

BARRIERS TO GRADUATION:
AN EXAMINATION OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The college experience of first-generation college students is unique in comparison to their peers. Many students do not have the support from their family and require help in the navigation of college life. Student Support Services, a federally funded TRiO program helps students successfully graduate with a bachelor's degree.

Qualitative interviews were conducted on ten undergraduate students at UAF who were labeled as first-generation college students. All ten students were active participants in Student Support Services at the University of Alaska Fairbanks during the time of the interview. A thematic analysis produced six emergent themes. It was found that students utilized communicative strategies based on Orbe's co-cultural communication theory. First-generation college students, a non-dominant part of society, tried to negotiate through the University system, the dominant section of society. Through this negotiation, a co-cultural group was formed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Other freshmen were already moving into their dormitory rooms when we arrived, with their parents helping haul. I saw boxes of paperbacks, stereo equipment, Dylan albums and varnished acoustic guitars, home-knitted afghans, none as brilliant as mine, Janis posters, Bowie posters, Day-Glo bedsheets, hacky sacks, stuffed bears. But as we carried my trunk up two flights of stairs terror invaded me. Although I was studying French because I dreamed of going to Paris, I actually dreaded leaving home, and in the end my parents did not want me to leave, either. But this is how children are sacrificed into their futures: I had to go, and here I was.
(Erdrich, 2008)

Many college freshmen feel angst as they begin this new stage in life, often far removed from their own homes and familiar expectations. They are thrust into a new culture where they must learn to negotiate with new friends, teachers, and the dreams that often change during that freshman year. Non-traditional college students also find this transition difficult, perhaps more so than traditional students. According to the University of Alaska Website, 34% of undergraduate students in 2009 at University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) were aged 25 or older. The non-traditional age creates a diverse population at UAF. In the fall of 2010, 5,787 students took classes at UAF on the Fairbanks campus. College student differ as they address their unique issues; additional struggles prevail for students labeled *at-risk* for dropping out of college. According to the Education Resources Information Center (Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors, 2008), at-risk students are defined as:

students considered in danger of not graduating, being promoted, or meeting other education-related goals. Risk factors may include, but are not limited to, [a] socioeconomic status; [b] academic background; [c] behavior, cognitive, or

physical problems; [d] family or community environment; and [e] school capacity to meet student needs.

Student Support Services (SSS) at UAF provides students encouragement and resources to foster their success in college. My passion for education, and desire for every student to receive a fair opportunity for success in school, encouraged me to complete my undergraduate studies in English education. I taught high school and middle school for four years to help students see the importance of high school graduation. Graduation makes it possible for students to continue their education at the college level. Now that I work with students at the college level, I see that they face many of the same struggles as they work to graduate in order to improve their quality of life through a college degree.

SSS is one of eight programs funded by a federal TRiO grant through The U.S. Department of Education whose purpose “is to increase the number of disadvantaged low-income college students, first-generation college students, and college students with disabilities in the United States who successfully complete a program of study at the postsecondary level” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, para. 1). Students must meet one or more of the following three criteria to qualify for the SSS program at UAF: (a) limited-income, based on federal guidelines; (b) first generation, students self-report whether they are first generation meaning that neither guardian completed a four-year degree; and (c) disability, students must provide documentation from a medical provider or agency to qualify in this category. SSS must provide specified services to students to satisfy objectives of the grant, which include tutoring, advising in course selection, information on financial aid, services to improve financial literacy, and activities to assist

in successful completion of a four-year degree. Other areas not required by the grant, but often included are personal counseling, exposure to cultural events, and mentoring programs (U.S. DOE FAQ, 2011).

SSS appears to be an expanding program across the nation. In the 1970-1971 academic year, 121 programs with 30,000 participants existed compared to the 2007-2008 academic year with 947 programs with 198,940 participants (Chaney, 2010, p.1). The program number continues to increase, although not as steadily, with the 2011-2012 school year producing 1029 programs with 202, 921 participants (U.S. DOE Awards, 2011). This program provides support for students at UAF, and college settings all over the nation. Two thirds of the students served in the program must be both first generation and low income, which provides the focus for my study since the majority of the students in SSS are first generation (p. 3). Projects across the nation tailor services to meet the needs of the student population. Students represented in SSS are at a higher risk than the general University population for several reasons including entering college at an older age, gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, disability, high school graduation, academic major, residence, and financial aid (p. 4).

1.1 Rationale for Study

I reached the decision to study first generation college students during my second semester of graduate school, but the interest began when I started working for SSS as a tutor my first semester at UAF. After working as a tutor and volunteer mentor and now as a full time staff member, I find students truly benefit from the program. I wanted to know more about the students and ask questions concerning their college experience. My

personal goal, while working on this thesis, is to better serve at-risk students, specifically first generation college students.

