, it is useful to begin with social class, a primary determinant of education opportunity. Wealth, as I mentioned earlier, is what allows for the transfer of opportunities from one generation to the next, and is thus a very strong predictor of who goes to college (p. 59).

Contributing to the problem of access for low-income students is an apparent lack of understanding among low-income women of the differences between institutions of higher education. LePage-Lees (1997) indicated that most women in her study didn’t care what university they attended as undergraduates. They had little guidance, which led to

them end up at the wrong colleges and in the wrong majors. They only learned about prestigious schools when going to graduate school.

Influence of family on success in higher education. The pressure working-class and poor students feel to work mentioned earlier in this paper continues when they enter college. They often work many hours in addition to attending classes. Research (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005) indicates that working more than 15 or 20 hours per week has a negative influence on the likelihood of persisting to degree completion. Further, federal financial aid is only available to students who enroll at least half time. This level of enrollment may exclude students who need to work to support themselves and/or their families. It particularly may exclude some women, especially those who have children, from enrolling due to the level of commitment required (Adair and Dahlberg, 2003; Polakow, Butler, Stormer Deprez, and Kahn, 2004). Even if they could manage the time commitment of work and school, federal aid is not adjusted for students with children. So, costs for childcare and other related expenses are not taken into consideration in the financial aid formula. Students with dependents do not receive more aid than they would otherwise (Polakow, Butler, Stormer Deprez, and Kahn, 2004, p. 137), which places a deeper financial burden on students with children.

As a result of their upbringing, which include themes of independence and maturity that continue into young adulthood (Burleson et al., 2008; Lareau, 2003; LePage-Lees, 1997; Longwell-Grice, 2008), low-income students who attend college may be uncomfortable forming necessary relationships with faculty. They misunderstand the role of professors and the purpose of their office hours. They fail to seek their help or engage with them unless absolutely necessary, feeling that they are annoying them or

admitting failure if they seek help. In addition, LePage-Lees (1997) found that the tendency toward independence had a negative impact on these students' ability to attract mentors. Their apparent maturity often leads others to believe that these students are not in need of help. Many of the women in her study never had a mentor, for example.

Further, as Jones (2006) indicated, girls from low-income families tend to have experienced significant socialization into traditional roles as mothers. Identification with a teacher would equate to identification with a stranger, someone who is different from her own mother and who represents someone who is not automatically trusted by her family. Without encouragement to do so from her family, the student may experience conflicting feelings or may attempt to distance herself from the relationship with the teacher, which may have a negative impact on her learning. She will continue to have difficulty seeing herself as having a choice beyond that of being a mother. Dodson (1999) shares sentiment about the importance of the student being able to overcome this obstacle, "Universally, the impact of choice, of having more than one way to imagine yourself in the world, is immeasurable" (p. 216).

Along similar lines**,** Longwell-Grice (2007) indicates that low-income students perceive their status within the educational organization differently than their middle-class peers. They see their relationship with faculty, a key factor in their success, as distant and risky. This interpretation of the student-professor relationship is consistent with Lareau's (2003) findings regarding children's relationships with adults in low-income families where authority rather than partnership with adults is emphasized. Further, perhaps, as LePage-Lees (1997) suggests, their distrust and intimidation by authority may be related to that they did not experience a normal "chain of command" in

their family lives. As mentioned earlier, many of the women in her study reported experiences of abuse and neglect, which had an impact on their ability to form stable relationships later in life.

Cost and financial aid. The high cost of attending college is in and of itself an obstacle. The rate of increase in the cost of education has exceeded the growth in the rate of income for most families (Hurtado and Pryor, 2006). Financial aid funding has not kept pace with increasing college costs (Bedsworth, Colby, and Doctor, 2006). Moreover, understanding of cost related to higher education is important, too. Students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, are often unsure and do not understand the cost of attending college (Burleson et al., 2008 and Longwell-Grice, 2007). In fact, as the level of income decreases among parents, so does the families' ability to estimate and understand that cost (Choy, 2001, 2002). The less money a person has, the less likely he or she is to understand how to manage it. However, the financial aid system is unnecessarily complicated, too. As Dahlberg points out (Adair and Dahlberg, 2003), like the welfare system, it is a bureaucracy that creates hurdles for the people it is supposed to be helping.

Debt associated with college costs can be daunting. Students who do not understand basic issues regarding money management may borrow way beyond their means and unrealistically in terms of what they will be able to afford to pay back even if they graduate. Since students from low socioeconomic status tend to graduate at lower rates than other students (Bedsworth, Colby, and Doctor, 2006) they are more likely to leave college with debt and no degree. In the ten year period from 1993 to 2003, among those with loans, the average debt has more than doubled, from $9,250 in 1993 to

$19,200 in 2003-4" (Wilson, 2009, p. A18). LePage-Lees (1997) noted that the low income women who participated in her study reported being distracted by financial issues to the point where they couldn't concentrate on their course work.

Establishing relationships. The ability to engage and interact effectively in school and college is an issue raised as a challenge for low-income women by Jones (2006) and LePage-Lees (1997). LePage-Lees (1997) found that the successful women who participated in her study did well in elementary school, but their level of self-esteem decreased as they progressed through high school. She speculates that this change may be due in part to the fact that these girls pleased teachers in the lower levels with their good behavior, which translated into good grades. As they moved forward into more challenging curricula, they did not do as well because they were not comfortable asking questions and may have actually ended up with less well developed skills than other students as a result. These findings were consistent with those of Orenstein (1994) and Sadker and Sadker (1994).

Consistent with ideas of silencing and shame mentioned earlier in this paper, many of the women who participated in LePage-Lees' (1997) study felt that they had no voice in the educational systems of which they were a part. She speculates that stressful life events made them fearful to seek help and of being rejected. Women reported lacking confidence and hiding their poor or working-class identities so they would blend in. Many of them suffered from Imposter Phenomenon, which is a phenomenon advanced by Clance (1986) that describes a situation where, despite evidence that they are qualified, individuals who suffer from this syndrome feel that they are not qualified. They take responsibility for failure, but not for success. Students who suffer from this syndrome

often spend a lot of energy trying to prove themselves, which can make the academic process unpleasant for them.

***College experience*.** Many low-income students report encountering arrogance and elitism in college. They describe their college experience as not fitting in. (Keller, Goodstein, and Kirkpatrick, 2005; LePage-Lees, 1997). For example, bell hooks (2000) shared from her own college experience that she felt out of place. She indicated that she was directly confronted with class issues during her college years. She experienced shame, especially around food and clothes because she could not afford them and she wasn't familiar with typical food and clothing of her middle-class peers. As a result, she ate alone, didn't socialize, felt isolated and lonely, and she resented other girls for their frivolity. She feared losing her financial aid and, as a result, felt tremendous pressure to succeed. She endured listening in silence to negative attitudes of other students toward the poor and working-class, which caused her to fear and hate the classroom. She had difficulty affiliating with middle class students due to internal conflicts. For her, affiliating with them and being a college student was like being a traitor against those who were close to her. She learned that to fit in, she had to leave her working class culture behind. That is, as she puts it "the price of the ticket" (hooks, 2000, p.36). Adair (Adair and Dahlberg, 2003) says the following about the narratives of low-income single-parent students she studied:

> These personal narratives reflect the debilitating experiences of low-income single-parent students who have little support, few role-models, and a severe sense of dislocation, disidentification, and class anxiety (p 260).

Adair's quote captures appropriately the intensity of the negative experience had by these students in higher education. She goes on to say that if these experiences must be acknowledged and addressed if these students are to survive in colleges and universities.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research approach was used for this study. I borrowed from several researchers to create my own research design. I found Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1987, 1994, 1997, 1999, 2005) to be my most helpful guide. Of paramount concern to me is that my research design allows the participants' voices to be heard, that the focus remains mainly on their success, and that the context, essence and meaning of their experience are conveyed in a meaningful, readable style. I also sought a design that would allow me to maintain flexibility to consider the participants' experience through multiple disciplinary frameworks. Portraiture, the title Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1987, 1994, 1997, 1999, 2005) assigned to her unique form of qualitative research, resonates strongly with me and makes sense to consider as the methodological framework for this study for the reasons stated in the following paragraphs.

Lawrence-Lightfoot is a sociologist and professor of education at Harvard University. Inspired by her desire to resist what she views as a dominant social science discourse predisposed to positivist thinking, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) "wanted to develop a document, a text that came as close as possible to painting with words" (p. 4). Portraiture attempts to capture the complex and dynamic aspects of human experience. The portrait is a result of the negotiation of understanding emerging through the evolving discourse between the researcher and participant. The process is careful to ensure that "the subjects feel seen fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, scrutinized" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 4). Portraiture is as much about intervention as it is about

inquiry. It seeks to give authority to participants by allowing their voices to be documented and shared using “thick description”, as described by Geertz (1973), an anthropologist who connects interpretation with imagination. Portraiture blends artistic resonance with scientific rigor and includes a heavy emphasis on framing the experience in context and using artistic metaphors to convey meaning.

An emphasis on success is critically important to my research since it is success that I hope to elucidate and understand. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1987, 1994, 1997, 1999, 2005) is committed to illuminating “goodness” or success. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1987, 1994, 1997, 1999, 2005) points out that researchers who approach their work asking questions about success and looking for what is good in a situation as opposed to searching for deficits and other negatives will be more likely to find and report on success and goodness. I agree strongly with Lawrence-Lightfoot that studying problems and failure will not necessarily illuminate pathways to success. A focus on goodness or success is emphasized and interwoven throughout her work.

Portraiture is framed in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Advanced initially by Husserl (1931), a German philosopher, phenomenology is based on the premise that experiencing the world through our senses is the only way we can know what we experience and that we are able to make meaning of our experiences through our conscious awareness of them. According to Van Manen (1990), an underlying assumption in phenomenology is that there is an essence or essences in shared experiences. Essences are the essential meanings understood mutually by those who share common experiences. The goal of a phenomenological study is to capture that essential meaning. Similarly, Portraitists seek to evoke a sense of identification in the reader and

believe that the reader will find embedded in the specific case “universal resonant themes” (Lawrence Lightfoot, 1997, p. 14). The main goal of my research is to capture the essential meaning and the “universal resonant themes” of success of first-generation female students at four-year private institutions of higher education. Thus, a research design with a phenomenological underpinning and an approach grounded in Portraiture is appropriate.

The constructivist point of view is a primary assumption in this study. Portraiture incorporates the constructivist tradition which considers the participant in the context of his or her social, historical, personal, and cultural context. The main research question investigated in this study is considered through the lens of the participants’ individual experience of the phenomenon of success in higher education. From a constructivist epistemological point of view, individuals interpret their experiences and construct reality based on their perceived understanding. Constructivists do not believe that there is one truth or reality, but rather that multiple realities exist. Those multiple realities are contextualized by worldviews as well as cultural, linguistic, historical, and social concepts (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, 1999, 2005; Reinharz, 1992). Thus, we cannot know how to interpret behaviors, experiences, or conversations that are not embedded in context. Therefore, meaning exists and is best understood within a context. Literature related to college student retention sometimes mentions first-generation students, but it rarely includes an accounting of their experience from their point of view in their own voices. This study seeks to allow those voices to be heard and by doing so highlight first-generation female students’ unique perception of their experience through the lens shaped by the particular context of their lives.

Relationships are central to this study. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), "Portraits are constructed, shaped, and drawn through the development of relationships. All the processes of portraiture require that we build productive and benign relationships" (p. 135). Here, among others, Lawrence-Lightfoot is drawing on the work of Gilligan (1993), Buber (1958), Brown and Gilligan (1992) and Belenky et al (1997). From the time of initial contact with my participants, I entered into relationships with them. I considered them equal partners in the research process. I treated them with respect and assumed that they were the authorities of their own experiences. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) sees the relationship "as central to the empirical, ethical, and humanistic dimensions of research design, as evolving and changing processes of human encounter" (p. 138). Some consider it is through the reciprocal, empathic researcher-participant relationship that knowledge is co-constructed. I strived throughout the research process to nurture and maintain a balanced and ongoing relationship with my participants based on mutual respect and empathy. "Empathic neutrality", according to Patton (2002, p. 50), is necessary to gain a basis for describing reality from another person's perspective. He goes on, "empathy … describes a stance toward the people one encounters-it communicates understanding, interest, and caring. Neutrality suggests a stance toward their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors-it means being nonjudgmental" (p. 53). I worked hard to maintain a position of empathic neutrality throughout each of the interviews.

In addition to portraiture, I found Janesick (2004) a helpful guide in developing my research design. Janesick (2004) uses dance as a metaphor to describe the process that occurs during qualitative research. Because of my background in relation to dance, the metaphor strengthened my understanding of the process. Valerie Janesick (2004) says,

"There is an integrity to the movement in dance and in yoga that resonates with the entire shape of qualitative research techniques and processes" (Janesick, 2004, p. xi).

Janesick's (2004) book is essentially a training manual for her students, providing practical guidance to the novice qualitative researcher. She remarks often that the researcher is the instrument of qualitative research and indicates that we perfect the instrument, our ability to see, hear and to use our bodies to communicate through training and practice. Like Lawrence-Lightfoot (1987, 1994, 1997, 1999, 2005), she emphasizes the importance of context, embraces the mixing of art and scientific rigor, and she chooses not to write in an academic style that excludes some who may wish to take part in the discussion. Instead, she purposely writes in a descriptive narrative style.

This study focuses on female students because I am interested in studying women's experience, especially first-generation women's experience in higher education. I bring to the research a feminist orientation that includes the assumption that gender matters in every aspect of our lives. Therefore, I sought a research design that incorporated into it a feminist research perspective which supported my focus on female's experience. Portraiture is attentive to feminist perspective since it views relationships as important, complex, and meaningful. It seeks to establish and maintain equal levels of power, as well as reciprocity and negotiation in the research process (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). The focus on females also addresses a call in the current higher education research regarding the success in higher education of first-generation students to consider subgroups within the larger group of first-generation students in research (Kuh, 2009; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

Further, my thinking is also oriented toward critical theory, which means that underlying my decision to do this research and throughout the orchestration of it was, without a doubt, the desire to elucidate the experience of first-generation college women participants in this study and any socially, psychologically, or institutionally constructed obstacles and challenges they overcame to succeed in higher education. I remained committed to producing a valid and reliable study that captures the essence of my participants' experience of success in higher education and creates a space for their stories to be told in their own voices. I, therefore, sought to describe the participants' experiences based on the discovery of their experience. Unlike some research framed by critical theory that seeks to highlight preconceived patterns or themes in order to critique or change society, it has always been the goal of this research to explore and discover the essence of the experience of the participants. Thus, inherent in my study is a healthy tension between my strong orientation toward feminism and critical theory and my commitment to the phenomenological philosophical tradition. I sought throughout the research process to strike a balance between my desire to include a "criticism of nonfeminist scholarship", to "create social change", to "represent human diversity", and "attempts to develop special relations with the people being studied", as Reinharz (1992, p. 240) indicates research that incorporates a feminist perspective does. In this case, there is a need to examine the success of first-generation female students through a critical lens.

Definitions

First-generation college students. I employed in this study a frequently used definition of first-generation college students, which is: students whose parents have

earned no more than a high school diploma (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001, 2002; Horn and Nunez, 2000; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al, 2004; Saenz et al, 2007).

Success in higher education. There are many ways for students to be successful in higher education. The participants may not see themselves as successful or may define their success in very different ways. Certainly, personal growth can occur and important lessons can be learned as the result of not persisting in higher education, for example. For the purposes of this study, however, I've limited the definition of success to mean that the student has made academic progress to at least the junior year of study. She must indicate that she is in good academic standing as described by the institution in which she is enrolled. The fact that a student has persisted to at least the third year of study is a strong indicator that she is likely to complete her degree. Student persistence to degree completion is a widely accepted measure of success of individuals (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

Four-year private institution of higher education. The institutions attended are accredited institutions of higher education and a four-year college with private (not public) affiliation.

Enrollment status. Participants have either graduated or are currently enrolled in any small four-year private institution of higher education.

Sampling

The sampling for this study is purposeful because I sought participants whose experience provides insight about a phenomenon. Participants were chosen purposefully

because they are first-generation female students who have experienced the phenomenon of success at a four-year private institution of higher education. I sought to end with a sample of ten participants with a focus on a the interpretation of rich information gathered from in-depth interviews.

Process

The purposeful sample was formed using a combination of intensity and snowball sampling techniques. First, I reached out to colleagues and friends to identify students or recent graduates from any New England small, four-year private institution of higher education who may be interested in participating in my study. I learned of a 21 potential participants through this approach.

Next, I contacted the potential participants by telephone to introduce myself and to confirm their interest. Subsequently, all potential participants were sent an invitation (see Appendix A). Of the 21, 12 met the study's criteria and six advanced to the interview stage. Interviews were arranged during a follow-up telephone conversation and were conducted at a mutually agreeable location where the participants felt comfortable speaking. The remaining four participants were all referred to me by other participants. Upon referral, I went through the same initial process of contacting via telephone and sending an invitation, as mentioned above. A research information sheet (see Appendix B) was provided to each participant prior to the interviews. Each was asked to read and sign a consent form (see Appendix C).

The sampling strategies employed yielded ten participants. One of the participants, however, was later unable to participate. After initially agreeing to do so, I

was later unable to contact her. I learned through the person who had referred her to the study that she experienced a family crisis and had actually withdrawn from college.

Participants

All participants are female, first-generation college students enrolled or graduated from multiple small four-year private institutions of higher education within the past five years. All of the participants were or are enrolled as full-time students in traditional undergraduate programs as opposed to being enrolled part-time in adult education or other programs. I used the five-year cutoff because I wanted participants' experience to be relatively recent based on my belief that more recent experiences would be most relevant to current practices and circumstances in higher education. All of the participants come from four-year private accredited institutions of higher education in the northeast United States.