The goal of SSS is help at-risk college students graduate with their Bachelor's Degree. I was curious, as a professional, about the issues that stand in the way of first-generation college students. There has been little research conducted on SSS and the services it provides to its students, so I believed it was important to study what was happening at UAF. I hope that this research will benefit the students at SSS as well as the staff that strive to help these students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Do you understand how amazing it is to hear that from an adult? Do you know how amazing it is to hear that from anybody? It's one of the simplest sentences in the world, just four words, but they're the four hugest words in the world when they're put together. 'You can do it.'
(Alexie, 2007, p. 189)

Students need organizational structures and student services to succeed in college. Some students receive support from their families, but when education is unfamiliar or not held as a valuable attainment, students need another source of support. One group of underrepresented students who need support from an outside source is the group of students labeled as first generation. This literature review examines first generation college students and support programs implemented to support students in the college setting. Finally, in order to add a communication lens, co-cultural communication theory (Orbe, 1998) explores the power differences in relationships between students in SSS at UAF and University employees including instructors and advisors. This literature review emphasizes that first generation students are more at-risk than the general population of college students. Furthermore, to address the at-risk status of these students, the University system can facilitate students' success in the college setting through student support programs.

2.1. First Generation Students

A first generation college student is defined as a student where neither guardian obtained a bachelor's degree (SSS, 2011). Much literature exists concerning the experience of first generation college students as they navigate through the college experience. Some literature more closely related to the education and success of first

generation students is presented in this section. A study authored by Orbe and Groscurth (2004), discovered first generation students sometimes find it difficult to fit in with peers. A student's interview comments illustrate this type of frustration by stating, "I just don't fit in, and I still don't fit" (p. 43). The student chose not to express herself to the people around her and kept most of her feelings to herself to fit in with her peers. Orbe and Groscurth refer to this as "nonassertive assimilation" (p. 43), which is a communicative orientation in accordance with co-cultural communication theory. Nonassertive assimilation has different characteristics that can include trying to act like and look like people from the dominant culture, which explains why the student did not express her feelings. Orbe and Groscurth use co-cultural communication theory with an emphasis on the negotiation of differences between dominant cultural members, such as university officials, versus underrepresented cultural members, such as at-risk students, in order to explain the experiences of first generation college students. Co-cultural communication theory emphasizes the understanding of perceptual standpoints that exist in power differentiated interactions.

In a study conducted by Kim and Sax (2009), a pool of undergraduates completed a survey and data was collected regarding GPA, skills development, and college satisfaction. Of the 153,457 students surveyed, 19.5% of the students considered themselves first generation (p. 440). The survey included questions about students' nature and frequency of the interaction with faculty (p. 441). From this study, Kim and Sax found that students whose parents attended college were more likely to approach faculty for various reasons including research, and in different situations including after lecture

or through an email. Additionally, first generation students appeared less satisfied with advising from faculty than those students not labeled as first generation (p. 445). First generation students, in this study, reported that they felt less comfortable approaching professors and using them as a resource. Kim and Sax suggest that first generation students do not fully utilize faculty by contacting them outside of class, which causes stress for the students.

Phinney and Haas (2003) analyzed student stress with 30 ethnic minority students, 25 students were first generation college students. Through surveys and narratives, the researchers collected data on “the issue of how situational factors, social support, and personal characteristics contribute to successful coping” (p. 708). Most of the students in the study had outside stressors like work, domestic duties, and financial problems. The study found that students dealt with external stresses through self-efficacy and social support. Student self-efficacy is described as determination and the desire to complete college. For the purpose of this study, social support was described as “either academic assistance from instructors or the institution or emotional support from family and friends who provide understanding and encouragement” (p.710). Social support helped students in the study who rated it as the top way to deal with college stress (p. 722).

A study conducted by Smith and Zhang (2010) reiterated extra stressors presented to first-generation students. In a survey completed by 574 students, researchers found “first-generation students received the least amount of help from parents” (p. 53). Because first generation college students struggle financially from their disadvantaged family income, the students in the study stressed frequently about the money needed for

school (p. 53). Stressors have a detrimental impact on whether students complete college. The next section presents an in-depth review of programs at the university level that potentially benefit students.

2.2 Supporting University Students

Universities support students in many ways in order to ensure their graduation. The two main focuses in this section include SSS and general advising programs. As mentioned in the introduction, the SSS program supports first generation college students and within the SSS program, advising plays a major role in student success.

2.2.1 Student support services.

Student Support Services, one of eight federally funded TRiO programs, helps students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed in higher education. Although I conducted a thorough literature search, the following study was the only peer-reviewed, academic, non-trade article that I could find that met the needs of this literature review. According to a study conducted by Chaney (2010) for the U.S. Department of Education, SSS has three main goals:

- (1) increase college retention and graduation rates for eligible students, (2) increase the transfer rates of eligible students from two-year to four-year institutions, and (3) foster an institutional climate supportive of success for low-income and first-generation college students and individuals with disabilities.

Two-thirds of the students served by an SSS project must be low-income (defined as at or below 150 percent of the poverty level) *and* first-generation college students or students with disabilities. The other third must be low-income *or* first-

generation college students. One-third of the disabled students also must be low income. (p. xii)

These goals guide programs across the nation in providing assistance to students who are at-risk. This section provides a summary of the study conducted by Chaney, which surveyed 200 SSS programs across the nation over a six-year period to gather perspectives as to the usefulness of the program. The statistical information collected provided vital information about each of the programs. Student surveys were conducted over a six-year span. Students involved and not involved in SSS responded to the surveys.

As a key rationale for the study, Chaney (2010) chose a variety of programs because they differ in the “specific services... offered through SSS and how they are organized” (p. 4). Students included in the study differed from their peers in several different areas. Two of the major differences noted in the findings were student disabilities and financial aid. The percentage of freshman college students who report disabilities nationwide is 2%, while 17% of SSS students reported having some form of disability. Students in SSS receive more financial aid than their peers; 82% of SSS students receive financial aid versus 42-45% of the other students included in this study (p. 4-5). The data from the study reports that SSS students are more at-risk than their peers.

Study results emphasized the importance of student intervention services like those provided by SSS. Students involved in SSS increased their GPA, from an average of 2.18 to 2.34 (Chaney, 2010, p. 57). An improvement reported in the study stated, “SSS

students were 8 to 11 percentage points more likely to have received either a bachelor's degree or higher or associate's degree or higher than if they had not received supplemental services" (p. 57). The third major area found to be affected by involvement in SSS was credit completion, going from an average of 59.2 credits to 75.5 credits. The change was measured during the six-year longitudinal study.

Many limitations accompanied this study, including the difficulty of tracking students over six years as well as differentiating between services offered by SSS versus services offered to the general college student and which services were making the biggest differences. Even with these limitations, this study helps to see the impact of SSS. Because of the limitation of in-depth studies completed on SSS, the following section looks at another area that could potentially benefit students considered at-risk, including first generation college students.

2.2.2 Advising programs.

From the discussion in the previous sections, research reports that SSS has a positive impact on at-risk students. One area offered by SSS that positively impacted students was professional counseling, or advising (Chaney, 2010, p. 71). This section focuses on advising provided at the university level. Advising programs at the university level nationwide have gained interest and more researchers are collecting data because student retention and graduation rates continue to decline. At UAF, SSS provides students with academic, career, and personal advising in order to retain students and help them to graduate.

Bai and Pan (2009-2010) conducted a study looking at different types of retention programs for first-time, full-time college students. The specific advising program that they studied assisted students in academic and pre-professional needs. They found that students benefitted from access to advising programs; “the students in the advising programs were 24% more likely to return to the campus after the first year” (p. 294). This study focused on specific areas to help freshman students rather than a large, general orientation. Bai and Pan found that specific areas of advisement benefited first year students the most. Students who are underprepared for college, like those enrolled in SSS, seem to benefit from specific advising (p. 297).

Truschel (2008) reported that advisors had the ability to use different types of advising, but appreciative advising, a positively focused advising technique, benefitted the at-risk students included in the study. One hundred twelve students with a grade point average under 2.0 participated in the study (p. 11). Appreciative advising helps students achieve their goals through discovery, dream, design, and destiny or the 4D’s (p. 10). Advisors help students realize their goals through this specific method. Truschel’s responses from the study were mainly positive from both students and faculty. The study reported that students grow and find their dreams achievable through the maintenance of relationships with faculty advisors. Another way of achieving mutuality is through mentorship.

The role of mentor creates a less formal relationship for the student compared to an academic advisor. Mentoring fulfills a similar role as advising when mentors help students negotiate through college. In a study conducted by Vivian (2005), the researcher

wanted to determine if informal mentoring would affect students at the University level. He informed 12 students of his intervention and 31 other students he established as the control group. Vivian met with the 12 students on a weekly basis as well as speaking with their professors about their in-class performance. The purpose of the mentorship was not to be disciplinary, but rather to provide feedback to students when they had questions. Although the author acknowledges that the results are suggestive and the researcher was quite informal with his mentoring, all 12 at-risk students came back to school the following semester. Vivian defines at-risk as “those who are socially, financially, or academically underprepared or under supported” (p. 336). Advising programs represented in the studies provide support and foster student success. Advising is one service offered to help students in SSS.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study could have potentially gone many different ways because the professional literature regarding hardships faced by at-risk students, including first generation college students examined many variables. To add a communication lens, standpoint and co-cultural communication theory require explanation.

2.3.1 Standpoint theory.

Standpoint theory explains the phenomena of communication between two groups, but looks specifically at the influence an individual’s standpoint has on that communication (Wood, 2004, p. 217). An analogy from the 19th century philosopher, Hegel (as cited in Smith, 1999, p.49; Wood, 1992, p. 14), explains standpoint theory through the use of slave and slave owner because of their radically different views of the

world based on different life experiences. Because of the slave owner's interest in maintaining status and enjoying higher privilege in life, the owner saw the world in a very different, opportunistic light. Standpoint theorists go on to say that the slave understands more of the world because the slave perceives not only the master's view, but also the inequalities that exist in the world (Wood, 1992, p. 14). Standpoint theorists apply the analogy of the slave and slave owner to any situation where there is a dominant and an underrepresented group.