Interviews

I conducted in-person, in-depth, open-ended interviews with each participant using a general interview guide (see Appendix D). The Interview Guide helped to ensure that I followed the same general line of questioning with all subjects, while still allowing for some flexibility. I chose this approach because I wanted to be sure to explore certain issues with each participant, but I also wanted to maintain flexibility and to not be tied to a standardized interview format. In addition, I wanted the participants to be free to respond to my inquiry in whatever order or manner they felt comfortable doing so, to tell their stories in a way that was best for them, and in a structure throughout which I could maintain an atmosphere of respect and empathic responsiveness to them. In each case I listened "for the story" as opposed to listening to the story (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p.

12), actively seeking out how the story fit together; how it was shaped, coherent, and then plays a role in selecting and creating it. I sought to capture the complexities of the participants' experience.

Feminist research methods often include self-disclosure regarding what researchers experience through the course of the research and that doing so equalizes the relationship which results in a greater comfort level for sharing experiences among participants (Reinharz, 1992). This is the case in this study since I shared with the students that I, too, had been a first-generation female student at a four-year private institution of higher education. I expressed that my interest in doing the interviews with them was related to my desire to share their stories with others in higher education and elsewhere so that we could all learn about their pathways to success in higher education and gain an understanding of their experience from their points of view.

During each interview, to allow for the participant to tell her story in her own words, structured in her own way, at her own pace, I asked open-ended questions about participants' experience of their achievement and experience of success in higher education. For example, among other things, I asked about their feelings, behaviors, opinions, values, and relationships, interactions with family, friends and members of the college community of which they were a member. I asked about family background and other questions related to participants' prior educational and other life experiences. I allowed the participants to tell their stories in any order and at any pace with which they were comfortable.

Each interview lasted for approximately an hour and a half, with some taking a bit longer. I followed up with additional questions in person with four of the participants and via telephone with two of them. I audio taped all interviews. The participants gave their permission to do so. I transcribed the recorded interviews using a word processing program. I took field notes during the interviews as well as following some of them. In some cases, listening to the interviews helped me to sharpen my interviewing techniques for future interviews.

All audio taped interviews and transcripts are stored on a password protected computer hard drive with the exception of two audio recordings that were erased due to a malfunction of the tape recorder. A hardcopy of the interview transcripts are stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. The transcripts and interviews are all indexed using pseudonyms so that participants' privacy is protected. No personally identifying information is included in this paper.

Data Analysis

While Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1997) philosophical and feminist approach to qualitative research was an initial and important guide to the framing of this study, the specific steps I utilized to analyze the data were also informed by the work of Giorgi (1985), Moustakas (1994), Polkinghorne (1989). A description of the steps I employed follow.

In preparation for this research study, I entered into the process of *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994). Prior to developing an interview guide or conducting any interviews, as is common practice in phenomenological research, I took significant time to reflect on

my own preconceptions or potential biases regarding higher education, the experience of first-generation female college students, and related matters. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) calls a similar process reflexivity. I continued to engage in deliberate self-reflection to identify, examine, and put aside any potential biases throughout the entire research process. Doing so resulted in greater self-awareness and an increased openness which enhanced my ability to *bracket* what I heard and saw during my research process (Moustakas, 1994). Through *bracketing*, I was able to achieve the goal of isolating or placing in brackets the essence or essential meaning of an experience (Moustakas, 1994).

After transcribing all of the interviews and reviewing my notes, I read each transcription multiple times to increase my familiarity with the data and, as Giorgi (1985) recommends, to get a general "sense of the whole" (p.10). I sought to maintain what Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) calls a "generative tension" (p. 192) between the need to organize and classify the data and preserving the rich complexity of human experience. I attempted to put myself in each participant's place; to understand their unique perspectives.

My next step was to horizonalize the data for each participant (Moustakas, 1994) by sifting through each transcribed interview multiple times, identifying meaning statements. Next, I organized the statements into a matrix, giving each one equal value. I labeled the statements according to the interview question to which they responded and recorded the participant who made the statement across in rows. Then, through a process of reduction and elimination, I removed any irrelevant or redundant statements (Moustakas, 1994), consolidating within the matrix the statements and references to the participant who made them. From the remaining statements, I identified "meaning units"

(Giorgi, p. 54, 1985) or “invariant constituents” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). I transformed them into themes in my own words and continued to reduce them into “emergent themes” and “resonant metaphors” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 209 – 210) or “essential structures” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 51).

I consolidated the themes into groups and developed them into a textural description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). I used “imaginative variation” (Polkinghorne, 1989) to explore potential meanings of the descriptions from a variety of perspectives, which increased my familiarity with the data and improved my ability to derive structural themes. Next, as Moustakas (1994) recommends, I synthesized the essential aspects of the textural and structural descriptions into an integrated description of the meanings and essences of the experience.

Finally, to validate the meaning units and the resulting themes, I tested them by working back and forth between them and the original statements in the interview transcriptions, ensuring that direct expressions in the transcriptions supported the meanings and themes derived from them and vice versa (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Limitations of the Research

This type of research has inherent in it certain limitations. Conscious experience cannot be accessed directly or be observed. So, we must rely on individual accounts of their experiences based on their memories and interpretations. Depending on individuals’ memories of their experiences is flawed. As time passes, memories change and may fade. Memories can be flawed. Further, any qualitative researcher makes choices about which themes to highlight and which ones to ignore. Just as a portrait’s frame provides the

scope of what can be included on the canvas, the boundaries of this research were created based on the context in which it occurred and the choices made by the participants and the researcher in terms of what was shared, what was heard, and what is included in the final report (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). In other words, there are potentially many stories to be found in any dataset. Participants might share different aspects of their stories with different researchers. In addition, the data collected and presented in this study is limited, of course, to that gathered through my limited interaction with the participants during the interview process. So, it is conceivable that some information was left out or I have neglected to notice or bring forth underlying themes that another researcher, looking through a different lens, might see.

The researcher most often takes a central role in qualitative research and that is certainly true in this study. It is important, therefore, to reveal my perspectives, predispositions, and stance relative to theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary matters as well as personal values and relationship to the research topic (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). While I have done my best to reveal my biases, pre-occupations, and predispositions, the educational process is one that lasts a lifetime and no doubt there will be new frameworks and schemas through which to view myself as a researcher and an individual that may bring to light many things I have yet to learn even about myself. However, through the portrayal of my participants' experiences in their own voices, the use of thick description in the narratives and by my making it clear when I'm interpreting, I hope to alleviate much of any potential bias.

Certainly, the fact that I was a first-generation female college student who attended a four-year private institution of higher education may have influenced my

perspective. My closeness to the research subject may be viewed as a weakness. On the other hand, the fact that I was a first-generation female college student may also be seen as strength. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) reminds us that many major contributions to our knowledge were made possible by the closeness the researcher had to the situations or individuals studied. She offers Piaget, Freud, and Newton as examples. I believe that my understanding of the subject matter has been deepened by my professional knowledge of the field.

Chapter 4

Data

Introduction

While the participants in this study share much common, their individual experiences are unique. The following stories provide not only some context within which to understand participants' interview responses, they also illustrate the salient themes emerging from this research. The idiosyncratic stories which include information about the participants' backgrounds, families, and other life circumstances are relevant to understanding the meaning and essence of their experiences.

Individual Participant Stories

Almira. Almira is a first-year graduate student and a full-time employee at the college she attends. We meet over lunch. Despite my obvious bit of fumbling with the audio recorder at the start of our interview, she does not hesitate to jump right into sharing very personal aspects of her life.

She describes herself as an "introvert" with a "strong inner sense of self". She says she was picked on as a child, she believes in part, due to her family situation. She explains that growing up in a "blue collar", "lower-income type of family" made her feel different than her peers. Her "troubled childhood" involved frequent moves to various rented apartments and "a very abusive stepfather", who she indicates "actually ended up in prison several times". Married at age eighteen, her parents divorced by the time Almira was just a year old. Her father had dropped out of high school and in his mid-twenties returned for his G.E.D. She recalls both parents working at low-paying "odd jobs". As

they were busy struggling to manage their own lives and to make ends meet, Almira grew up quite independently, spending a good deal of time on her own with little adult supervision and as she points out, "…not a lot of expectations on me at all at home" regarding achievement in school. The circumstances of her young life were uncertain and stressful. Almira believes that the challenges she and her family faced interfered with her academic performance, resulting in her grades through high school being inconsistent and not representative of her academic capabilities. Nonetheless, she liked school in her younger years and believes that she "was always advanced" and "a bright student".

Almira was never "proud" of her "family situation" and, while she turned inward and spent a lot of solitary time in her room reading, she also developed a tremendous inner drive to survive and succeed. She says that at a very young age she developed "an idea in the back of my head that there has to be more to life". She stated repeatedly throughout the interview that she never gave up pursuit of a better life no matter the obstacle she found in her way. She refers to her drive as an "odd inner thing". Her strong motivation, along with her remarkable resilience, surfaced as salient themes.

> Any pressure to do well came from myself from wanting to be proud of something. I've always been driven by the life that I came from. I know that there's better out there. I know that I'm capable of better. And, I think that I wanted it so badly that I was going to do it regardless. It wasn't something that was an option for me. That's how I've lived my whole life. Knowing I was capable of more and doing it. I always tend to push myself quite a bit.

Despite the fact that she had no consistent role model, little encouragement to succeed academically, and that she had many obstacles to overcome, she set her sights on college.

She plotted a course to college by listening closely to advice and direction the parents of her college-going friends offered to their own children and then by mimicking her friends' actions. She said the following while reflecting on that process:

> So, I had these two or three friends who were also interested in looking at colleges. So, my father told me to pack the cooler and gave me a credit card to book a hotel room. I never had a family member go look with me or anything… I never knew what a college tour was like. I never knew what kind of questions to ask. I never attended a college interview.
>
> I felt good about it even though I realize now that there was no rhyme or reason to what I was doing.

This strategy worked well for her during the college search stage. When it came to completing college applications and applying for financial aid, however, she was completely on her own.

> My father never having gone to college, never having even graduated high school, didn't know simple things like grade point average. He didn't know what financial aid was. He didn't know about student loans. So, I didn't have a lot of involvement from him because he was caught up in his own situation.
>
> So, I sat down when it came time to fill out the paperwork. I asked my father for his tax forms and I figured it out myself. He signed where I asked him

> to sign. And, that was it. I sat at our little kitchen counter and just did it. I had no help from anyone at school or anything. And, that was probably the most difficult and confusing thing for me; the financial aid process.

To help support herself, while in high school, Almira worked. And, while her father showed emotional support for her pursuit of a degree, indicating that he was “very proud” of her, he could provide no financial support. Quoting her father she says:

> You know my financial situation. I can’t help you. You’re on your own as far as paying for college. But, I want the best for you and I hope you can do it.

Because she became completely independent financially once enrolled in college and the college she attended did not meet one-hundred percent of financial need, to fill in the gap between what could be borrowed and what was needed her need to work increased.

> I always worked at several different jobs. I was usually working over forty hours per week. And, that was very difficult. My freshman year I guess I didn’t work as much. I worked on campus and then half way through the year I realized I needed more money. I was paying for my books, my clothes, food, anything I needed. Shampoo. I was on my own. My father would come up every once in a while with a bag or two of groceries. But I was really supporting myself. I worked in a daycare center, did tours in admission, at an elderly care center nearby. At certain times I tutored. I nannied off campus. I worked at the Mall.

The fact that she had to work nearly full time to support herself while also enrolled as a full-time college student left little time for anything else, including studying. She worried constantly about finances and her academic performance. Her college experience was

stressful since she was continuously concerned that she might fail to earn the grades necessary to maintain her financial aid funding. As a result, her college experience was marked with "immense pressure all the way through to perform and never let anything slip". Regarding the pressure to succeed, she said:

> I can't afford to mess up. I've always been very planned and particular. Everything I do in my life, every step I take is calculated. I'm always afraid that what I've earned so far might be taken away from me. So I think throughout my life like when I changed majors, I was concerned about being in school longer particularly without a strong relationship with an advisor.

While enrolled, she realized that her situation was different than that of most of her college peers. For example, in contrast to her peers who enjoyed the benefits of parents who not only supported them financially, but also advocated for them and basically managed their lives, Almira had to support herself financially as well as manage all aspects of her enrollment and her life independently.

> It was hard because my friends weren't [working]. They had money. I'd come home from work and pick up my roommate who was at my boyfriend's and they were all partying and having fun. I wasn't. I'd be coming home at ten o'clock to get them and I'd have to go to bed because I had to get up early to go to work in the morning and they didn't. But, it was something I knew I had to do unless I worked. Or, I would have ended up at home again. Above anything, I did not want to go back home.

Almira was consistently struck by the many facets of inequity between her and her college peers. For example, her peers enjoyed a great deal of material possessions that she did not. She realized that her situation was different on her very first day on campus.

> I remember driving up on move-in day. Here I am, this girl on financial aid … in my bright yellow two-door hatch back with my surf shop stickers all over the car. I'm in my t-shirt and my tan and my bleach blonde hair and my Bob Marley playing. And here's all these other kids pulling up in their BMW's and their Lexus's and their families and they're all wearing GAP and Abercrombie. I literally stopped. I looked at my father. I took a deep breath and said, "Oh my gosh, am I going to fit in here?"

Unlike her, other students did not need to work so much. They were able to socialize, engage in extracurricular activities, and to spend money on leisure activities. Because of these differences, she often felt that she didn't belong and "wondered what I was doing there". Almira believes that her peers' the lack of need to take responsibility for themselves resulted in immature behavior Almira referred to as "college girl drama". Despite being annoyed by the perceived immaturity of her peers and feeling like an outsider, just as she had many times in her past when faced with such obstacles, she was determined to make it work and, therefore, sought strategies to help her tolerate the situation.

Eventually, Almira felt increasingly engaged in her college experience and "flourished". Acceptance into an honors program not only acknowledged her past academic achievement, confirming that she was "bright", but also challenged her

academically. The perceived lack of academic challenge she experienced was something that bothered Almira until then and contributed to her lack of college engagement. The position as a resident assistant relieved some of her financial concerns, which allowed her more time to concentrate on academic and other matters. It also was a role that came with adult responsibilities, which allowed her to feel that she belonged in the campus community in a new way. The level of responsibility and maturity required to do the job well was a good match for her.

Despite her increasing campus connections, Almira indicates that her experience was limited by a lack of information about other possible opportunities, and by the fact that she was reluctant to ask for help, even when it was needed.

> I assumed I couldn't do things like study abroad because I had to work. So, I didn't ask. One personal thing for me was that I never wanted to appear weak. I always wanted to do things on my own and not have to ask for help.

Reflecting on her experience, she wishes that she had been more proactive in seeking help and asking questions.

When asked whether she thought being female had any impact on her college experience, Almira indicated that she believes because she is female she wasn't taken as seriously as she might have been if she were male, especially in her role as a resident assistant. She adds that more was expected of her because she is female.

> I think people were more strict with me behavior wise because I was a female. If I did something like the guy down the hall might not get in trouble for doing but I

> would. The expectations are different in that arena. Otherwise things were pretty fair.

I think she means that females were expected to behave more responsibly and more maturely than their male counterparts even under similar circumstances.

At the point of leaving college and finally achieving her longstanding goal of earning a college degree when one might think she would be relieved, instead Almira felt tremendously increasing levels of stress. Rather than celebrating like the other students who were planning their graduation parties and looking forward to returning to their family's home, she was preparing for yet another difficult life transition that she had to sort out alone. As is common practice, her college required that resident students move out of the residence halls by graduation day, which would leave her homeless and, if she couldn't get a job by graduation day, without sufficient income to make ends meet.

> I had my resumes out and ready to go. I got hired during my senior week events… None of my friends were thinking about work or had jobs. They were all going to go travel over the summer. They were going to be waiters or bartenders. I felt immense pressure to get a job. I moved in with my boyfriend the day of graduation. I felt immense pressure.

No longer eligible for student housing and loans to help cover expenses, Almira not only needed immediate housing, she also needed income sufficient to cover rent and other living expenses, including transportation to get to work and to begin repayment of significant student loan debt. She felt very fortunate that she avoided a crisis since she

had been offered a job and a place to live, even though she indicated that moving in with her boyfriend “wasn’t a good living situation”.

Beth. Beth is a senior in college who is just finishing a social science degree. At the start of the interview, she does not seem very forthcoming, tending to respond in short answers. I sense some nervousness on her part based on her fidgety behavior. So, I keep the initial conversation light in hope that doing so will help her to feel more at ease.

When she does share, Beth is quite articulate. She describes herself as “…always a little shy”, concerned about “being rejected”, but “resilient”. I remind her that she does not have to continue the interview if she is uncomfortable for any reason. She says that she thinks it’s important for people to hear her story and the story of other students like her and that she wishes to continue. She opens up and tells me that she has been overwhelmed throughout the past several years of her young life because she has had to deal with a “really bad” family situation. I am careful not to push too much. I sense that she is vulnerable and I don’t want to harm her by pushing her to discuss something that will make her too uncomfortable. After more light conversation, she decides to share with me that she was sexually abused by a close family member, that she came forward to disclose repeated incidents of abuse taking place over an extended period of time, and that the individual is currently incarcerated as a result. Then, despite her initial cautious behavior, she begins to seem stronger. Her voice becomes louder and more distinct. She sits taller in her chair. She goes on to tell me that other close family members blamed her for the abuse and “it tore my whole family apart”. One outcome of the situation was that Beth was no longer welcome in her family home. At the time of the interview, she was just beginning to reconnect with a younger sibling, who at her mother’s urging had not

spoken with her since the initial trial. Most pressing on her mind during our meeting is that she is involved in a desperate search not only for a job, but also for a place to live since she has to leave campus housing upon her upcoming graduation.