Most of the contemporary literature on standpoint theory deals with women as the underrepresented group and men as the dominant group, but the theory could be broadened to include other groups such as people who are from an ethnic minority group, gay men and women, and people who are physically disabled. It is imperative, according to standpoint theory, to view the world from the perspective of the non-dominant groups because of the insight gained. Harding (1991) focuses on women as the underrepresented group when she writes, "the perspective from women's everyday activity is scientifically preferable to the perspective available only from the 'ruling' activities of men in the dominant groups" (p. 128). Going back to the slave analogy, Harding emphasized the importance of recognizing the non-dominant group and took this one step further to say the insight from the underrepresented group of women is *preferable* to men.

Harding (1991) highlights that standpoint theory is not pointing out differences between women and men, but rather, recognizing a different perspective on experiences that an underrepresented person in society can bring to a situation. Each individual brings a personal viewpoint, but in Harding's description, the underrepresented individual

provides a different perspective of society than the dominant. This different perspective occurs because the dominant view “is far more partial and distorted than that available from the perspective of the dominated” (p. 59). Harding stresses that standpoint theory provides a tool to recognize the differences that do occur between dominant and co-cultural groups rather than it providing an excuse for racism or sexism.

2.3.2 Co-cultural communication theory.

When the standpoint is realized, an individual often finds it difficult to *not* sense a change in communication and views of the world. Once recognized, the non-dominant groups do not hold the same vocal power in society as the dominant group. This mutedness applies to first generation students and the *miscommunication* or *lack* of communication with teachers, advisors, and other university personnel. Muted group theory, first proposed by Ardener (as cited in Kramarae, 1981), expands on why:

women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men
(Kramarae, 1981, p.1)

Muted group theory, like standpoint theory, recognizes the non-dominant group possesses a different perspective, which is not heard, or is silenced, by the dominant group (Wood, 2004, p. 259). This phenomenon led to Orbe’s (1998) expansion of both standpoint theory and muted group theory to include how communication occurs between dominant and non-dominant groups. According to Orbe and Spellers (2005), “a co-cultural theoretical approach to communication is designed to speak to the issues of traditionally

underrepresented group members as they function within societal structures governed by cultural groups that have, over time, achieved dominant group status” (p. 174). Co-cultural communication theory explains decisions a person from an underrepresented group makes when attempting to converse with someone from the dominant part of society.

Orbe and Spellers (2005) write that when individuals communicate with members of the dominant society they first choose a preferred outcome for communication; the person asks, “What communication behavior will lead to the effect that I desire” (p. 175)? Co-cultural communication theory (Orbe, 1998) gives three possibilities for communication outcomes: separation, accommodation, or assimilation (Appendix A). If individuals choose to separate from the dominant group, they retain all individuality within their underrepresented group, but it may be difficult for individuals to change their situation or to communicate productively with members of the dominant society. When individuals choose accommodation for their outcome of communication, they attempt to become part of society and expresses ideas within the dominant group while maintaining a sense of individuality. The outcome allows for change within the dominant system because communication is achieved, allowing a new voice and insight into the dominant structure. The last choice for the outcome of communication is assimilation, which occurs when individuals become a part of the dominant society, but they may lose their sense of the identity formed within their underrepresented group.

Once individuals choose an outcome, they must decide the behavior they wish to use in order to achieve the outcome. Individuals may choose a nonassertive, assertive, or

aggressive communication approach. After individuals participate in communication, they evaluate their communication approach to see if it was successful. The combination of choices and behaviors leads to a kind of matrix, which has nine “communication orientations adopted during their interactions within dominant societal structures *from the standpoint of co-cultural group members* [emphasis from author]” (Orbe, 1998, p. 109). Orbe and Spellers (2005) define communication orientation as “a concept referring to specific stances that underrepresented group members assume during their everyday interactions” (p. 179).

Within each communication orientation, certain communicative practices are utilized to achieve the goal for communication. When individuals choose nonassertive separation for their communication orientation, they may avoid the situation or put up barriers (Orbe, 1998, p. 115). If assertive separation is utilized, individuals may embrace the stereotypes that society has placed upon them (p. 116). The most extreme behavior for the communication choice of separation, aggressive separation, will take the communication to the point of attacking or sabotaging others (p. 117). The second goal for communication is accommodation. Those who use nonassertive accommodation, may try to dispel stereotypes that others have of the underrepresented group (p. 113). Those individuals who chose to apply assertive accommodation may educate others in the dominant group about the differences between dominant and non-dominant society (p. 114). Aggressive accommodation may result in confrontation with others in the dominant group (p. 115). The last goal an individual can choose for communication is assimilation. Nonassertive assimilation emphasizes commonalities between those who are

underrepresented and the dominant society (p. 110). Those utilizing the communication orientation of assertive assimilation may overcompensate differences between the two groups (p. 111). The final communication orientation is aggressive assimilation. In this orientation, individuals ridicule themselves in order to diminish differences between the non-dominant and dominant group (p. 113). It is important to note that individuals vary in their use of these orientations. Some individuals use the same orientation consistently throughout interactions with dominant culture, while most individuals alter their orientation regularly depending on the context in which they communicate.

2.4 Research Questions

The literature reviewed shows the importance of giving voice to first generation college students. First generation college students, a non-dominant culture, find themselves constantly muted by dominant society. The following research question helped to guide the study that tried to determine whether this phenomenon was consistent with students at UAF enrolled in SSS.

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of first generation college students utilizing Student Support Services at the University of Alaska Fairbanks?

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

In order to more fully understand this research, the epistemological and theoretical perspective must first be examined. In this section of the paper, the theoretical framework, constructionism; theoretical perspective, interpretivism; and the method used, narrative inquiry, will each be described. After the methods section, the procedures, participants, and analysis for this study will also be explored.

Constructionism as an epistemology explains how we understand the world through human interaction. Different from objectivism, which views the meaning within the object, it is up to humans to construct meaning through constructionism. Crotty (2009) states that constructionism makes meaning and that meaningful reality is “contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). Crotty goes on to explain that no object can stand alone from the human experience. Rather, meanings are rooted in the human experience so the understanding is also rooted in the human experience. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) reiterate that constructionism is based in the human experience and it emphasizes “the role of humans in actively using symbolic resources to objectify, circulate, and interpret the meaningfulness of their environments and their existence” (p.45). Constructionism is based on the human experience and how that experience constructs meaning in objects. Through interviews, the human experience expands from the co-researcher’s experience to the researcher’s experience as well, which is why interviews provide substantive data

using this epistemology. Meaning cannot exist without the human interaction, specifically the oral communication of an interview.

3.2 Theoretical Perspectives

In this research, interpretivism stands as the theoretical perspective. Creswell (2007) describes interpretivism as a worldview where “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 20). This understanding of the world and the meanings that lie within are formed mainly through human interaction (p. 21). Crotty (2009) expands the definition by stating that the interpretivist approach was created in response to the positivist view and “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social-life world [emphasis removed]” (p. 67). Creswell (2007) also emphasizes the importance of self-reflection when conducting research through the lens of interpretivism (p. 248). Interpretivism requires interaction between the researcher and the subject. In the case of this research, that requires interaction between first generation students and the researcher. Crotty (2009) states the importance of dialogue in order to “become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings” (p. 75).

In a previous work, Crotty explained that the perspective of phenomenology lies within the interpretivist view and tries to strip away “prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning” (as cited in Crotty, 1999, p. 78). Phenomenology attempts to view an event in its rawest form while trying to bracket prior experiences and refrain from attributing

meaning (p. 79). van Manen (1990) describes phenomenology as a constant reflection of what happens within a person's lived experience (p. 36). Through the interpretivist perspective of reality, it becomes possible to view the lived experiences of first generation college students in academic programs as the students socially construct their worldviews through narrative interviews.

3.3 Research Methodology

This study used narrative inquiry as the research methodology. Unlike other types of inquiry, narrative inquiry is "concerned with the study of entire stories" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 180). In the field of communication, it is especially important to note that interaction between interviewer and interviewee shapes the narratives, or the life stories of the co-researcher (p. 181). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), narrative inquiry gives us insight to reality that otherwise would not be possible because the stories help us make sense of our social reality. The authors emphasize the importance of storytelling and "linguistic interaction" in order to help us reach a new level of knowledge (p. 55). By better understanding our social reality and hearing the stories of others, the world can be clearer.

3.4 Methods

Through narrative inquiry, it is essential to elicit the stories of the interviewee in order to understand the individual's perception of reality. To gather these stories, I chose conversational interviewing. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state that conversational interviews provide an avenue for both the interviewer and interviewee to constitute knowledge because humans are conversational beings and knowledge is "constructed

through the interaction of interviewer and interviewee” (p. 302). I began the interview with a list of questions/topics I wanted to cover in the interview. However, we engaged in a conversation, so I often asked for further clarification or went in different directions than I originally anticipated. Conversational interviewing allowed this to happen. The interviewer and interviewee become co-researchers as they try to make sense of the reality surrounding them. It allows the researcher to learn the lived experiences of the co-researchers.

3.4.1 Objectivity and researcher as instrument.

Within conversational interviewing and the entire research process, it is vital that the researcher have objectivity, which will be obtained through reflexivity. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) define reflexive objectivity as the researcher’s ability to see himself/herself within the research. It is impossible to remove oneself completely from research, so Kvale and Brinkmann emphasize the importance of reflecting on the contribution made by the researcher (p. 242). As researcher, certain biases exist which find their way into the research. Creswell (2007) explains the importance of having the researcher be a voice within the study. There is not necessarily anything wrong with having bias as it is known that “how we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research” (p. 179). The importance in reflexivity and objectivity is to not ignore the experiences we bring to research, but to reflect upon how that may affect our interpretation of the research.