Beth had never considered going to college when she was younger. She wasn't even sure at times if she would graduate from high school. Although she liked school, her grades were inconsistent she believes due to the interference created by the crises occurring in her family and the impact it all had on her personally. She says that she suffered emotionally and mentally. During her senior year of high school, she was encouraged by a guidance counselor to apply to college. She had no idea what college would be like. Her only impression of college was based on the "lecture halls on T.V." Like Almira, her childhood was quite independent. She wishes now that "there was someone to help me to understand the value of education and to tell me to do my homework." If she had understood the value of it, she believes she could have and would have achieved at a higher level academically. She says that the current disconnection from her family makes her determined to succeed in college since she believes that doing so will allow her to be able to take care of herself in the future. Therefore, she sees obtaining a college degree as something that she has to do to survive.

> I knew I had it in me but I had to work hard. I guess I just knew that I had to do it. You know, I had to be able to take care of myself, to survive. I had no choice. Nobody else was going to take care of me and I wanted a good life.

Her first year of college was difficult because she struggled to adjust to new academic expectations, but even as the challenging situation with her family continued

and she experienced some inconsistencies in her ability to focus, she says that she was successful academically. How well she did at any point in time "…depended on what was going on with my family." Her level of success also depended on what was going on in the courts. She testified against the abusive family member and lived in constant fear that that individual would be released from prison and/or that there would be appeals that would force her to testify again.

Beth is an independent student in the official sense of the term, meaning that she is financially independent from her parents. They provide her no financial support. To remain enrolled at her small, private college she borrows a significant amount of money in the form of loans, which don't cover her living expenses or cost of attendance or the increasing cost of the medication she needs to control her anxiety completely. In addition, she has to "work a lot" to support herself. Juggling jobs to make ends meet financially became so challenging and her situation was so stressful that at times she considered withdrawing from college. Since she was so hopeful that obtaining a degree would have a positive impact on her life, however, she was determined to succeed and, so, remained enrolled.

> The whole money part. I've had trouble paying my bills. It's impossible to go to school and make enough money to live on.

Beth managed the college search and application process on her own. She becomes animated, moving her arms in the air, as she tells me that the process of applying to and enrolling in college was particularly painful for her emotionally. The worst part, she says, is that she had to repeat her tragic story many times to strangers. In

her view, colleges and the entire enrollment process, most especially the financial aid application process, are constructed to accommodate typical dependent students whose parents often manage that whole process for them. Her financial aid applications were rejected by the federal government again and again throughout her four years of enrollment because her situation was different than the norm and her forms did not include any indication of parental support. She wishes that she had more help figuring out the entire aspect of financing her education as well as counseling about academic majors and courses within them. She often felt lost around these issues and didn't know where to turn for help.

When Beth was asked whether she thought being female had any effect on her experience, she says that she clearly sees a difference in how males and females are treated in the classroom. She adds:

> I think females have to work harder. I think girls have more of a relationship and they participate more. I think it's not cool sometimes for boys to participate.

She says that the faculty members expect more from female students and that male students automatically get respect while females have to earn it.

Beth believes that her college education helped her to learn how to better manage her time and to "feel smarter" and more confident. When she compares her own experience with that of her college peers, she believes that they simply need to figure out "how to handle the independence" from parental supervision. Beth would like to go on to graduate school, but is concerned about financing it and is focused mostly on resolving matters of immediate concern.

> I really want to go to graduate school. I've looked online at some programs. It's a money issue, though. Right now, I can't afford it. I don't even have a place to live. I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to do. I really, really have to find a job. I have a lot of loans. I'm kind of freaking out about it. The woman I was living with is moving out of state... I can go with her, but … I like it better up here. So, I have to figure out a way that I can find a place to live quick because school will be over in a couple of months. It makes it hard to concentrate on school work and I can't even have any fun like everyone else. It stinks.

Like Almira, she too is facing homelessness upon graduation and is under tremendous pressure to get a job. While she feels a great sense of accomplishment for having completed her degree and is enormously grateful that she had the opportunity to do so, she cannot take the time to celebrate. As we speak, she is realizing that while completing her bachelor's degree will likely help her eventually, it will not mean the end of her financial struggles. For her, she now realizes, college graduation represents another difficult crisis to overcome on her own.

Catherine. Catherine is in the final months of coursework before graduating when we meet. She begins sharing openly almost at once as we sit down to start our interview. She mentions immediately that her family background was challenging. As I listen to her story, just as I did with Almira and Beth, I wonder how she managed to overcome the many obstacles in her way.

Catherine describes herself as "a very shy person", who believes that she was too selfless in the past, giving too much and not focusing enough on taking care of herself.

> I was actually a very selfless person. I realized that I'm starting to think more about me and what's best for me. Thinking back I was giving and giving and giving. I realized that no one else was going to do that for me. It's hard for me, too, to think about doing that because with my mom and then coming here just filling that void with my friends. So, now it's about me. I mean, what do I get? Now my friends don't understand. But, it's hard to say no and to continue focusing on myself.

Reflecting on her prior educational experiences, Catherine indicates that she always loved school and was always driven to become a nurse.

> I just have my own beliefs. I have goals. I was picked on in school. But I still loved school. Math and Science were my favorite.

She considers investing in her education to become a nurse worthwhile. "It's a lot of money, but it will pave the road for me." She does not appear shy to me, quite the opposite. She appears strong, articulate, and confident.

She continues by telling me about her "rough" childhood. Catherine's mother was a high school student when Catherine was born. Catherine believes that because her mother's own life experience precluded her from attending college, she became especially encouraging to Catherine to pursue a college education. The family circumstances including the mother's parenting behavior, however, were not supportive or encouraging. Catherine's experience went beyond that of an independent childhood to the point of neglect. She was left with nearly complete responsibility not only for herself, but also for the care of younger siblings.

> My mom and dad were divorced when I was eight. My mom had me in high school. So, for her, going to school was important. My background I don't have a lot of money. We were like the poor kids. I was picked on in school. Then my mom remarried had a child and was divorced again. And then DSS has been involved in my life since I was eight. Like I said, well to be frank, DSS was involved. There was a situation where I was potentially being taken away from my mom. Basically I was the one doing the watching, cleaning, and cooking. I was being the mom. It was hard, though, because there was a lot of turbulence.

Despite her difficult childhood, Catherine finds a positive in her experience stating that she believes the huge amount of responsibility she took on at such a young age kept her away from getting into drinking and other destructive activities that create obstacles to success for so many young people, including some of her family members.

She elaborates a little more about her family situation and how it made her transition to becoming a residential college student particularly challenging.

> Like I said I cared for my sisters and brother a lot. My two sisters are like 2 and 11. But so she was 4 years ago like 7 when I came to college. The other one wasn't even thought of. Like I said there was still a lot going on at home. I was concerned. I wasn't really homesick at all. I loved being on my own. I didn't have a car.
>
> It was hard because I was the communicator between my mom and my brother. My stepmother and my brother. [Tearfully.] They did it, though. At that point I started to detach myself because it was just too overwhelming. Yes, and it's hard

> to be the parent of your own parents. I almost can give her an excuse because she had me at 17. I don't know.

I wondered about Catherine's college search process and whether she received assistance from anyone outside her family, perhaps at her high school. Like the other participants in this study, Catherine managed the search process mostly on her own, indicating that her guidance counselor was *"too busy to help me much"* and that he discouraged her from going to private school due to the cost. This discouragement led her to believe that she'd be limited to attending a community college. But, instead she followed her own instincts and applied to four-year institutions anyway. She did not visit colleges prior to applying or enrolling because she wasn't able to do so due in part to a lack of transportation.

> I came after being accepted. That was the only time that my mom has ever come to campus. My mom didn't have a car and there was a lot going on at home at that time. So, I just said it was okay and we didn't need to come until I had to come to do a schedule. We had to borrow a car.

Her college choice was based on the amount of available financial aid and proximity of the institution to home.

> My background I don't have a lot of money. So, I got more bang for my buck. I really wanted nursing. I applied to five schools and got accepted to all of them. I had to go where I was going to get the most financial aid.

Like other participants, she found applying for financial aid the most significant hurdle in the entire college application process.

> I was clueless. It was aggravating. It was hard to get my parents' information. They didn't know anything about it at all. My applications would get rejected.

Catherine tearfully describes her overall college experience as stressful and refers to herself as "a big ball of stress", constantly dealing with financial struggles and concern about keeping her grades at an acceptable level as well as feelings that she doesn't belong socially.

> My background at home made me grow up faster than others. This college, there are a lot of people coming are from more of a richer population and me coming from complete opposite I look at them sometimes in disgust. I just have to realize that different people take different time to mature and grow up and that maybe this just isn't the time for some of them.

> Coming here having to figure out how to remember, oh, I have to pay this bill or that bill. Having to figure out where the grocery store is. A lot of the kids here their parents send them money and that's frustrating. I mean I have to pay for my books, my gas, and any fun things I might want to do. I wish that I wasn't as stressed. If I could come to college and not worry about money and just focus on my studies, I'd be fine. My scholarship I needed a 3.5 to keep it. I almost lost it in my junior year. So, I had to work harder to keep my scholarship.

Ultimately, Catherine accepted that her circumstances were different than that of her peers and that in order to succeed she had to take her course work more seriously than they do. She seems to cope by detaching herself from that which is of concern at any given point in time, which allows her to focus on other matters.

Regarding whether being female had any impact on her college experience, she says:

> There is a lot of focus on sports. I feel it's more the males than female sports. There are obviously nearly all females in my program. Many of the guys on those teams are assholes. Many of the girls don't care how they look when they're drunk.

She immediately returns to discussion about the lack of maturity she perceives in her peers, which she seems to believe has had more of an impact on her experience than any gender-related issues.

As her college graduation approaches, like Almira and Beth, Catherine feels tremendous pressure to find a place to live and a job immediately.

> I am freaking out when May is coming and thinking I'm going to be out on my own. It's the nursing aspect. I'm thinking where am I'm going to go. I have to get a job, a car and I don't know what I'm going to do. I hear that there aren't as many jobs now. Some places aren't accepting new nurses. It's tougher than it used to be. I didn't have anyone to kind of figure any of this out.

Like Almira and Beth, she has no safety net, no family home to which she can return while she seeks a full-time job. She is also worried about the state of the current job market for nurses, which has become tighter in recent years.

Dorothy. My immediate impression of Dorothy is that she is an extremely upbeat young woman who exudes tremendous energy. She smiles broadly as we greet each other. As she speaks during the interview, she moves her arms widely and shifts her body around in the chair as if doing so is necessary to convey the intensity of what she is communicating verbally. While she appears quite gregarious to me, she describes herself as someone who is “not the cool kid” and “a little shy”.

Her parents divorced when she was eight years old. She lived with her mother and other family members prior to moving on campus at college. Her father is not very involved in her life. She doesn’t see him and she says “…he’s not someone I’d turn to”. Her mother suffered a major disabling heart attack a few years ago. Consequently, she was unable to continue working, which had a significant negative impact on them financially, resulting in the loss of income and benefits due to her disability. Dorothy indicates, therefore, that she is “basically supporting myself” and, as a result, faces financial struggles and responsibilities that she believes sets her apart from her college peers.

> I work. I work a lot. I have a job on campus and more off campus. I have to deal with a lot that other students don’t even have to deal with like paying for bills and paying for things. Usually it has to do with money. When my mom had her heart attack, I had to live with an aunt and then with another aunt. So, I haven’t been around adult supervision for quite a while.

As Dorothy comments above, she works a lot. In addition, she feels tremendous pressure to succeed academically. She struggles to balance work and school and has little time left

for other activities, leaving her somewhat isolated socially, although working on campus helps her to feel more connected to her college.

Her college choice was based mostly on the amount of financial aid she was offered and the proximity of the school to her mother's home. Thus, her college search was limited to only a few local institutions and she believes her final choice was somewhat random. She says, "I don't really know how I got there completely." She attended a technical high school and was discouraged from applying to college based on what she says is the misconception that students who attend technical schools do not go on to college. She was also discouraged from attending a private college due to the cost. The financial aid application process was the most challenging aspect of the college application process for her, suggesting, that it was "too complicated" and "overwhelming" leaving her "frustrated". It did not become any less complicated or less frustrating throughout her four years of enrollment and she found it difficult to obtain guidance from college officials even though she sought it persistently.

Dorothy had a very independent childhood. Because her parents were working so much, she was left on her own. "I spent a lot of time in the library." Despite the challenges she faced, she says that she had very positive early educational experiences, and that she "loved school" except when it came to math. She "feared math" and has avoided it as much as possible, especially since the eighth grade when she had a particularly negative experience with a teacher who told her class that if they couldn't do the math she was teaching, they wouldn't be able to go on to college. Dorothy indicates that such discouragement regarding pursuing a college education actually motivated her, "I felt that I had something to prove even more then." She believed in herself, was highly

motivated to succeed, and was determined to do so in spite of the obstacles she had to overcome.

While her mother has not been able to support her financially, she has been extremely emotionally encouraging to Dorothy regarding her pursuit of a college education. Her mother was one of thirteen children who had to leave high school to help support her family. She later returned to school as an adult to complete high school. Having experienced working without a high school diploma, she consistently stressed the importance of education to Dorothy, mostly regarding completing high school. College was never something that was imagined or discussed for Dorothy. The recent encouragement and enthusiasm from her mother is important to Dorothy, however. Also defining for her was early encouragement from a teacher. “My teacher told me that I was going to grow up to be a great person and you will have a lot of friends around you. That kind of stuck with me and motivated me to work harder.” The statement validated Dorothy’s inner sense that she could be successful, especially since it was made by someone who she perceived to be in authority. She set high goals for herself and worked hard to achieve them. She says the following about her determination to succeed:

> It was always within me. I was hard on myself. Even my mother used to tell me that it was okay if I didn’t get an A. I’m goal driven. I’ve always been academically driven. Like a challenge. Never just looking for the easy way out.

Despite her determination, Dorothy’s transition to college was difficult. She felt that she did not “fit in” with other students. She acknowledged that in many ways she actually didn’t want to fit in. She believes that she was “pretty close” to being an adult

when she arrived at college whereas she sees her peers as still quite dependent on their parents. She says the following about fitting in with her college peers:

> …there was a lot of stupid drama with females. Yuck. I hate to be involved with that and never did. So, I avoid it. Backstabbing, name calling, the obnoxious stuff. It still happens but it happened more in freshmen year when people are trying to fit in. So, it matters more then. It makes you not want to try to fit in sometimes. I know some people who had no issues but when you don't even have that one comfort person, it's hard. I didn't have anyone to kind of figure any of this out.

Her transition to college was complicated additionally by conflict with a long-time boyfriend, who she saw not only as immature, but also was actually actively interfering with her attending college. He didn't understand why she wanted to attend college and didn't want her to do it. "I couldn't explain college to him. It was always like a fight the whole way." Dorothy further explains her struggle with the relationship:

> I think it's completely different from people that don't go. Even the little things that you pick up that they don't know. For example, I'm a women's studies minor. So, I'm a feminist and I didn't even know it. I always was and didn't know what it was called. I couldn't even hang out with some of the same people. I would just flip out. I don't even know how I did it. One of the hardest things is to take it in and do what's right for you. It's hard especially when you don't have someone to look up to.

Unable to reconcile the differences between them, Dorothy eventually ended the relationship. Although doing so would mean deeper isolation until she could establish new friendships, she believes it was the right decision.

Like most of the other participants in this study, Dorothy is approaching graduation when we meet. Due to her mother’s disability and the disconnection from her father, Dorothy is on her own to find a home to live in since she can no longer live with her mother. She is struggling to find a job so that she can make the transition out of college without a huge crisis. She worries that she might not find a job right away and that she’ll have no place to live. She feels tremendous pressure about this, but remains optimistic that she’ll succeed.

Emma. Emma is in her third year of study when we meet. She responds to my interview questions, but her statements are brief and include little elaboration. I remind her that she may opt out of the interview, but she states that she wants to continue. We push on. It takes a while for her to offer more than brief answers to my questions.

Emma states that she sees herself as an “ambitious” person who is “shy”. She describes her early educational experiences as positive and indicates that she “liked school” when she was younger. She did note a particularly discouraging encounter with one of her high school English teachers, though. During this interaction, the teacher discouraged her from pursuing her dream of attending college to seek a degree in the biological sciences. Her teacher suggested that she “rethink” her goals because she “may not make it through college”. The idea of attending college, though, had been a

longstanding one to which she was committed and about which she says, “My mom drilled it into my head that I needed to go college.”

Finally, Emma opens up when asked about how she came to enroll in college. Emma says that her journey to college was uncertain mostly because she had nobody to help her with the process of gathering college information and applying and that the financial aid application process was particularly challenging. Because of the lack of support, she nearly gave up. The entire process was frustrating for her and she believes that she didn’t have easy access to resources about colleges or the process of applying to them. Her desire for a better life than the one she saw her mother endure, however, motivated her to continue on with the application process nonetheless.

> I tried and do it by myself. I almost didn’t do it. Then I didn’t want to end up like my mother. So, I went to the school that was closest to home.

Looking back, if only she had known then what she knows now about variations in academic programs, she says she would have chosen a college that had a program with a more specific focus on majors related to her area of interest. She finds the general subject area, the only one available at the college she attends, less interesting than she believes would be the case with the more focused area. She worries that the general degree might not be as valuable later when she seeks a job or applies to graduate school, but at the present time doesn’t see any alternative. Her main reason for choosing the college she attends is due to its proximity to home.