Creswell (2007) writes of the importance of the researcher as the key research instrument, which is especially true in qualitative research and conversational interview. The researcher is entirely in charge of creating the questions and interpreting the findings, which can leave much room for the researcher's own opinions and background to emerge as part of the research (p. 38). The researcher must constantly reflect back on personal experiences while making inferences within the research.

3.4.2 Validity.

In order to establish validity in this research, a continuation of reflexivity was used. Validation within research occurs in many ways and discussions continue on the best approach and even if validation is necessary. Creswell (2007) writes about substantive validation, which “means understanding one's own understandings of the topic, understandings derived from other sources, and the documentation of this process in written study” (p. 206). Creswell explores the importance of self-reflection, bringing in the idea of reflexivity once more. The researcher uses the subject matter to co-create a new understanding. This is where the idea of co-researcher comes from, rather than characterizing the interviewee solely as a participant. Working with the participant on understanding a phenomenon creates a new understanding for both researcher and participant. Thus, a co-researcher is formed.

By asking questions of the co-researcher, and checking for her/his understanding, triangulation is created. Triangulation is a strategy of validation where a phenomenon is viewed from several viewpoints and methods, or from multiple co-researchers (Creswell, 2007, p. 45). Validity in a qualitative research project presents difficulty and seems

untraditional from quantitative research, but remembering that co-researchers help to create a new understanding through communication helps the researcher create validity through self-reflection.

3.4.3 Reliability.

Reliability, according to Kvale and Brinkmann, is the “trustworthiness” of the findings (p. 245). According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), this presents difficulty in qualitative research. Definitions of reliability revolve around the ability to reproduce something, which proves impossible in personal interviews. The exact interviews cannot repeat themselves and thus are hard to define as reliable because “qualitative research lies in the interpretivist assumption of multiple, changing realities” (p. 239). The social construction of our world makes it impossible to recreate reality as reality is “continually changing – and the investigator’s own understandings also change in relation to the scene under study – then replication of results via independent assessments is neither practical nor possible” (p. 239). This study was made *reliable* and *trustworthy* through the researcher’s meticulous reporting of the findings, understanding that reliability, in the quantitative sense, is not possible.

3.4.4 Lived experience and generation of knowledge.

The concept of lived experience is crucial to phenomenological research. Through phenomenology, the researcher is aiming “to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence” which causes the reader to be “powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). These lived experiences were expressed through the conversational interviews conducted for this research. Creswell

(2007) writes of the importance of gathering the lived experiences of different co-researchers within the arena of phenomenology so that the researcher can describe “what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 58). Because co-researchers can best tell their lived experiences through conversation, I chose conversational interviews to describe the experiences of first generation college students. It must be understood that these results provide a snapshot of the lived experience of these students at the moment of time the interview occurred. The same interview can never again be produced.

3.5 Procedures

First, IRB approval was obtained on January 26, 2012 (Appendix B) in order to complete the conversational interviews. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. I received informed consent from co-researchers to guarantee ethical research practices including confidentiality and anonymity (Appendix C). I conducted semi-structured interviews, with no script, in a neutral place, either in the communication department’s conference room, or the main area of the communication department when the speaking center was closed. The audio-recordings will remain on record for five years and then will be destroyed. The data is in a locked storage room in the Department of Communication in Gruening 503A for a five-year period after which the data will be destroyed according to university policies.

3.6 Participants.

The participants in this study were first generation college students at UAF and participants in SSS. Students were considered first generation if neither parent or

guardian had obtained a college degree from a four-year university. The students self-disclosed whether they were first generation on their applications for admittance to the program. In order to recruit participants, I distributed flyers (Appendix D) around the SSS office asking for first generation students to participate in this study. Ginny Redmond, director of SSS, also sent a mass email to students, which informed them of my study and asked for volunteers to participate. When I screened interested participants, I chose students who qualified as first generation-only, or students who qualified as first generation and limited income. As seen from the literature review, many students labeled as first generation also found themselves in situations of limited income (Phinney & Haas, 2003, p.708). Once students volunteered for the study, I made it clear to students that I was working on my graduate project and it was not a requirement for the SSS program for them to participate. I conducted the interviews outside of the SSS office in order to further ensure that they understood my role as advisor did not apply in that situation. Students signed an informed consent form, which included the above information as well as informing students that they could withdraw from the study at any point and if they needed outside resources following the interview, I would happily provide such information. Questions in the interview were open-ended in order to elicit genuine lived experiences from the students.