When asked about her initial transition to college, she indicates that it became quite challenging when her family moved suddenly. Her family moved out of state abruptly, leaving her on her own, which was very difficult for Emma.

> I just got settled in school and then, in October, she moved. I have three sisters. They all went. It was hard. I wasn't doing well in school. I couldn't concentrate. I was antisocial.

She says that she wasn't prepared socially for residential campus living and now realizes that she'd rather live at home and commute to college. This is not an option for her since she has no local home. She misses her family and the ability to visit them. She was very close with her mother. She felt disconnected and alone, which had a negative impact on her ability to concentrate on her course work. Adding to her concerns was that she didn't feel as though she fit in at all with the other students she'd encountered on campus. College wasn't turning out to be how she had pictured it, either.

> Yes, from watching TV you think college is going to be exciting. It's actually very dull. I'm not into the drinking and drugs. It's hard when everyone else is doing that and you don't want to do it. I don't have anything to do. I used to go to lunch and sit by myself.

Emma describes one significant and disturbing incident occurring during her first year of college as something that still angers her.

> My freshman year, I lived in a quad. I guess my roommates didn't like me. They would leave derogatory notes on my computer and in my room that said stuff like, "I'm going to kill you Nigger." "Don't fall asleep." "We'll kill you." I just wanted

> to leave. I didn't expect all that racism. I lived with three other girls. I don't know which one it was. I confronted them. I still see them all the time. I was at work and someone came into our room and stole our laptops but they blamed it on me. I was at work here on campus in the library. I could prove I was at work. But Public safety made me move out to another room. I have no idea who stole the laptops but I was really upset that they thought it was me.

The fact that she still sees the former roommates around campus frequently contributes to her experience of social discomfort. She believes strongly that she experienced a great injustice due to the fact that she, rather than her roommates, was required by campus security to move out of the room following the incident. She also believes strongly that she was not really vindicated of the alleged theft of the laptops. Further, the roommates were not reprimanded for the racial and threatening content in the notes they left for Emma and that aspect of the incident was never addressed. Despite her dissatisfaction with the way she was treated, she decided not to pursue the matter further, since she believes it would not be worth the time and effort in the end.

Regardless of how Emma feels about the injustice she experienced or the social discomfort resulting from it, she does not have time to dwell on it. She must focus on more pressing and immediate concerns, such as worrying about supporting herself financially, an issue which takes precedence over everything else. After all, her family is unable to provide financial support to Emma. In fact, one of the reasons for the abrupt family move is that her mother just lost her job and heard that there are jobs and less expensive housing in the south.

As time passes, Emma's concerns about money increase along with her feelings of isolation. Like the other participants in this study, she works a lot. She has two jobs, one on campus and one at a local shopping mall, which together equate to about forty hours per week. Unfortunately, even with the income from both jobs, she struggles to support herself. Despite the fact that Emma missed her family tremendously, she couldn't afford to visit them.

On top of everything else, Emma worries whether she has made the right choice of colleges. It would be one thing to struggle with the isolation and financial troubles she's experiencing if she was feeling enthusiastic about her classroom experiences and the potential return on the investment in terms of a job later. And, while she indicates that she has earned good grades, she doesn't feel challenged or engaged in the classroom. So, there is little about Emma's college experience at this point which seems positive.

Felicia. Felicia is nearing completion of her last semester in college when we meet. She describes herself as "a mixture of confident and shy" depending on the situation and as someone who is reserved and doesn't like "drama". Before I even can begin informal chat with Felicia , she immediately becomes tearful. She says that her family situation is extremely stressful and the reason for her tears. I ask her to tell me more if she is comfortable doing so and offer to end the interview if she wishes to do so. She chooses to continue and states that her parents are "really strict", citing cultural beliefs of her Haitian background that limit freedom of choice for children, especially for daughters. While she was encouraged strongly by her parents to do well in school and to attend college, the choice of college was driven mainly by the fact that she would not be allowed to live on campus. Further, throughout her college enrollment, she has

experienced tremendous stress. She has worked on average more than forty hours per week. She is expected to maintain a work-study job and at least 25 hours per week of additional work at another off-campus job, the earnings from which are turned over to her father. Not allowed to have a car, she commutes to school and to her additional job and home via public transportation. She is also expected to participate fully in additional family matters. This participation includes housework, stepping in to facilitate communication complicated by a language barrier, and taking on significant responsibility for the care of nieces and nephews as well as a foster child her family has living with them. She remarks, “even though I was smart enough not to get pregnant but I feel like I have a kid of my own anyway”.

Felicia indicates that she believes her family’s “huge cultural difference” causes her parents, mostly her father, to limit her freedom and to expect her to do so much in addition to doing well in college. She not only believes that her family’s expectations are unreasonable, but also that they actually interfered with her ability to succeed in college. She is keenly aware that if she were male, she would be treated quite differently within her family. At this point in the interview, she remains tearful. I remind her that she doesn’t have to continue participating in the interview if it’s going to be too upsetting to do so. She insists that she’s fine and that she wants to go on.

She started college in a nursing program, but had to leave the program eventually because she didn’t make the necessary grades to remain enrolled. It had been her dream to become a nurse and she is extremely disappointed that she was not able to achieve her dream. She believes strongly that she would have been able to succeed if only her father had understood that she needed to spend more time concentrating on her course work.

She says that he is even stricter with her than he might have been otherwise because her older sister had "kind of screwed up" and didn't make it to college. She says that her sister attempted suicide when Felicia was about twelve years old. While she doesn't think it caused her sister's suicide attempt, she believes the pressure resulting from their difficult family situation contributed significantly to her sister's personal struggles.

Felicia 's situation causes her to be isolated socially. She doesn't have any friends on campus and feels that she doesn't belong. Because of the expectations on her outside of the campus environment, she found no time to participate in any extracurricular activities or to connect with her college. The only meaningful relationships she has with anyone on campus are with the staff she has gotten to know at her work-study position. She states that she can't even manage having a boyfriend because she has no time to maintain a relationship and her father interferes. I asked her how she managed to handle it all.

> You find your ways around things. My parents decided to move and they bought a new house and um the bills became so much more heavy it's like you become part of it too. So I have to work to pay bills. My mom is my motivation. She understands me. She shaped me and gave me the strength to keep going and not pay my dad any mind. And like they fight a lot and they filed for divorce at one point. I don't know…you kind of grow like a wall where you don't let things faze you. You know like the little things.

She saw her college peers enjoy freedom and take for granted material things, such as cars, that she lacked. “But you see things especially coming into a school like this, you see things and then you feel uncomfortable for a little while. Then it’s like whatever.”

Elaborating on her thoughts about her college peers, she says:

> Or sometimes they can be just be so ungrateful.[She laughs.] It’s like they act in ways that are like I don’t know. They damage their cars. They just don’t care. Um. Or like you’re sitting in class and this one girl is like my dad just bought me a car for my birthday and I didn’t like it. If my dad bought me a car it would be you know.
>
> People tend to hang around together socially with people who are like them. Unless it’s like a class project. Some were what I thought. Some I was like well they’re really down to earth and okay. Others were well I was like get away from me. They’re not really that mature. But they have their parents all the time to do things for them. All they worry about are material things. They’ll probably adapt. Sometimes I really envy that they don’t have to work.

She regrets attending a private college and cites her lack of knowledge and the absence of available advice as the reasons she did so.

> If I had knew more I would not have gone to a private school simply because of the money. There should be that extra person to sit down with students who don’t have parents who can help then Like maybe getting scholarships or picking classes. Other kids have parents who make calls for them. I didn’t know that you

could transfer credit or take summer classes. Working on campus I got a lot of information. There's a ton of stuff I didn't know about.

As her graduation is approaching quickly, Felicia is worried about what comes next. She is especially worried about repaying her loans. Stating that although she feels trapped in her family situation, she realizes that she has to continue hoping for the best since she has no place else to go. She is tearful again as she tells me that she was counting on a nurses' salary to pay for her student loan debt and to free herself from a stressful family situation. She believes her degree in health sciences will provide merely the opportunity for administrative positions in a healthcare setting from which she'll earn far less than she would have as a nurse. She anticipates that she will continue to be expected to contribute financially and in other ways to her family and her freedom will continue to be restricted for as long as she lives with her parents. She hopes to go to graduate school some day, but doesn't think that will be possible at any point in the near future due to her financial situation.

Glinda. Glinda describes herself as "independent", "kind of laid back", "smart" and "Hispanic". Like the other participants in this study, Glinda experienced a difficult childhood. She indicates that the neighborhood she grew up in was unsafe. Her older brother was shot and killed there. Her other brothers attended vocational school. She and her sister, instead, both went to private high school, but her sister dropped out after becoming pregnant. At around that same time of her sister's pregnancy, other trouble in the family was brewing:

> Then money got really tight. My brothers had to get a job. I had to get a job when I was 15. So, I couldn't like do any activities in HS. I had this other priority to get money just so we could make it through. At that time, my quality of work wasn't as good because I had to stay up late to work. So, it was kind of hard as far as school. But I had to help out my family.

As a result of their financial struggles and to be close to wherever her father could find job opportunities, Glinda 's family moved a lot. Later, her father had a heart attack just before Glinda completed high school. He was soon after diagnosed with cancer and could no longer work. To help her family survive financially, while in high school Glinda worked nearly full time. This need to work made it difficult for her to manage her course work. "My mom didn't really understand how high the expectations were." Regardless of her struggles, Glinda graduated 15th in her class. Unfortunately, she attended her high school graduation alone due to her father's illness. She eventually was able to celebrate her accomplishment with her family by sharing pictures taken by one of her friends' parents.

The possibility of attending college was never discussed in Glinda 's home. She made the decision on her own while a sophomore in high school. She said that it was difficult to tell her parents that she wanted to go to college. Attending college was outside of their experience and difficult for them to understand.

> It was hard to tell them that I wanted to go to college. My mom, she wasn't, since she didn't go to college. It was hard. She didn't understand what was the point of

> college. My dad didn't either. So, it was hard to find anyone who was positive about it. So, it was hard for them to be willing for it.

She spent a lot of time alone throughout her childhood and mentions that she "read a lot" because she was curious. She "dreamed about being a dancer, then a teacher, then a psychologist". She finally decided to major in Business Management.

Glinda 's college search process was limited. She managed it mostly by herself and states, "Google was my savior." She spent a lot of time in the library and found the librarians to be particularly helpful, even as far as helping her to find information regarding specific questions on financial aid applications. She ended up choosing the college she attends because it was recommended by a family acquaintance as well as its proximity to home. In response to a question regarding any assistance she received from high school teachers or guidance counselors, Glinda said:

> Well my friend was white and her schools were like Harvard. I mean like we did have the same guidance counselor. Yeah, like in high school I was the fifteenth and my friend was 40th. They were telling her to apply to BU and Harvard. So, we were going through the same process. But she was like I'll still go with you to look. And even though we weren't going to the same schools she said she'd come along with me to look.

Despite her high school academic achievement, Glinda was advised by her guidance counselor to attend community college. She believes this was mostly due to the idea that

she could not financially manage the tuition at a four-year school, but she also mentioned potential racial discrimination as well.

> Since I'm Hispanic, my guidance counselor told me that I should learn a trade. It was in my junior year and I told her I wanted to go on to college. She was like Oh really that's good but maybe you should consider this….community college or maybe you could learn this trade. I told her that's not what I want to do. She's like, well, that's a lot of money. I didn't want to let that stop me. I read about loans and financial aid. She was really hung up on the trade. You'll get a job quicker and it's too much money. I wanted to be a professional teacher and to go to school for that. I just went to the library and looked it up myself. I wasn't going to let her stop me. Sometimes if I thought about it I doubted if I could do it. After that she kind of helped me but she threw some random colleges out there but they were community colleges

Glinda seemed forgiving of the ignorance of her high school teachers and counselors, and insightful when speaking about them.

> It was hard because I don't think they wanted me there. But because I was smart they thought I was okay. But when I asked for help they were like oh were you not paying attention in class? Their expectations weren't really high for me. It was kind of expecting me to give up. At times I thought maybe I should give up. My mom didn't really understand how high the expectations were. I had a hard time adjusting. There was a negative circle around me. I would see where the expectations were around my friend and where mine were. And like if she kind of

> like messed up or if I messed up. They would say more like well you should have done this or that. It wasn't like criticism. I just think they don't know how to work with minorities. Not to say it was racial. I just don't think they knew how to handle someone who was different. So, for the other person if she didn't understand they thought it was probably the teacher that didn't explain it right. For me it was more that they thought I must have not understood. So, it was different.

Glinda 's adjustment to college was challenging. She quickly saw her situation as different from that of her peers. She explained that she felt she didn't belong and described differences between her and her first roommate.

> My roommate was always spending all this money. We had such different backgrounds. It was hard for me like she didn't throw it in my face all the time. It was still there. It was kind of like you could really tell how different backgrounds. Being working class I couldn't relate to some of these students.

> I bought my first car. Nobody bought me anything. She talks about her dad paying her insurance. I pay everything and more. She talked about her sweet sixteen. It was hard for me to relate to her. We had no common ground. There's times when you feel like nobody is there. I think she was more like carefree. She could stay out until whatever time at night and I knew I couldn't do that. I'm paying for my own education. She didn't go to class a lot of times. Then when she got a boyfriend, she went even less. It was kind of hard um for me to like because she was like oh we can go to this bar. But like her lifestyle was so carefree. Her

> maturity level was different than mine. She was like oh I can just go party all the time. She was nice we just couldn't find common ground. I felt like she came here to have a good time. I came because I need to get a job to take care of myself. She didn't grow up like I did. I like to be independent.

Nonetheless, believing that earning a college degree would help her to achieve her most recent dream of becoming a manager she refused to give up and decided not to let the fact that she felt marginalized interfere with her ability to succeed.

> You just have to push through. So, there were a lot of obstacles but in a way they motivated me to keep pushing. I just tell myself I'm going to do this and I do it. Everyone is always depending on me. Then but for me it was like take care of the parents and all of the kids. Even though they're looking for jobs. It was a lot of pressure. I just did what I had to do. I knew I had to do it regardless.

Pervasive in her home situation and strongly ingrained in her father's attitude are certain beliefs about women to which Glinda is accustomed. She says, according to her father, "We should all be stay-at-home moms". While her father supports her brother attending college, the fact that Glinda is in college "was a shock" to him. Her experience in a Business Management program also highlighted issues based on her being female. About this aspect of her college experience she says the following:

> Besides cultural with the woman thing I had to try even harder. Especially in Management it was all guys. So, I felt like I had to do even better than the guys. Women were always overpowered by the guys. It was hard to actually say stuff to talk over the guys. Faculty treated us like we needed more help than we really did.

> We worked really hard and we studied all the time. They thought we couldn't understand it. Which was funny. We could understand it. Now it doesn't bother me, but I know how to handle it.

While nearing completion of the course requirements for her bachelor's degree, Glinda was faced with new challenges. Still struggling to help her family manage their difficult financial situation, she works many hours on campus and off campus. She recently took on even more work hours, but then became ill. She describes the situation tearfully:

> I got so exhausted I fell over the toilet at work and had to go to the hospital. I had to work five nights a week from 9 o'clock at night until 6 in the morning. We weren't getting the money we were supposed to. My father couldn't get any disability. He was in the hospital. He had no insurance. I was doing inventory and stocking. I was the only one there who was in school. They had to stop school. Now I see why they couldn't do it. Then I just couldn't do it. Then I got diagnosed with leukemia. All the teachers helped me a lot. It kind of made it easier to finish school. Now I'm graduating. It's hard.

She is to begin treatment for her leukemia the day following our interview. Unaware of this until she mentioned it during the interview, I immediately remind her that she doesn't have to continue the interview. She reveals that she wants to participate despite her illness because she refuses to let it stop her from doing something she made a commitment to do. She further believes that it's important for her and other students in similar situations to tell of their struggles. Her dedication and resilience are remarkable.

Hanna. Hanna is preparing to take her last scheduled final exam of her junior year when we meet. She's always seen herself as a "good student". She mentions that she is anxious to see her grades for the classes for which she's already completed the work. She says that she earned all A's and one B+ last semester and is aiming for a perfect 4.0 grade point average for this semester.

Like the other participants, Hanna had a difficult and unstable childhood. Attempting to describe her family situation, she says, "At home, well, you just didn't know how things would be." She further discloses that her father "drinks a lot" and became abusive when under the influence. Her parents "used to fight all the time". To cope, Hanna and her younger sister frequently sought refuge in her bedroom to watch television. Her father finally left the home, which Hanna says "was better because he was gone", but it also meant that more of the financial burden for the family fell on her mother's shoulders. The income from her mother's two jobs where she "cleans at the hospital and at another place for a company she does on the side at some people's houses" is not adequate to support the family. Her father is not always compliant with providing child support to her mother, which leaves them struggling to pay bills.

Hanna 's childhood was filled with responsibilities for the family and household, which left little time for friends or social activities.

> Well, it was okay. I guess my mother worked a lot. I had to babysit my sister all the time. It was hard sometimes but I didn't know different. I missed out a lot with my friends. I couldn't go out because my sister was little and I had to take

> care of her. I was home a lot so I did a lot of homework. I liked school because I guess I didn't have to worry about anything there.

These responsibilities didn't cease or even lessen when Hanna enrolled in college. In fact, when the family recently increased in size after Hanna 's 18 year old sister had a baby, Hanna assumed additional responsibility for the care of the baby so that her sister could work. Hanna says that another sister also recently moved into the home temporarily with her two young children. Hanna described the environment at home like this, "It gets crazy sometimes." As a result of her significant level of responsibility for the home and family, Hanna believes that she missed out on opportunities to make friends by socializing and participating in extracurricular activities during her elementary and high school years. On a positive note, Hanna indicates that because she spent so much time at home, she focused a good deal of her energy on doing homework, which she believes helped her to do well in school.

Hanna found her way to college by chance. While she had often dreamed of going to college and started to believe it might be possible when encouraged to do so for the first time by her sixth grade teacher, she hadn't seriously considered it as a real possibility. She later dismissed the idea completely, assuming she couldn't afford to pay for it. It wasn't until she happened to hear about financial aid that the idea resurfaced.

> My cousin and my aunt came over to see my sister because she had a baby. They told me about the financial aid. I didn't know about it. So, I started thinking, hmm, maybe I can do this. They said that you could apply for help. She's taking something, I think like biology, at UMASS. She really likes it there. I decided to

> apply to another school because I like hospitality and I wanted to stay close to home. I like it there. The campus is nice. Mostly the people are okay. My friend at school was going there because she likes animals. So, I went here when she went to look at it. It was really nice there. I liked it. So I decided to apply too.

This conversation took place in Hanna 's senior year of high school. According to Hanna, her grades were consistently in the high B and A range throughout high school, yet she had never heard of financial aid and had only briefly in the sixth grade been encouraged to pursue a college degree. Ultimately, her college choice was based on the little bit of information she gathered from her cousin and the one friend she knew who was already enrolled in college.

The college application process was challenging for Hanna. Her father resisted the idea of her attending college and created obstacles to her obtaining the information she needed to complete the financial aspects of the required forms.

> He wasn't so happy about me going to college. The idea bothered him. I think he was worried about the money aspect of it all. Well, he didn't help and I finally got the stuff that I needed to do it.

Hanna did, however, seek and receive help from officials at her high school and from her cousin, who assisted with getting the necessary information for the financial aid forms.

As far as parental support while enrolled in college, Hanna had little. Her mother was emotionally supportive, but unable to provide any practical or financial support. And, even though her father wasn't involved in her life on a regular basis, his ongoing negative attitude about her college attendance and lack of support of any kind for Hanna

causes emotional conflict for her. This is especially true when she sees so many other fathers actively engaged in a positive way with her college peers.

> I don't see him that much. He told me I should get a job instead of wasting time and money. No, he thinks I should work full time to take care of myself. I think he's like old fashioned about girls. Maybe it's just a family thing, like the way he grew up and he doesn't know girls have changed and he thinks everything is the same as it was before. I don't know. It was a pain. Well, my mother said go anyway and we'll figure it out.

Entry into college was difficult socially for Hanna . She says that she was "shy at first". She struggled to find friends who were as serious as she about the course work. She felt isolated and "different".

> Well, I changed a few times who I was hanging around with. It was bad at first. Then I found a couple of people in one of my classes who were better. The other girls sometimes just don't seem to care much about the schoolwork. They're all about partying all the time. I can't afford to be that way. I have to make sure I do okay so I can get a job. I don't know. They just don't seem all that serious about it or something. I hate it because I feel different. I don't have the fancy phone and the clothes. I don't have money to throw away because I have to earn it. Well, maybe someday [she smiles].

Hanna works nearly full-time hours on and off campus to support herself, to pay for books, and to contribute financially to the family. She struggles to complete course assignments. She has no time for friends or other activities, including educationally

enriching activities such as internships and service learning or study abroad. Group assignments are particularly challenging due to her work schedule.

In spite of the obstacles in her way, she was determined to succeed. When asked how she manages to succeed under such difficult circumstances she replies as follows:

> I didn't pay attention to it. I just had to put it out of my head and pretend I didn't notice. I just said to myself that someday I'll have it easier, too. So, that's what I did and it worked. That's what I always have to do. I just do it.

Like the other participants in this study, Hanna demonstrates resilience and unrelenting inner strength that allows her to manage many different demands on her time by sacrificing any social or leisure activities. In regard to the source of her motivation she says:

> Me. I motivate myself. I don't want to be stuck like the rest of my family. I want to be able to take care of myself. I want a good life and to be able to have a good job.
>
> Like I don't think I could get a good job without going to college. It's kinda the ticket you know like it's a way out to something better I guess. It will just take a while before I get there.

Hanna keeps her eyes on the future with hope that her hard work and perseverance will someday pay off.

Hanna did not fully understand the amount of money she'd need to borrow to pay for her education or the context in which she'd be required to pay it back.

> I'm worried about paying loans, too. It stinks. I had to borrow a lot of money. I didn't realize it at first that I would have to borrow that much. I don't know how I'll pay it back. It's hard. I think it's going t take a long time. I hope I can find a job when I graduate.

Although Hanna has another year of college before graduating, she worries constantly about the amount of money she is borrowing and how she will pay it back. She worries that she might not be able to get a job right away following her graduation. She is now beginning to realize that earning a college degree is not the magic key to a better life she was led to believe it would be. Instead, she realizes that for her it is just the first step toward achieving her goals and that more hard work follows.

Judy. Judy is nearing completion of her senior year at the time of our interview. Judy describes herself as someone who "was never very social" and "a little intense". She says that her family life was difficult throughout her childhood and has continued to be chaotic. The difficulties varied, but she says that a great deal of them were due to their financial struggles. Her mother is a "waitress" and her father "used to work for the Town then he left". Judy doesn't know what he does for work now. She says that when she was young, her family worried about money "all the time". When her parents divorced several years ago, the financial worries increased.

> My mother was working all the time. I couldn't work as many hours either because I had to take care of my little brother and sister. Sometimes my father didn't get to send my mother the support, too. She knew she couldn't depend on it. So, it was hard. I remember in my first year in high school I never had any

> money. I had two pairs of pants and we couldn't do anything. Then, my mother had to take my father to court but he didn't come. It was a mess.

Because her family struggled financially, Judy began to work at babysitting jobs at age 12 so that she could contribute financially to the family. By age 15, she was working more than 20 hours per week outside the home in addition to spending many hours caring for younger siblings. And, while she had positive early experiences in school, she believes that working so much had a detrimental effect on her academic achievement.

> I know for sure I would have done even better if I didn't have to work so much. I have to work a lot.

Also interfering with Judy 's academic achievement when she was younger is that her family moved several times, which meant that she had to adjust to a new school each time. She said the following about school.

> School was good. I liked it. I went to a few different ones. So, it was hard making friends sometimes. I liked it, though. I did okay. I got good grades. I liked to write. My English teacher was the one who helped me with the essays. When I was little I used to write stuff. Like I'd try to write poetry and stories. I liked it and it was fun. I never did anything with it. For a while I thought I wanted to be a writer. Then I decided it wasn't practical and I picked being a Business major. It was hard but I did pretty good.

There are other difficulties within her family which continue to affect Judy greatly even now. For example, during her sophomore year her mother was the victim of domestic violence.

> My mom got beat up by some guy she went out with. He seemed nice at first, sort of, well I never liked him. I guess I was hoping that it would work because he was buying her stuff and she seemed happy. Then he started drinking and that was when it happened. She had to go to the hospital and the police had to come to make sure he didn't come back. I don't know.

Until the ex-boyfriend left town, Judy was constantly afraid that he would return to the home. The situation caused her tremendous anxiety.

Despite the many negative aspects of her childhood, from as far back as she can remember her mother and other members of her family encouraged Judy to pursue a college education. So, Judy 's journey to college was one that was expected of her and that she expected of herself.

> They were always telling me that I had to go. It was the way to have a better life and that I could do anything if I went.

Her family's encouragement was important and motivating to Judy . When it came to assistance with the college search and application process, however, they could not help. Judy offered the comment below about the application process, and while she did obtain assistance from a teacher with her college essays, like the other participants she found the financial aid application most challenging.

> The whole thing was difficult. I did my applications myself. One of my teachers helped me to do the essay. I liked doing it, but the financial aid part was frustrating. I had a hard time figuring it out. I finally did it, but it was a lot to figure out. I didn't have anyone to help me and my mother didn't have a clue. It was sort of a nightmare. Especially the financial aid part. It was sort of ridiculous. I had no idea what they wanted or where to get the information. Finally, I figured it out, but I hated it. I didn't really know what the money meant. Now, I'm worried about paying it all back. It's scary. I hope I can get a job soon. I keep applying but nothing has come through yet. It's kind of bad out there.

Her college choice was based on a referral from a friend. She did not look at colleges or consider other options or whether the school would meet her needs academically, socially, financially or in other ways. The institution she chose is within driving distance and the only school she knew about personally.

While a full-time college student, Judy 's family expects her to support herself financially. She receives no financial support from them. In fact, she feels pressure to contribute more to her family. She shared the following remarks about financial assistance she may receive from her family while enrolled:

> Every once in a while my grandparents send me $25 or something like that for my birthday or Christmas. I have to work to get money and to pay for books and school. It's kind of crazy.

Judy has been quite independent from the time she was a young child. Her independence continues now. I mentioned this to her. She offered the following response about her independence.

> Have to be. Have to be. There isn't anyone to do it for me. If I want it then I have to get it. I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but I won't give up. I don't want to be like my parents and other people I know working all the time and never having anything to show for it.

Judy 's motivation comes from within. She is driven by the desire to achieve what she perceives to be a better life than that of the previous generations of women in her family.

> Like I decide on something and don't give in. I don't want the same sort of situation that my mother and grandmother had. I want to be able to take care of myself. Looking at how my mother ended up, taking care of kids by herself. I don't want that and I think that I could end up in that situation if I didn't go to college.

Her determination is clear and extraordinary as is her strong belief that obtaining a college degree is critical to achieving her goals.

Judy 's academic transition to college was "easy". She indicated that the "work wasn't hard at all". She "wondered why it wasn't harder" and if she "…was going to learn something new." She went on to say that the academic aspect of her college experience did become more challenging later because she had to work increasing numbers of hours to make ends meet. She believes that her transition was difficult

socially because she felt isolated. She saw herself as “different” from other students. She explains:

> Well, it’s different for me because of my family situation with money and all. I can’t go places and do things other students are doing. I don’t have the money. I can’t stand some of them, honestly though. So, I wouldn’t want to be like them.
>
> I work a lot. So, I don’t spend a lot of time on campus except in classes and when I work. I hate the partying. I don’t have time. I mean, I like spending time with a few friends. But, some of these kids take it too far. I guess since they don’t have to work like I do, they have it easier. Anyway, the social aspect is fine except I realize it’s different for me. I don’t have money to go out and hang out drinking all the time. So, I guess I don’t really fit in with all that.
>
> I think they take advantage of the situation. I mean, like, I never had half the stuff they have. It’s kind of ridiculous, really. They have no idea. They don’t have respect for the money that is being spent for them to be here. I don’t have that luxury. If I don’t get good grades, I could lose my scholarship money and then, guess what? I wouldn’t be here. They get everything. Their parents take care of everything. Me, if I have a problem, I have to figure it out myself. My mother wouldn’t even know what to say if she called here.
>
> It was hard at first. Once I figured out that it was just going to be different for me, I didn’t care. I mean, I figured out that I can’t be like them. So, I just had to tell myself that someday I’d be able to sit back it I got through the hard work now. I don’t know: I knew I didn’t really fit in but eventually it didn’t matter.

Like the other participants, Judy seems to be able to put aside her feelings of not belonging. Judy was finally able to feel engaged on campus, however, by finding other students who she saw as being more aligned with her own financial situation and background when she took a work-study job on campus.

> Then I got a job on campus and I made a lot of friends that worked on campus, too. That's where my friends are.

When asked whether she believes being female had any impact on her education, Judy says that she does not believe so. She does, however, believe that "the guys get away with more than the girls…" Beyond that, she doesn't believe it matters whether one is male or female.

Judy's greatest concern right now is finding a job. The transition out of college is stressful and frightening for Judy . Her focus is on the immediate crisis of not only finding a source of income sufficient enough to support herself, including paying for the need for housing immediately upon graduation. About this she says:

> Judy : I'm going to graduate and I can relax about that now, but I am freaking out about getting a job. Now, I'm worried about paying it all back. It's scary. I hope I can get a job soon. I keep applying but nothing has come through yet. It's kind of bad out there. I'm trying to work as much as I can to save the money for rent. I have to find a place to live. I am really stressed about it. I am not sure where I'm going to go. I can't go home because my mother moved in with her boyfriend and there's no room for me. Taking finals has been hard because I'm working so

> much, but I have to. It's hard, everyone else is having parties and I'm freaking out.

As a result of the significant challenges she faces, Judy sees herself in a very different situation than her peers.

Chapter 5

Emergent Themes

Hope is the indispensable seasoning in our human, historical experience. Without it, instead of history we would have pure determinism. - Freire, 1998, p.69

While the specific stories above, gathered through the interview process, depict varying experiences, common themes emerged. Through the process of data analysis described in the Methodology section of this paper, I was able to lift out from the data emergent themes. In this section, I describe those emergent themes.

Childhood and Family Experience

All participants indicate that they had difficult, independent childhoods. “Troubled”, “really bad”, “we were the poor kids”, and “rough” are some terms participants used to describe their childhood experiences. While the specifics of their childhood situations vary, all involve some sort of trauma. Physical abuse occurred in the homes of 5 participants. Almira, Beth, and Dorothy indentified a stepfather as physically abusive; Hanna her father; and Judy her mother's boyfriend. Both Almira and Beth had abusive stepfathers who actually went to jail. Catherine's describes a case of DSS involvement due to neglect. Felicia describes a father who goes to extreme measures to restrict her freedom. In addition, both Felicia experienced the trauma of her sister's suicide attempt and Glinda that of her brother who was shot and killed in an unsafe neighborhood in which they lived. Hanna indicates that her family was greatly affected by her father's alcohol abuse. For Almira and Glinda, part of the instability resulting from their family situation involved frequent moves including changing schools.

All of the participants indicate that they led independent lives as children and that their families face significant financial struggles due to their low-income situation. Parents of 7 participants in this study need to work many hours which requires them to be out of the home for considerable periods of time, leaving the children home alone and unsupervised. Six of the participants grew up in single-parent homes where the father is not present in the home. Beginning at young ages, 4 participants indicate they are expected not only to manage their own young lives independently but also to take on responsibility for the daily care of younger siblings or other children living in the home as well as for the household. Catherine’s situation, which includes DSS involvement, is an example of this occurrence.

> My mom and dad were divorced when I was eight. My mom had me in high school. So, for her, going to school was important. My background I don’t have a lot of money. We were like the poor kids. I was picked on in school. Then my mom remarried had a child and was divorced again. And then DSS has been involved in my life since I was eight. Like I said, well to be frank, DSS was involved. There was a situation where I was potentially being taken away from my mom. Basically I was the one doing the watching, cleaning, and cooking. I was being the mom. It was hard, though, because there was a lot of turbulence.

Judy also described a difficult home situation.

> My mother was working all the time. I couldn’t work as many hours either because I had to take care of my little brother and sister. Sometimes my father didn’t get to send my mother the support, too. She knew she couldn’t depend on

> it. So, it was hard. I remember in my first year in high school I never had any money. I had two pairs of pants and we couldn't do anything. Then, my mother had to take my father to court but he didn't come. It was a mess.

For 5 of the participants, these responsibilities include an expectation that they contribute financially to the family. To contribute financially to the family as expected and to pay for their own needs participants work a substantial number of hours outside the home beginning in high school. Glinda , for example, worked nearly full time while in high school to help her family survive a financial crisis exacerbated by her father's sudden heart attack and ensuing diagnosis of cancer. Felicia's story includes the following remarks:

> You find your ways around things. My parents decided to move and they bought a new house and um the bills became so much more heavy it's like you become part of it too. So I have to work to pay bills.

Felicia has worked at least 25 hours per week from the time she was a sophomore in high school. All of her income is turned over to her father.

Academic Expectations

All of the participants express memories of having a positive attitude toward school in their earlier years. This is true even for the 7 of them who also recall memorable discouraging interactions with a teacher or other school official. And, while all of the participants experienced inconsistencies with their grades at varying points in time, all reported that they generally did well in school during their younger years with

little, if any, parental guidance, involvement, practical support or encouragement. For example, Almira explains it well when she says that there were "…not a lot of expectations on me at all at home" regarding achievement in school. Beth mentions that she wishes now that "there was someone to help me to understand the value of education and to tell me to do my homework". Even in cases, such as that of Felicia and Glinda, where there was significant parental pressure to do well in school, they are still expected to devote significant amounts of time to work in and outside the home with school work being a low priority.

All of the participants report being distracted from their school work frequently not only by the demands of their family situations, but also by the associated drama, all of which led to confusion and emotional stress for them. Judy's experience which led her to worry because she feared the reappearance of her mother's abusive boyfriend highlights the potential intensity of such a distraction.

> My mom got beat up by some guy she went out with. He seemed nice at first, sort of, well I never liked him. I guess I was hoping that it would work because he was buying her stuff and she seemed happy. Then he started drinking and that was when it happened. She had to go to the hospital and the police had to come to make sure he didn't come back. I don't know.

Deciding to Go to College

All but one participant (Beth) indicated that the idea she would attend college someday was one she had been thinking, even dreaming of, for a long time. That dream included attendance at a four-year college for all of them. This is in spite of the fact that

only 4 of the participants said that someone in her family encouraged her to attend college and only 3 said her parents encouraged her strongly from an early age to consider college a necessity.

Only Beth and Hanna indicate that they were encouraged by a guidance counselor or teacher to apply to college. And, in fact, 4 of the participants (Catherine, Dorothy, Emma, Glinda) were actually discouraged from applying to college in some way by either their guidance counselor or a teacher.

Almira captures the inner drive that motivates the participants to pursue a college education in the following statement:

> Almira: Any pressure to do well came from myself from wanting to be proud of something. I've always been driven by the life that I came from. I know that there's better out there. I know that I'm capable of better. And, I think that I wanted it so badly that I was going to do it regardless. It wasn't something that was an option for me. That's how I've lived my whole life. Knowing I was capable of more and doing it. I always tend to push myself quite a bit.