3.7 Analysis

After the interviews were conducted and transcribed, the analysis followed. For this research, I chose to utilize thematic analysis. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), thematic analysis allows for new knowledge to be reached through the narrative

of reality. This reality is obtained when the researcher artfully decides the themes that illustrate that which requires recognition and that which does not need to be in the foreground (p. 107). This approach aligns with the theoretical framework outlined earlier in this section, which discussed the importance of telling the lived stories through communication. The process of analysis included the researcher being saturated in the process through transcription and the re-reading of the interviews in order to find thematic relevance. From the narratives with my co-researchers, themes emerged which allowed for a new story's production.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Nicole's Conversational Interview

I met with Nicole on Saturday, February 4, 2012. I have known Nicole since the summer semester 2011 when I worked with her as her tutor in SSS. After I hung my fliers around the SSS office, Nicole eagerly offered to help by participating in my study. I was glad to begin with her as I was nervous about the process and knew that she would understand my nerves and willingly humor me as I floundered through the process. She met me in the Communication Department in the early afternoon. She wore a nice outfit and arrived early to our appointment. She appeared to be as nervous as I felt. I explained the process to her and asked her sign the informed consent form. As she had no other questions, we began the interview.

I started with demographics. Nicole was a 22-year-old African American female. She moved all over beginning in California until she was 3 months old, then bounced around to different towns in Alaska until she finally settled in Fairbanks at the age of 18 when she began college.

I wanted to know from each of my co-researchers what the process was that brought them to college. When I asked Nicole this question, she explained that when she was younger, she used to dream of being, “a doctor or lawyer, but I didn't know that it took, uh, going to college, and a lot of education, and money.” At this comment, she giggled, then continued by saying:

As I got older, I realized the type of things that it took to get to college and I still wanted to go, but I didn't think I would be able to go because I didn't have a lot of financial backing to pay for it and I didn't want to go into a bunch of debt.

At this point, Nicole elaborated on the financial issues that burdened her decision to come to college. She said she did not want to go into debt and then not have a job to help pay off the loans, yet simply having a high school degree was insufficient:

I didn't have some family owned business that I can go work for and have a guaranteed job to pay off the loans that I would've probably had to take out to go. At the same time, I also knew I didn't have the option of not going cuz that would just put me in the position where I was. Only a high school graduate with no work experience.

Nicole said that she wanted the degree to back up her knowledge to help her get a job so that she did not end up working fast food or cleaning hotels like her mother and other people she knew growing up who worked "legitimately."

After discussing the financial aspect of school, Nicole told me about her choice to come to UAF. "So, I applied to UAA, UAF, and one other university in New York, but I didn't finish the application cuz I knew I wasn't going to get in like my grades weren't very good in high school." Nicole was admitted to both UAA and UAF as a pre-major because of her low high school grades, but chose UAF because of some connections that she made during a UAF visit to Anchorage:

I ended up meeting Heather, I believe, an advisor from Academic Advising and Mimi from Financial Aid. And that's how I got involved with the TRiO program.

I went home and I was like, well, I, um, I am going to UAF. I was surprised.

At this point, Nicole giggled nervously and it appeared to me that we had reached a stopping point for that part of the discussion.

I followed up by asking why she was amazed by her acceptance to UAF and she replied that her grades were not too great, so she was surprised she had been accepted:

I didn't have an official ACT or SAT, and so when I got here I took the

Accuplacer, so they'd waive my math and my writing. I was fine on my writing,

but my math was low, so I ended up coming in with the developmental classes.

Nicole continued answering the first question about college, stating that she hoped to

better the situation she was in, so I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by the

situation in which she found herself. She spoke again of the financial situation saying,

“there's a lot of things you can't do, so if I went to college, I'd have a degree at least.”

She said that the importance of a degree outweighed the importance of work experience.

She stated that she wanted that degree to, “back me up instead of just having not had

work experience, low income, no education, just high school education, is basically like,

um, I don't know. I wouldn't have, um, I would probably be workin' in fast food.” She

checked in with me to make sure I understood what she was saying, which I did, so she

continued:

Well, that's what I saw it as. Like my mother, she worked at Subway and cleaned

hotels and stuff like that and um, she had less than high school education. I think

she ended up getting her GED as she got older, but um, so that's basically my frame of mind and what I saw.

This raised my curiosity about the rest of her family and their education level, so I asked if anyone in her family was college educated. She spoke of a cousin, but was not that close to her and other than that, nobody in her family had a college education. She said, "Like, no one in my immediate family. Like my mom and my brother didn't go. Me and my best friend went to college the same year, but she's in Rhode Island and I went to college in Fairbanks." I asked if her friend's decision to go to college had any weight on her own choice to attend school. Nicole admitted that it probably did. Nicole said that it was not necessarily a conscious decision, but her friend encouraged Nicole in certain ways. One way that Nicole said her friend influenced her was that she encouraged her to apply for the school in New York:

You should really get out of Alaska. And that's when I applied and I was like, I am not gonna get in ya know, so I am not going to finish the application. That's just a waste of time. They're not going to accept me anyway.

I tried to steer the conversation back to her family by asking if she had any connection with her father. She explained to me that she did have a relationship with her father at the time we conducted the interview, but it was not like the relationship she had with her mother. She told me:

He was around when I was up to three and then he wasn't, so then from like eight 'til maybe a couple years he went to prison and then um, he got out, but during the time he was in, he, we had communication.