College Search and Application Process

The idea of attending college, of what going to college means in terms of an outcome related to career development, or the difference between colleges for the participants in this study is not tied to anything very concrete. Beth, for example, said that her idea of college was based on "lecture halls on T.V." Three of the participants (Catherine, Emma, Glinda) were pushed toward community college and vocational programs, as opposed to four-year institutions.

Glinda : Since I'm Hispanic, my guidance counselor told me that I should learn a trade. It was in my junior year and I told her I wanted to go on to college. She was like, "Oh really that's good but maybe you should consider this….community college or maybe you could learn this trade". I told her that's not what I want to do. She's like, well, that's a lot of money. I didn't want to let that stop me. I read about loans and financial aid. She was really hung up on the trade. You'll get a job quicker and it's too much money. I wanted to be a professional teacher and to go to school for that. I just went to the library and looked it up myself. I wasn't going to let her stop me. Sometimes if I thought about it I doubted if I could do it. After that she kind of helped me but she threw some random colleges out there but they were community colleges

Only Catherine said she considered her financial aid awards in her college choice. Felicia 's comment to follow made as she nears graduation illustrates how little she understood regarding cost:

Felicia : If I had knew more I would not have gone to a private school simply because of the money. Basically, it's all about taking out loans.

There should be that extra person to sit down with students who don't have parents who can help them. Like maybe getting scholarships or picking classes. Other kids have parents who make calls for them. I didn't know that you could transfer credit or take summer classes. Working on campus I got a lot of information. There's a ton of stuff I didn't know about.

Almira describes her choice as somewhat “random”. Only 2 of the participants (Catherine and Glinda) accessed college information either online or in some other publication. Five (Almira, Felicia , Glinda , Hanna , and Judy) followed their friends or made a decision based on word of mouth from acquaintances. One (Beth) applied upon recommendation of her guidance counselor. Dorothy chose her college because she liked the campus. Emma made her choice without fully understanding whether the program met her needs and later regretted her choice. Thus, for all but one (Catherine), the college search process was filled with unconfirmed assumptions about limitations or came about simply because of the physical proximity of the institution to their homes or by some other coincidence. Dorothy says it best, “I don’t really know how I got here completely.”

The participants in this study act independently because they are not aware of anyone who might be available to help them with the many details involved in searching for appropriate institutions and then applying to them. Despite their determination, they find the process quite difficult and, without exception, indicate that the federal financial aid application process is the most stressful and challenging aspect of applying. For example, as part of that process, Beth had to tell the story of why she is an independent student, which in her case involved being the victim of abuse, over and over throughout this process every year of her enrollment. Four others (Catherine, Dorothy, Hanna, and Judy) had to struggle repeatedly to get information from fathers who were either not to be found or reluctant to provide the required financial data. Their applications were rejected by the federal government frequently.

Motivation

All of the women in this study demonstrate strong internal motivation. All state that they are highly driven by not only the need to be able to take care of themselves; to survive, but also by the idea that obtaining a degree will offer them a way out of their family situations. Almira expresses this inner motivation best in the following statements:

> Almira: Any pressure to do well came from myself from wanting to be proud of something…I have this odd achievement addiction. I love to achieve things. I have this odd inner thing. I don't know what it is. [laughing] I probably need counseling for it. So, I've always been motivated to do it. I'm currently working on my Master in Education. I'd eventually like to be an independent education consultant maybe working with first-generation students or others who need appropriate educational placements.
>
> I always had an idea in the back of my head that there has to be more to life than this. So, I think that's where my drive came from. I've always been driven by the life that I came from. I know that there's better out there. I know that I'm capable of better. And, I think that I wanted it so badly that I was going to do it regardless. It wasn't something that was an option for me. That's how I've lived my whole life. Knowing I was capable of more and doing it. I always tend to push myself quite a bit.
>
> I'm the kind of person that throughout my life and tend to take my experiences and it just makes me stronger and know that I have to achieve more. I've always been that person that if I didn't have that belief in myself I would have responded

> in a very different way. I know of many friends who went downhill and would not have continued through.

As expressed by Beth below, whose statement is representative of those made by all participants, she realizes that she can count only on herself. She derives her strength from her strong belief in herself and the desire for a better life.

> Beth: I guess I just knew that I had to do it. You know, I had to be able to take care of myself, to survive. I had no choice. Nobody else was going to take care of me and I wanted a good life. I do think I have a strong will to do well. I knew I had it in me and I just had to find the right way to get there.

All 9 of the participants decided to attend college in hope of it providing a way out of their difficult life situations. Once the decision was made, they remained undeterred regardless of the obstacle in her way. Of the 9, 7 indicate that they overcame obstacles by developing the ability to "grow a wall" (Felicia) which allows them to ignore the obstacle.

Difficult College Transition

All participants in this study find the initial transition into college life difficult, but not regarding all aspects of the transition. While all but one (Beth) finds the academic transition easy, all of them face other challenges. For 5 participants (Almira, Dorothy, Emma, Hanna and Judy), the social transition was the most challenging aspect of the transition. The 5 participants feel different than the majority of their peers. They feel that they don't belong. This feeling is reflected in remarks such as:

> Almira: I had a very awkward transition socially. But, I looked around at all the other kids. I said, “I don’t look like them.”
>
> Emma: Socially I wasn’t prepared.

Felicia found the administrative aspects of college most challenging, including determining which classes to choose. Dorothy faced significant challenges separating from friends. Both Beth and Catherine struggled to overcome interference from the drama associated with their family situations. For example, Catherine realizes early after initial enrollment that to be successful in her nursing program, she must separate herself not only from the day-to-day involvement with family but also from emotional involvement in their troubled relationships. She has an advantage because she is physically removed from the home as a resident student. In a very different way, Dorothy’s eventual ending of a difficult relationship with a long-time boyfriend who actively interferes with her decision to attend college illustrates another way that the transition to college is complicated. Felicia, on the other hand, continues to live at home where she turns over her paychecks to her father and must succumb to the demands of her family.

> Felicia : I feel if I had left home and had my own environment I would have been better off. I would have done been better in school and would have done what I wanted. It’s a huge cultural difference. It’s like I don’t want to hurt them. They ask me to do a lot of things. They need it because obviously they don’t know much. Well stuff around the house and like certain things that requires communicating like with the mortgage company or the credit company. I can’t just leave my parents hanging.

She is conflicted about her desire to help her family and the desire to be on her own. She feels trapped.

"I Don't Look Like Them" – Almira

All of the participants revealed feelings that they did not belong with their peers; they felt different. They also have in common how they deal with those feelings. Their immediate response to the feeling of not belonging is to ignore it. All of them tell themselves that it doesn't matter and move on. Their sense of not belonging comes on quickly for all of them and continues throughout enrollment. Almira's description below of her first realization on move-in day that she felt different and the way that she deals with it describes the situation well.

> Almira: I remember driving up on move-in day. Here I am, this girl on financial aid in my bright yellow two-door hatch back with my surf shop stickers all over the car. I'm in my t-shirt and my tan and my bleach blonde hair and my Bob Marley playing. And here's all these other kids pulling up in their BMW's and their Lexus's and their families and they're all wearing GAP and Abercrombie. I literally stopped. I looked at my father. I took a deep breath and said, "Oh my gosh, am I going to fit in here?" I said, "I'm going to have to because I don't have any other choice and I'm doing this. I got very scared. But, I looked around at all the other kids. I said, "I don't look like them." I just decided I didn't care. I said, "I need to do this."

Interestingly, though, none of the participants in this study express that they wish to fit in, to belong with their peers by becoming like them. In fact, they consistently offer strong

feelings about peers who they see as different. They all express ideas that include everything from wondering if they would have fit in more had they chosen a public over a private institution, to expressions of distain for immature behavior and a sense that their peers are not grateful for or serious about the opportunity to pursue a college education. The participants' own words below to describe the situation summarizes it very well.

> Almira: I had really had it with the typically college girl drama. It got old quickly. I wonder if I had gone to a state school if I would have been more comfortable in my own skin.
>
> Dorothy: I feel like there was a lot of stupid drama with females. Yuck. I hate to be involved with that and never did. So, I avoid it. Backstabbing, name calling. The obnoxious stuff. It still happens but it happened more in freshmen year when people are trying to fit in. So, it matters more then. It makes you not want to try to fit in sometimes.
>
> Felicia : But you see things especially coming into a school like this, you see things and then you feel uncomfortable for a little while. Then it's like whatever. Like a car. Or sometimes they can be just be so ungrateful. [She laughs.] It's like they act in ways that are like I don't know. They damage their cars. They just don't care. Um. Or like you're sitting in class and this one girl is like my dad just bought me a car for my birthday and I didn't like it. If my dad bought me a car it would be you know.
>
> People tend to hang around together socially with people who are like them. Unless it's like a class project. Some were what I thought. Some I was like well they're really down to earth and okay. Others were well I was like get away from

me. They're not really that mature. But they have their parents all the time to do things for them. All they worry about are material things. They'll probably adapt. Sometimes I really envy that they don't have to work.

Glinda : My roommate was always spending all this money. We had such different backgrounds. It was hard for me like she didn't throw it in my face all the time. It was still there. It was kind of like you could really tell how different backgrounds. Being working class I couldn't relate to some of these students.

I bought my first car. Nobody bought me anything. She talks about her dad paying her insurance. I pay everything and more. She talked about her sweet sixteen. It was hard for me to relate to her. We had no common ground.

There's times when you feel like nobody is there.

I think she was more like carefree. She could stay out until whatever tine at night and I knew I couldn't do that. I'm paying for my own education. She didn't go to class a lot of times Then when she got a boyfriend, she went even less. It was kind of hard um for me to like because she was like oh we can go to this bar. But like her lifestyle was so carefree. Her maturity level was different than mine. She was like oh I can just go party all the time. She was nice we just couldn't find common ground. I felt like she came here to have a good time. I came because I need to get a job to take care of myself. She didn't grow up like I did. I like to be independent.

Also interesting about this theme is how the participants cope with their feelings of not belonging. All of them state that they make a conscious decision not to allow the fact that they feel different bother them or interfere with their success.

Working while enrolled in college

Of the 9 participants, all of them are working at least 40 hours per week while enrolled. All of them accomplish this by working at more than one part-time job on and off campus. As a result, as Dorothy indicates in her statement below, they work a lot while enrolled.

> Dorothy: I work. I work a lot. I have a job on campus and more off campus. I have to work a lot because I am basically supporting myself.

While only one of the participants (Beth) is financially independent from her parents in the official sense of the term, indicating that she legally does not have to claim their income on her financial aid applications, each participant is in all practicality financially responsible for herself. None of them receives any financial support from their families while enrolled in college. Beth's comment sums it up well:

> Beth: The whole money part. I've had trouble paying my bills. It's impossible to go to school and make enough money to live on.

Even the 3 (Felicia , Glinda and Hanna) who live at home must contribute financially to the family to continue the benefit of receiving meals and a roof over her head.

Emerging into Adulthood Differently

All of the participants in this study see themselves as more mature, independent and closer to adulthood than their peers. The following statements are examples of how the participants express this belief.

> Almira: It was hard because my friends weren't [working]. They had money. I'd come home from work and pick up my roommate who was at my boyfriend's and they were all partying and having fun. I wasn't.

> Catherine: My background at home made me grow up faster than others. This college, there are a lot of people coming are from more of a richer population and me coming from complete opposite I look at them sometimes in disgust. I just have to realize that different people take different time to mature and grow up and that maybe this just isn't the time for some of them.

> Felicia : They're not really that mature.

Contributing to the participants' sense that they are different is that, unlike their peers who are supported financially and in other ways by their parents, as stated above, the participants in this study do not receive any support from their families. The participants believe that because their peers are not directly responsible for themselves, they are frequently more frivolous and less mature. In fact, Almira describes a very different situation for herself than for her peers due to the number of hours she must work:

> Almira: It was hard because my friends weren't [working]. They had money. I'd come home from work and pick up my roommate who was at my boyfriend's and they were all partying and having fun. I wasn't. I'd be coming home at ten

> o'clock to get them and I'd have to go to bed because I had to get up early to go to work in the morning and they didn't. But, it was something I knew I had to do. Unless I worked, I could not do it. Or, I would have ended up at home again. Above anything, I did not want to go back home.

I felt immense pressure all the way through – Almira

All of the participants in this study state that they worry about their finances and specifically about financial aid funding constantly. In fact, all of the participants' college experiences are marked by a high level of stress. The source of this stress is pressure they feel to succeed and to survive on the money that they earn. For example:

> Catherine: I call myself a big ball of stress. I'm always worrying about my grades or I need money. So, I need to go to work. I was an RA for one semester. I worked at the library. I'm a TA. I'm doing homework and studying.

While each of the participants is grateful for the opportunity to attend college, she knows very well that her continued enrollment is completely contingent upon receipt of financial aid and that her eligibility to receive financial aid depends on her continuing to achieve academically at an acceptable level. For example, Almira says that she made an error in her first semester of enrollment when she believed that she could behave like her college peers. She saw them enjoying leisure time going to parties and socializing at events. When her grades slipped slightly as a result, she learned how easy it would be to lose her financial aid funding. She realized that the funding was not hers to do with what she wished; that someone else could make the decision to take it away from her. She knew she had to take her course work more seriously. So, she made a commitment to herself

that she wouldn't let anything like that happen again. One result of this experience was a heightened level of stress about her grades and general academic achievement.

> Almira: I felt immense pressure all the way through to perform and never let anything slip. That's why when I got that one grade it was a real big turnaround time for me. I said "I can't do this. I can't afford to mess up. I've always been very planned and particular. Everything I do in my life, every step I take is calculated. I'm always afraid that what I've earned so far might be taken away from me. So I think throughout my life like when I changed majors, I was concerned about being in school longer particularly without a strong relationship with an advisor.

Below, Catherine shares her thoughts about the constant stress she experiences.

> Catherine: I call myself a big ball of stress. I'm always worrying about my grades or I need money. So, I need to go to work. I was an RA for one semester. I worked at the library. I'm a TA. I'm doing homework and studying.

Glinda describes her experience below.

> Glinda : This semester was like really hard. My teachers were asking if I was okay. At work at 3 or 4 o'clock I was reading doing homework at work. I'd come back and go right to class. It got really hard really fast. I just couldn't handle it. I was so behind in school. I thought I should leave. Then like when my dad got out. Then he had to go back in. Then it was getting worse. Then one of my brothers lost his job. So he came to live with us with the kids. My niece is 5 and my nephew is 3. My mom got custody of the kids because my sister had a drug

> problem. My mom did come back. It was like kind of hard on us. She got a job. My aunt moved out but close. It made it easier. I didn't have to work as much. I still did because I didn't like know what was going to happen. I got so exhausted I fell over the toilet at work and had to go to the hospital. Then I couldn't work anymore. Then my mom was calling me saying oh we're behind on this or that. School was pretty much at the bottom of my list. Then, I was getting sick all the time. My teachers kept telling me not to give up. I was so close. They said they would help me. I never give up on anything but this was too hard. Then, my shifts got longer 9 to 7 or 7:30. I would get here and go to class. I was doing inventory and stocking. I was the only one there who was in school. They had to stop school. Now I see why they couldn't do it. Then I just couldn't do it. Then I got diagnosed with leukemia. All the teachers helped me a lot. It kind of made it easier to finish school. Now I'm graduating. It's hard.

College Engagement

Six of the participants (Almira, Beth, Dorothy, Felicia , Glinda , Judy) did mention that working on campus was a positive experience for them not only because it provided a source of income while at the same time allowing them to form relationships with staff and other student workers, but also because it helped them to feel more connected to their institution. It also provided a channel through which to get information relevant to their college experience. Almira, for example, says the following about her experience as a resident assistant:

> Almira: So, I became an RA. This really helped me financially and I really flourished. The responsibility was really good for me.

Almira adds the following about joining an honors program:

> Almira: Then I was invited to go into the Honors program and I got interested again and stopped thinking about leaving.
>
> Glinda : If I didn't work on campus it would have been easier for me to give up. It was my responsibility here that kept me going. I made connections with people I worked with.
>
> Judy : Well, it's really been working here. I like all the people I met. I didn't have time for sports or any of that. So, working on campus was good. I got to know some of the people that work here, too, and they helped me out a few times when I needed it.

Being Female

Generally, the responses on this topic were mixed. However, 7 of the 9 of the participants were able to articulate specific aspects of their lives they believe are influenced by the fact that they are female. Almira believes she is not taken as seriously and was not treated with as much respect from male students as her male counterparts in her role as a Resident Assistant.

> I think people were more strict with me behavior wise because I was a female. If I did something like the guy down the hall might not get in trouble for doing but I would. The expectations are different in that arena. Otherwise things were pretty fair.

She, as well as (Beth), believes that behavioral and academic expectations are higher for female students than for males and that, therefore, females are treated more strictly when they misbehave than are males. Glinda believes that she has to perform even better than her male counterparts in her business major in order to be taken seriously.

Beth also believes that females are more willing to participate in the educational process. She thinks this might be true because it's not as socially acceptable for males to do so, while Dorothy believed the opposite is true in that females are more "shy" in class and males "take the floor more often". Two participants (Beth and Dorothy) believe that relationships matter more to females. But Catherine didn't think that being male or female made any difference at all for her. Felicia believes that the difference matters more depending on the academic major, explaining that in majors like nursing that are female-dominated versus management which is male-dominated, the dynamics vary.

Felicia and Glinda note being treated differently within their families because they're female. For example, Felicia notes that her younger brother has more freedom to do what he wants than she has and Glinda mentions her father's strong feelings that women "should all be stay at home moms".

Parental Involvement

While 6 of the participants indicate that at least one parent is emotionally supportive of their college enrollment and achievement (Almira, Catherine, Dorothy, Felicia , Glinda , Judy) and that they appreciate that support, even those parents who are

encouraging or emotionally supportive either cannot or will not support the participants in other ways.

> Felicia : My parents are really strict. (She begins crying.)… Being at home just sucks sometimes. They just don't understand. Like coming from a society where I don't know like you don't – like where they come from you can be like 30 and if you're living with them you're still a child. I don't know. Leaving home was a no no for school. And even then it wasn't good. I feel if I had left home and had my own environment I would have been better off. I would have done been better in school and would have done what I wanted.
>
> It's a huge cultural difference. It's like I don't want to hurt them. They ask me to do a lot of things. They need it because obviously they don't know much. Well stuff around the house and like certain things that requires communicating like with the mortgage company or the credit company. And they do foster care and we have a boy that stays with us. I feel like I have a kid of my own. I have to stay with him while they go to work.

As stated previously, none of the participants receives any additional form of financial support from their families.

> Almira: I always worked at several different jobs. I was usually working over 40 hours per week. And, that was very difficult. My freshman year I guess I didn't work as much. I worked on campus and then half way through the year I realized I needed more money. I was paying for my books, my clothes, food, anything I needed. Shampoo. I was on my own. My father would come up every once in a

while with a bag or two of groceries. But I was really supporting myself. I worked in a daycare center, did tours in admission, at an elderly care center nearby. At certain times I tutored. I nannied off campus. I worked at the Mall.

Beth: I was on my own. The whole money part. I've had trouble paying my bills.

Catherine: Coming here having to figure out how to remember, oh, I have to pay this bill or that bill. Having to figure out where the grocery store is. A lot of the kids here their parents send them money and that's frustrating. I mean I have to pay for my books, my gas, and any fun things I might want to do.

Judy : Every once in a while my grandparents send me $25 or something like that for my birthday or Christmas. I have to work to get money and to pay for books and school. It's kind of crazy.

And again, for some of them (Felicia , Glinda , Hanna , Judy) it's quite the opposite: these participants are expected to contribute financially to supporting their families even while enrolled in college full time.

Strong but Silent

Eight of the nine participants describe themselves as "shy" and/or "introverted". In response to the request for a personal description, I found Felicia 's response to be particularly insightful.

Felicia : It's a mixture of confident and shy. It depends on the situation.
I'm really reserved and quite. I'm calm and quiet and I don't like drama.

> It has to be something where I know that material real well. If I'm really focused on a subject then I will get involved in a debate even. I am surprised at how much I speak out in class. Other people think I'm quiet. I worry about what people think about me. I feel like it's better to keep to yourself.

In fact, all of them seemed unable or unwilling to elaborate in response to this question. The question seemed to make them uncomfortable. It seemed to silence them. I say this based on my impression of their behavior and body language when responding. They made little eye contact with me, fidgeted, and moved about in their chairs while responding to this question. This behavior contrasts sharply to that observed during responses to other questions, even those whose responses involved revealing highly personal information, where they spoke directly and made a lot of eye contact.

Graduating

As graduation approaches, all participants are under tremendous pressure to get a job. All worry because they need to figure out how to replace immediately the income they were earning from their on-campus jobs that will end upon graduation or sooner. All worry about getting a job with benefits that will provide health insurance. The 6 participants (Almira, Beth, Catherine, Dorothy, Emma, Judy) who are resident students have an additional concern. None of the 6 has a family or other home to which she can return once she moves out of college housing by graduation day. To secure a place to live, she needs a job and, to get a job, she will need a car. The following statements highlight their stress at this important juncture.

> Almira: I had my resumes out and ready to go. I got hired during my senior week events. I found a phenomenal mentor in the campus office I worked at. None of

my friends were thinking about work or had jobs. They were all going to go travel over the summer. They were going to be waiters or bartenders. I felt immense pressure to get a job. I moved in with my boyfriend the day of graduation. I felt immense pressure. It wasn't a good living situation but I didn't want to go home. I made it work.

Beth: I don't even have a place to live. I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to do. I really, really have to find a job. I have a lot of loans. I'm kind of freaking out about it. … It makes it hard to concentrate on school work and I can't even have any fun like everyone else. It stinks.

Catherine: I'm nervous. There's a lot going on at once. May will be here before you know it. I am in the process of trying to find a job. I'll be on my own. Dealing with loans. Finding a place to live. It's going to be a lot. So, with the responsibilities I am freaking out when May is coming and thinking I'm going to be out on my own. It's the nursing aspect. I'm thinking where am I'm going to go. I have to get a job, a car and I don't know what I'm going to do. I hear that there aren't as many jobs now. Some places aren't accepting new nurses. It's tougher than it used to be.

Judy : Now, I'm worried about paying it all back. It's scary. I hope I can get a job soon. I keep applying but nothing has come through yet. It's kind of bad out there. I'm trying to work as much as I can to save the money for rent. I have to find a place to live. I am really stressed about it. I am not sure where I'm going to go. I can't go home because my mother moved in with her boyfriend and there's no

room for me. Taking finals has been hard because I’m working so much, but I have to. It’s hard, everyone else is having parties and I’m freaking out.

While their concerns seem overwhelming, they go about solving the problem independently.

Independence

A theme that begins early in childhood for all participants and continues through their college enrollment is that of independence. For example, 4 of the participants (Almira, Beth, Catherine, and Dorothy) specifically mention making the independent decision as children to do their homework. Catherine mentions being isolated because she was "picked on in school". Five (Almira, Beth, Catherine, Dorothy, and Emma) of the participants indicate that their decision to attend college was made on her own. Five of the participants (Almira, Beth, Catherine, Dorothy, and Emma) search for appropriate colleges, complete their college applications and apply for financial aid independently.

Once enrolled in college, all of the participants experience some degree of isolation. All of them mention feeling that they don't belong or fit in with their peers. Beth 's and Catherine 's statements to follow are representative of thoughts expressed by all of the participants indicating that they are on their own.

> Beth: I knew I had it in me but I had to work hard. I guess I just knew that I had to do it. You know, I had to be able to take care of myself, to survive. I had no choice. Nobody else was going to take care of me and I wanted a good life.

> Catherine: I was actually a very selfless person. I realized that I’m starting to think more about me and what’s best for me. Thinking back I was giving and

> giving and giving. I realized that no one else was going to do that for me. It's hard for me, too, to think about doing that because with my mom and then coming here just filling that void with my friends. So, now it's about me. I mean, what do I get? Now my friends don't understand. But, it's hard to say no and to continue focusing on myself.

In addition, the need for all of the participants to work at least 40 hours per week while enrolled further isolates the from their peers. The following statement by Almira illustrates how this is true and is representative of similar thoughts expressed by all other participants.

> It was hard because my friends weren't [working]. They had money. I'd come home from work and pick up my roommate who was at my boyfriend's and they were all partying and having fun. I wasn't. I'd be coming home at ten o'clock to get them and I'd have to go to bed because I had to get up early to go to work in the morning and they didn't. But, it was something I knew I had to do unless I worked. Or, I would have ended up at home again. Above anything, I did not want to go back home.

The reality faced by the participants in this study is that they really are on their own.

Chapter 6

Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications for Future Research

The themes emerging from the in-depth interviews conducted with each participant, which are outlined in the previous section, reveal a great deal about their backgrounds, how they came to apply to college, the obstacles to success they face, how they overcome them, as well as what it means to them to succeed.

Patterns of Working-Class and Poor

The lives of the participants, including their college experience, are profoundly affected by the larger complex context created by the intersection of personal, family, social and economic forces. The tendency to ignore the impact of those larger systems is explained not only by the typical denial in the U.S. that class stratification exists, but also by the prevalence of the mainstream belief that we live in a meritocratic system where everyone, including students operating within our education systems, enjoys an equal opportunity for success (Delpit, 2006; Jones, 2006; LePage-Lees, 1997; Shipler, 2005; Sleeter, 2002). Within the context of that belief system, anyone can succeed with enough hard work and sacrifice. Success or failure is attributed to the individual alone. Those larger family, social and economic forces are far-reaching with many tentacles that converge in a multitude of ways to influence the participants' lives at the individual level. The impact of those forces, which often manifest tangibly as barriers to success, are frequently interpreted as individual failures or a lack of ability rather than symptoms or outcomes of larger social or economic systems (Delpit, 2006; Jones, 2006; LePage-Lees, 1997; Shipler, 2005).

When I consider the participants' experience through a wider sociological lens, however, my understanding of their experience is broadened. I move beyond a narrow focus on the ability of the individual student or student group to navigate successfully in an education system. This view of the participants' experiences through that wider lens, reveals patterns emerging from their stories consistent with those associated with the working class and poor (Adair and Dahlberg, 2003; Burleson et al., 2008; Dodson, 1999; Holyfield, 2002; Jones, 2006; Lareau, 2003; LePage-Lees, 1997; Polakow, Butler, Stormer Deprez, and Kahn, 2004).

One significant theme evident in their stories is their low socioeconomic status, the impact of which begins early and continues into college. All participants indicate that their families face significant financial struggles due to their low socioeconomic status. To state simply that the families of participants in this study struggle financially, however, provides only a superficial representation of their experience. While their lack of adequate financial support contributes to financial instability, additional patterns of differential childrearing practices and expectations common among young women growing up in working class and poor families emerge.

The participants' upbringing, which includes themes of independence and maturity, is consistent with childrearing practices of working-class and poor families described by Lareau (2003). All of the participants spent significant amounts of time on their own as children and adolescents. Seven of the participants, including six who grew up in single parent homes, indicate that the major reason they were alone so much is that their parents found it necessary to work many hours to make ends meet. In addition, 5 of the participants are expected to help manage the home and take responsibility for the

daily care of younger siblings or other children living in the home; also common expectations of girls in working class and poor families (Dodson, 1999; Jones, 2006; and LePage-Lees, 1997). Another expectation of 5 participants in this study is that they contribute financially to the family. The expectation to contribute financially is common among many first-generation students who come from low-income families (Volle and Federico, 1997).

All of the participants describe their childhoods as difficult in some way. While each case is different, all of the participants persevered and learned to adapt through some sort of trauma. The traumas include abuse, neglect, displacement due to frequent moves, serious family illness or tragedy, and living in an unsafe neighborhood where a sibling was shot and killed. Yet, despite the striking intensity and magnitude of the constant exigent circumstances through which the participants in this study persist, there are some positive outcomes for them.

Positive Early Educational Experiences and Academic Expectations

All participants report doing well in school in their younger years with little, if any, parental guidance, involvement or practical support. Further, they manage to do well even though the demands of their family situations and the associated drama frequently interfere with their ability to do so consistently. All, including the 7 who also recall memorable discouraging interactions with a teacher or other school official, express having a positive attitude toward school in their earlier years. Put simply, they find refuge in school as children. Their early positive educational experiences help them to develop an affinity for education, a positive identity as a student, as well a foundation of academic

success which serves them well later on. All but one of the participants in this study made the decision to attend a four-year college at an early age, which is unlikely according to previous research (Berkner and Chavez, 1997).

Resilience, Determination and Motivation

In the course of overcoming the many challenges in their lives, the participants develop inner strength that helps them to remain motivated. They build incredible emotional agility and determination in their early years which allows them to cultivate reservoirs of resilience to draw upon later in life as they face the many hurdles they will encounter. The resilience, determination, exceptional strength, and resourcefulness evident in their interview responses is astonishing. I am very fortunate to have met and had the opportunity to include their stories in my research. They are amazing individuals.

Finding the Right Fit

The participants' independent and uninformed decision-making limits their choices of institutions and puts them at risk for entering an institution that doesn't meet their needs. Their parents are absent from the college search and application process, which is likely to put them at a disadvantage, since previous research (Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999) points to the importance of parental involvement to a successful college planning and decision-making process. Also, consistent with previous research (Choy, 2001, 2002), help or encouragement with the college search and application process is either unavailable from high school officials or the participants' are unaware of its existence. Further, the participants are unaware of the differences in quality and other characteristics across institutions of higher education, which is consistent with previous

research (Berkner and Chavez, 1997; Pascarella et al, 2004; (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Vargas, 2004). Also, as is common among low-income students (Choy, 2001, 2002), this study's participants enter four-year private institutions of higher education without a real understanding of the cost of such an education, the implications of taking on significant debt, and the context within which they will pay back what they borrow.

Since the participants emphasized so strongly, their challenges with the financial aid application process is worth highlighting separately. Without exception, all of the participants indicate that the federal financial aid application process is a stressful and challenging obstacle to their enrollment and success. The system is not designed to accommodate a student who does not have ready access to parents' financial information. It is not necessarily the application itself that is the problem, though. Instead, the obstacles arise when the participants must obtain financial information from individuals with whom they either no longer have contact or with whom they have troubled relationships as a result of abuse, other trauma or difficult family situation. In Beth's case, for example, the application was rejected each year of her enrollment requiring her to repeatedly explain that she no longer lived with her parents or had contact with them because she was abused in the home. I have to wonder how many other potentially successful college students there are out there who were blocked from attending college due to this barrier.

Belonging

Once they have made a final college choice and begin to make the crucial initial transition to college life (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo,

1994), despite the fact that they do so armed with extraordinary stamina and tremendous motivation, they find the transition challenging. A challenging initial transition to college is consistent with previous research regarding first-generation students (Casey, 2005, Lara, 1992; London, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Terenzini et al, 1994) and low-income women in higher education (Keller, Goodstein, Kirkpatrick, 2005; LePage-Lees, 1997).

A sense of not belonging for all of the participants contributes in a variety of ways to the transition to college being challenging. The participants' sense of not belonging begins almost immediately. They feel that they do not fit in with their peers; they see themselves as different. None of the participants, however, wishes to fit in with their peers by becoming like them. In fact, they consistently offer strong feelings that they see their peers as immature, while they see themselves as adults. The participants' life experiences influenced their development so that they are mature and independent. Their development does not appear to occur in a sequence, such as that described in Arnett's (2004) popular theory of emerging adults, which Arnett admits most accurately describes the experience of those who are white and middle-class. Instead, it is more accurately described as occurring in a fluid manner influenced by self-construction within the social and historical context in which they live (Caffarella and Olson, 1993; Greene, 2005; and Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

The participants' financial situations also contribute to their sense of not belonging. While 6 of the participants indicate that at least one parent is emotionally supportive of their college enrollment, none receives any form of financial support from their families. Being responsible for their own financial and other types of support contrasts with what they observe among many of their peers who are still depend on their

parents for financial and other types of support. In addition, while about 33 percent of first-generation students work full-time while enrolled (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin,1998), all of the participants in this study work at least full time while enrolled in college full time. The fact that they work at least full time to support themselves while their peers do not further deepens the sense of not belonging in the participants. In addition, the time spent on work and studying practically precludes any chance for social activities that might help to mitigate their sense of not belonging. It also contributes to isolating the participants.

Institutional Structure and Belonging

The participants' sense of not belonging is exacerbated by the extreme adaptation they must make to fit the complex context of their lives into an educational structure that does not suit their needs. That structure is, instead, most appropriately designed for a more homogeneous group of students, who are supported by parents and that do not have to work full time to support themselves while enrolled (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). The participants are reminded constantly not only by their peers, but also by the system itself that they are different. They may even be considered not engaged by standard measures (Pike and Kuh, 2005). The fact is that to succeed within the structure of the institutions they attend, they do not have time to become engaged in college in ways that are typically expected of undergraduate students. The issue that the educational structures, processes, and programs that facilitate success for some students don't necessarily do so for all of them is consistent with the growing understanding in the literature (Bensimon, 2007; Harper and Quaye, 2009; Kuh et al, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2006).

Stress and Worry Eclipse Experience

All of the participants' college experiences are marked by a high level of stress. In addition to the stress of not fitting in and of juggling significant hours of work with academic demands, the participants in this study say that they worry constantly about financial issues. While that first-generation students tend to worry more than other students is consistent with previous research (Bui, 2002), three things stood out to me in this research. The high intensity and duration of their stress is striking. It seems to eclipse and diminish their entire college experience; it overshadows everything. A major source of stress is the pressure they feel to succeed. They know their continued enrollment is contingent upon receipt of financial aid and that eligibility to receive financial aid depends on continued academic achievement.

Isolation

While the participants' well-developed ability to act independently is certainly a remarkable strength, their isolation is salient. The theme of isolation permeates their stories from the time they are children alone at home, to when they are on their way to college and then while they are enrolled. Their isolation highlights how little help they receive. The college search process is a good example of when their isolation is limiting. Unlike many other students whose lives fit more closely with the expected college search process, because they do not have the means, parents who are engaged in the process, or even the transportation to get to pre-college events, their decision-making process is limited. They simply handle everything on their own. Their isolation speaks to a need for

programs and structures in higher education, and perhaps at other educational levels, that mitigate their isolation.

Transition Out - A Crisis

The transition out of college for all participants is remarkable. While they would have benefited from additional support all the way through college, at this juncture it is needed desperately. All of them need a job immediately to support themselves. Many need to find transportation to get to a job. They worry about health insurance. Those who work on campus will abruptly lose the income from their on-campus employment just before graduating. Worse, for those who live on campus, which included 6 participants in this study, they literally face homelessness since they must move out of campus housing by graduation day. For a variety of reasons, none of the 6 has a family home to which she can return. Further adding to their anxiety are thoughts of beginning to pay back their loans. At this time when other students are celebrating, the participants in this study begin to realize that earning a college degree has not ended their struggles, but perhaps, for now, only redirected their trajectory.

How Do They Succeed and What Does Succeeding Mean to Them?

The journey through college for the participants in this study is challenging, isolating, taxing, uncertain and filled with stress. The results of this research illuminate the tremendous effort and commitment to success it takes for the participants to overcome the significant barriers not only in their personal lives, but also in the education systems they navigated.

Underlying the stress about grades and potentially losing financial aid is that there is no second chance, no opportunity to recover if they fail. There is no safety net, no family business or network to fall back on, no financial resource on which to draw should financial aid be taken away or should their need for support exceed their earning capabilities. There is nobody else to depend on but themselves. All it would take is one small mishap to derail their success.

Fortunately, their well-developed inner strength and enduring hope for the future provides them with the courage to reject negative messages that they are different or not capable. They are highly driven by the need to take care of themselves, to survive. To them, the success of earning a bachelor's degree, although a tremendous accomplishment, represents much, much more than earning a degree. To the participants in this study, earning a degree represents taking a necessary step toward saving themselves from returning to a life they seek desperately to leave behind, a life filled with uncertainty, instability and suffering. Therefore, they remain resolute even in the face of the most daunting barriers and, thus, reject succumbing to individuals, forces and structures that seek to hold them back.

Closing

In the introduction to this paper I discussed my experience in a Student Retention Committee meeting where first-generation students were described as being destined for failure due to their many individual deficits which contribute to that failure. This study highlights, instead, the tremendous success that the first-generation female participants in this study achieved. It also highlights the many obstacles they must overcome to succeed.

As current degree-completion rates show (N.C.E.S., 2011; Radford et al., 2010), after 40 or more years of efforts to improve them, what we're doing in higher education is not working, especially not for some students. The way I see it, we as a society and as a community of educators have a choice to make. To improve college degree completion rates, we must begin with making the choice to acknowledge the underlying social and economic forces contributing to institutionalized obstacles to success at all educational levels. Only after we initiate an open, inclusive discourse that includes those issues can we begin to address the resulting shortcomings in our education system, including the gaps across the boundary from k-12 to higher education. Further, the responsibility for student success needs to shift so that it is shared by both students and the institutions where they enroll, rather than being placed mostly on students. Joining the academic chorus should be an opportunity that is available to all capable students. It should not be as nearly impossible as it was for the participants in this study.

Future Research

I recommend that future research focus on the following:

- developing and conducting additional studies with more first-generation, female students as well as with additional subgroups of first-generation students at a wider variety of institutions
- determining what facilitates student success for various subgroups of students
- determining what works to support institutions of higher education to take a large measure of the responsibility for student success
- conducting more in-depth work to investigate the impact of socioeconomic status on student success from the earliest years through the attainment of graduate degrees
- developing an open discourse that embraces the study of the impact of social class in higher education
- critically examining the underlying assumptions and theoretical underpinnings of institutional policies, programs and practices in higher education and overall education systems for first-generation female students and other student subgroups. Do our structures and processes support the success of all students equally?
- investigating the power dynamics between students from all types of backgrounds and at all education levels and the institutions in which they navigate and communicate

- determining how to make the federal financial aid application less of an obstacle, especially for students who do not have ready access to their parents' financial data
- investigating the impact on student subgroups, including first-generation students, of the federal government's shift away from grants to loans (St. John, Paulsen, and Carter, 2002) and including whether it has any impact on their ability to continue on to graduate school
- examining the educational process across the entire journey, rather than narrowly on the K-12 only or the college experience once enrolled only
- discovering how to integrate appropriate college "learning capital" (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, p. 590) into a K - 12 education
- facilitating the teaching of financial literacy skills into a K - 12 education
- considering alternatives to four-year degree programs, such as variations within traditional, four-year programs for students who do not find existing programs, such as community college viable options
- developing student work programs for students who need to support themselves that include student engagement activities likely to enrich learning and facilitate educational success
- helping higher education to expand its understanding of adult development
- supporting teachers to be not only aware of their own biases, but to develop culturally responsive teaching and classrooms

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Appendix A

INVITATION

Date

Dear Potential Study Participant,

I'd like to invite you to participate in a study regarding your educational experiences. I am currently a Ph.D. student at Lesley University. As part of my Ph.D. program, I am required to conduct a research project which I will later write about in my dissertation. My research is in regard to the success of first-generation female students at four-year private colleges.

The purpose of the research is to learn more about the background and educational experiences of first-generation female college students. Students whose parents did not attend college are often referred to as first-generation college students. Through my research, I hope to illuminate factors that create obstacles to success as well as anything that may contribute to success for students in this group so that college administrators, policy makers, and others who work in supportive roles with first-generation students might use the information to inform their work. The study or parts of it may also be useful to first-generation students.

Participation in the study involves an in-person interview at your convenience in a mutually agreed upon location that will take approximately 90 minutes. You may also be asked some follow up questions at a later time. If you are interested in participating, you will be asked to read and sign an Informed Consent Form.

Please contact me at 781-248-2320 or at sallybuckley180@comcast.net to set up a time for the interview. I'm also happy to answer any questions you may have about the research at any time. Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this study!

Best regards,

Sally Buckley

Doctoral Student
Lesley University
Cambridge, MA

Appendix B

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Title: *The Success of First-Generation Female Students at Four-Year Private Institutions of Higher Education*

Description and Purpose: The intent of this research is to explore and describe the lived experiences of first-generation female students at private four-year institutions of higher education. The research is being conducted in partial fulfillment of requirements for my Ph.D. program.

Procedures: Participation in this research is completely voluntary. Participants can end their participation in this study at any point and can decline to answer any question without penalty.

Participation in the study involves an in-person interview at the participant's convenience in a mutually agreed upon location that will take approximately 90 minutes. The research will likely take place over the period of several months. Participants may also be asked some follow up questions during that time frame. All participants will be asked to read and sign an Informed Consent Form.

Transcripts of the interviews will be available upon request to the participants.

Participants will be asked to allow the researcher to audiotape the interviews. Audiotaping will help to ensure that the researcher will be less likely to be distracted while taking notes during the interview process. It will also help to ensure that the researcher has access to an accurate record of the interview during the data analysis and writing aspects of the research project.

Risks: There are no known risks associated with participation apart from feelings that may be stimulated by answering the questions.

Confidentiality, Privacy, and Anonymity: Participants in this study will remain anonymous. Transcripts of the interviews will be viewed solely by me and stored in a locked cabinet. Participants' names will not be used in the transcription of any audiotaped interview. The written dissertation, which will be based on this research, will however, include student year of enrollment or graduation year, age, and other information shared during the interview process. For example, reference to an individual who participated in the research might be "A Caucasian female student in junior standing." The institution of higher education attended and actual names of the participants will not be revealed.

The text of the dissertation will also include direct quotes made by participants during the interview process, excluding any personally identifying information.

The material generated from the research will be shared with three faculty members who are on my research committee at Lesley University. It is possible that I may publish the findings of the research. Again, the actual names of participants or other personally identifying information will not be used in any publications or at any other point in the process.

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title: *The Success of First-Generation Female Students at Four-Year Private Institutions of Higher Education*

Principal Researcher:
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Description and Purpose: The intent of this research is to explore and describe the lived experiences of first-generation female students at private four-year institutions of higher education. The research is being conducted in partial fulfillment of requirements for my Ph.D. program.

In order to participate in this research project, you are required to sign this Informed Consent Form. By doing so, you indicate that you understand the nature of the research study and your role in it. Please consider the following before signing:

I understand that my participation in this research is completely voluntary. I can end my participation in this study at any point and can decline to answer any question without penalty.

I understand that my participation in the study involves participation in an in-person interview at your convenience in a mutually agreed upon location that will take approximately 90 minutes. The research will likely take place over the period of several months. I may also be asked some follow up questions during that time frame.

I understand that I may request a copy of the interview transcript to review.

I understand that the interview(s) will be audiotaped. Audiotaping will help to ensure that the researcher will be less likely to be distracted while taking notes during the interview process. It will also help to ensure that the researcher has access to an accurate record of the interview during the data analysis and writing aspects of the research project.

I understand that there are no known risks associated with participation apart from feelings that may be stimulated by answering the questions.

I understand that my participation will be anonymous (that is, my name will not be linked with my data) and that all information I provide will remain confidential in all aspects of the research project and any written report or publication that results from it.

I understand that I may contact a member of Lesley University's Internal Review Board if I have questions concerning my rights as a participant in this research.

By signing this form I am stating that I am over 18 years of age, and that I understand the above information and consent to participate in this study being conducted.

a) Researcher’s Signature:

________	______________________________	______________________________
Date	Researcher’s Signature	Print Name

b) Participant’s Signature:

________	______________________________	______________________________
Date	Participant’s Signature	Print Name

Appendix D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

College Choice and Decision-making to attend college

Please tell me the story of how you decided to attend college.

- How did you learn about the college attended?
- How many colleges did you apply to? How did you choose them?
- What role did your guidance counselor play? Other mentors? Role models?
- How did you come to choose the particular college attended?
- How did you choose your major area of study?
- What information did you have about tuition, financial aid, and payment? What information did you consider regarding how the college compared with other institutions and/or how the college would meet your particular needs? How did you get that information? Did you understand it? Did you do financial planning? Looking back, was that information complete and accurate? What/who was helpful? What, if anything, was not clear or created an obstacle?

Prior Educational Experiences and Future Educational Expectations

What motivated you to attend college? Describe your educational and family experiences prior to enrolling in college and what role they played, either positive or negative, in your ultimate decision to attend.

- Encouragement? Someone significant providing support: parents, teachers, friends, relatives, readings, feelings (hopes, fears, dreams)?
- What were your future educational expectations growing up? Significant role models? How did you think about college? Always knew? Recent idea? Expectations of friends and family? What prompted you to think about going to college?
- Can you describe your educational experiences in elementary school? In middle school and high school? What image did you have of yourself as a student? Achievement? Extracurricular involvement? Activities? Expectations at home for homework completion? Grades?
- How do you think your former teachers would describe you as a student? Your peers?
- How would you describe yourself as a child? Athletic? Rebellious? Teacher's pet?
- Would you say that others, such as your teachers had high or low expectations of you?

- Did you have low or high academic expectations for yourself?
- Was any member of your family involved in your educational process? Homework, attending school meetings and functions, paying attention to your education?
- What were your family members' expectations for you regarding your education? Was there anyone who was particularly encouraging of you to pursue a college education? Anyone who discouraged you?
- What positive school experiences did you have? What negative experiences did you have? Positive or negative relationships?
- Was there anything in particular occurring in your childhood that interfered with your academic achievement in school? That enhanced your academic achievement in school?
- What is most memorable about your experience of school? Positive? Negative?
- What does obtaining a college degree mean to you? To your family?

Family Experiences

Describe your childhood and family life and background.

- How did you spend your time as a child? A lot of time with parents/other adults? On your own? With other children/family members?
- Were you involved in any organized activities such as sports, dance, or other?
- Were there others around you who were college graduates?
- Did you work in or outside the home? If yes, when were you expected to do so? What was expected of you?
- How would you describe your relationship with your parents and/or their parenting style? Were they authoritative – in other words could you negotiate with them and engage in conversation with them, or was it more like they were in charge and you had to obey?
- And, since you enrolled in college, what is your relationship with them like now? Has anything changed since enrolling in college?
- How would you describe your current relationship with family members? Has that changed at all since your enrollment in college?
- How would you describe your family's financial situation? Did you ever worry about money? Did you ever feel that friends or peers at school had more or less than you? Did you feel any lack of ability to have things, clothes, other items that other kids had?

Transition to College

In general, how would you describe your transition to college? Easy? Comfortable? Stressful? Difficult? Please elaborate and provide examples.

- During your first few weeks here, what happened? How did you feel? Describe your transition to becoming a student here. What was positive? What was negative?
- Did you feel that you need to separate from your old friends or family members in order to make that transition successfully? Or, did you maintain relationships that you felt helped to support you through that transition?
- Before deciding to attend this college, what did you do to acquaint yourself with the college? Visit? Talk with faculty, students, staff?
- After deciding to attend this college, how did you become acquainted with campus and people? Visit? Talk with faculty, students, staff?
- Did you attend one of the summer orientation sessions? Describe what that experience was like for you. Did you connect with other students? Anyone you didn't connect particularly well with?
- When you arrived on campus either to move in or attend classes for the first time, how did you feel? Did you feel as though you belonged here? Why or why not?
- Are you still close with childhood friends? Describe any changes in those relationships that have taken place since your enrollment in college?
- Was there anything that made you feel that you belonged or didn't belong here?
- Did you make any friends?
- Did you participate in any on-campus activities?

Academic Preparedness

Describe how prepared were you for college-level academic work?

- Do you believe that you were as prepared, more prepared, or equally prepared as your classmates for your coursework? Please provide examples.
- Describe your high school experience. Did you do well academically? Do you believe that your high school education prepared you well for college?
- Once at college, was the work harder than you expected, as hard as you expected, or easier than you expected?
- Before you started to take classes, were you concerned about whether you were adequately prepared for college level work? After you took your first classes?
- Did you ever struggle to keep up in any of your classes?

College Engagement

In what ways have you become involved in the college life? Describe experiences.

- Since your initial transition to the college, have you participated in any on-campus activities? During your first year in college? After the first year? Clubs, internships, work on campus, sports, service learning or community service projects, learning communities, other activities? Why or why not? Describe experiences.
- Do you feel engaged in class? With the material, the instructor, other students?
- Do you often speak in class? Why or why not?
- Have you ever sought help from a professor outside of class, during office hours? Why? Why not?
- What, if anything, do you wish were different about the way(s) that you have or have not been able to become involved in the campus/with peers/ with faculty, etc.?

Social Class

What social class do you most closely identify with? Does your background have any impact on your college experience in any way? How? How do you deal with it?

- Do you feel a sense of belonging here on this campus? Among your peers? Why? Why not?
- Do you feel that your experiences, opinions, thoughts on various issues or ideas matter in class or outside of class? Explain and provide examples?
- Do you ever worry about financial issues? How does this affect you?
- Do you or have you ever felt pressure to work? Do you work more hours than your peers? Does the number of hours you work interfere in any way with your school work?
- How have you managed financially?
- Think about power in your life and relationships. Do you feel that you have power in your relationship with family members? Examples? At school? Examples? Over your entire educational process, are there aspects over which you feel you do not have power? Power?
- Do you receive financial support from anyone in your family? In what form?
- Do you believe that other students at the College are also from a similar class background?
- Have you ever felt that you had to hide who you really were, where you came from, or any aspect of your background? Perhaps to fit in or not draw attention to yourself?

- What role, if any, does your social class background play in defining who you are including your attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and interactions with others?

Gender Identity

How do you see yourself as a woman? Is that image congruent with what you believe is an expected socially accepted role for women?

- Do you think gender played a role in any aspect of your education either before or during college? Your early years?
- Do you believe that you were ever treated a certain way because of your gender? Do you believe that you were ever discriminated against because of your gender?
- What role should a woman play in the life of her family? Her work?
- Do you have any other personality tendencies that you feel have helped or hindered your success? Perseverance? Resilience? Perfectionism?
- In what ways do you see your role as a woman the same or different from that of your mother?
- Have there been experiences in your life that have had an impact on the way you think about women and/or about yourself as a woman?
- When you think about your future after college in five years, ten years, and twenty years, what role do you feel being a woman plays?

Personal Identity

How would you describe yourself? Your personality? Are you confident? Shy? Unsure?

- How would you describe your temperament? Are you easy-going? Intense? Perfection?
- Have you experienced any significant trauma or stress in your life? How did you manage it? Respond to it? What role did it play in who you are today? Resilient?
- Are there any aspects of your heritage, race, or ethnic background that you feel have an impact on who you are or what you believe?
- Do you see yourself as smart? Perceptive? Intelligent? Common sense?
- How are you at making friends? Forming other relationships?
- How do you come to know people?
- Tell me about trusting others?

Relationships

Could you please discuss and describe your relationships with family, significant other, friends, co-workers? Faculty, staff, other students?

- Are there any relationships in your life that either help or interfere with your success as a student?
- How would you describe your relationship with the college faculty? Staff? Other students?
- What/who helped? Has there been anyone in particular who you connected with at the college?
- What helped or hindered your ability to connect with faculty, staff or students?
- How involved in your college experience are your family members? In what ways?
- To whom do you turn for emotional support if you need it?
- Do you feel that you are able to communicate your needs well to others in your relationships? Personal? At the College? Faculty, staff, other students? Can you give examples?
- How do you come to know and understand others?

Success

To what or whom do you attribute your academic success in college? Prior to college?

- Do you believe that you have been successful in higher education? In what ways?
- What has been the strongest motivator for you in regard to your academic success?
- Did you encounter any barriers to your success? Did you overcome them? If so, how?
- What do you find the most discouraging? Do you think there are any barriers that cannot be overcome?
- Can anyone succeed if they try hard enough?
- Were there any barriers you couldn’t overcome and/or that you believe you still need to face?
- Was there anything about your success that surprised you?
- Is there anyone or anything about the College environment that you believe contributed to your success? Created an obstacle to your success?
- How would you characterize your college educational experience? Fun? Difficult? Stressful? Please elaborate?

General Questions

What are your plans for immediately after college? Work? Have you considered going on to graduate school? How did you come to consider this? What processes have you or will you go through to gather information and to make that decision?

When you think about your future, what, if anything, are you most concerned about?

Looking back on your experience, what would you change? What might you have done differently? If you had it to do all over again, what would you change? What wouldn't you change?

What advice might you offer new students who are entering college and who might be from similar backgrounds?

What advice would you offer your elementary, middle or high schools so that they can improve the way that they help students like yourself prepare for college? To students?

What advice would offer to the College? What might the College do better in order to help future students like you to succeed?

Is there anything I missed? Anything at all that you feel is important about you, your background, or your college experience, anything else that you'd like to share?