She continued by telling me that their relationship was built through written letters and phone calls. Her father was released from prison when Nicole was 14 and she went to visit him in Texas because he did not want to return to Alaska. She visited him three times, but has not been to Texas since she was 18. I looked at her questioningly and she explained:

Um, but, like, we communicate like, maybe, hmmm, it's not really a consistent basis. It's like, if there's something that comes up that we need to talk about, but it's not like a father-daughter, dad-daughter, trusting relationship. Not like me and my mother.

At this she giggled, and I thought that indicated her readiness to change topics. I asked Nicole about her father's education level. She replied, "I think he had high school and at one point, as an adult, like when he got out of prison, he went to college. I don't know if he finished." She elaborated that she thought that he had received a certificate, but was not sure if he ever received his bachelor's degree.

I felt that the conversation on Nicole's father was exhausted, so I decided to move on to talking about SSS. I first asked her to tell me in her own words what she felt the purpose was of SSS. She told me that for her, "it fills in where I was lacking, like the support I didn't have, in multiple areas like family support, financial support, just educational academic support. They filled in those voids, those gaps that needed to be filled." She gave examples of what people lacked which included tutoring and money for printing. I asked Nicole to give me some specific examples of how SSS had helped her and she started by telling me about her tutoring experience at SSS. She said that the tutors

at SSS took time and explained the material to her in a way that made sense. If she asked for further explanation, specifically in math, she felt they were provided to her in a timely manner. She said in comparison to other tutors around campus, “and other places, not that they’re doing it wrong, but they may not have as much patience, you know? Like, you learn the way you need to learn.” I realized at this point that I had not asked Nicole to tell me how she qualified for the program. She qualified for SSS because she was limited income and first generation.

After talking about SSS, I asked Nicole about her general college experiences including the classes she had taken. She told me that she was majoring and minoring in the humanities and had taken all the general requirements and planned to graduate in spring of 2012 if she passed all her classes. She emphasized that it “is in the four-year span.” I asked her if she was ready and wanted to graduate. She told me that she was trying to figure out financially if it was a good idea for her to graduate that spring. She said, “I actually want another degree. I’d like to get another degree in nursing, so if I don’t graduate, then I can go to school for two more years with the Pell grant.” I clarified that if she graduated and then came back, she would not be eligible for the Pell. She replied, “no.”

Next I asked her about her relationships with her professors. She said that there were lots of variables that played into her relationship, like how many times she had taken a specific teacher and how their personalities seemed to mesh. She explained the need of approachability, “I am like, okay, if I don’t understand something, I am going to their office hours and I am going to go and talk to them about this.” I asked if this was a

characteristic that she had always had or if it was a skill she had acquired. She said that yes, this was something she had done since she was a freshman. She talked specifically about spending time in her math teacher's office her freshman year:

I spent a lot of my time in her office and with a tutor here at SSS, so, because I knew I needed that. Like, I don't think I am very smart, so I try to use as many resources as I can get to make up for that, so yeah, so I've pretty much always done it like, even in high school I did it. I struggled.

I continued by asking her if she had ever had any particularly bad experiences with professors. She said that at times she did not really feel like she could talk to the teacher, but she did anyway because she worried about her grade. She gave an example about a professor who posted office hours, but when she went to visit, the teacher was never there. She emphasized that she did not think the teacher was a bad person, rather, he just did not have the time to spend helping. Instead of giving up, she emailed the teacher and asked for a time to meet to go over material she did not understand and told the teacher that email was not sufficient. She told me, "I have the same professor this semester so I went and met with him and explained to them in person, like I'd like to meet with you often so I can get help and like face-to-face type of help." She said that she did feel uncomfortable having that conversation, but she knew it was vital for her own education.

Following the discussion of her teachers, I asked Nicole to tell me about her advisors. She explained that she usually started with an advisor from her department, but that she *always* came to SSS. When Nicole visited her major department, she saw whatever advisor was available and did not feel a close connection, but when she came to

SSS, she saw the same advisor that she started with her freshman year. I asked what the difference was and why she felt that she needed both opinions. She replied, "I've been with SSS from the beginning. They know my history." Nicole said that it took almost two years from her beginning at UAF to actually take her major classes because of the developmental classes that were required for her to take. She said that her SSS advisor talked about the required classes and also, knowing her, what sequence would work best, which workload would be the most appropriate. When discussing the impact of the SSS advising, she said, "it's more um, in-depth and targeted and a work load that *I* can do."

I asked Nicole if there was anything else that she discussed with her advisor besides classes. She responded,

I think a lot of times I go in there when I am kinda discouraged or if I am thinking about different types of majors that I am interested in, I go talk to them about that. Anything academically related or that can affect my academics even if it's kinda, um, not direct, but indirect.

This statement intrigued me, so I asked Nicole to elaborate. She said that when she was feeling like she could not complete a class, that her advisor at SSS helped her see the big picture:

You know your schedule's been pretty busy. You know you can see a tutor at this time, and they can help you know or I can help you and we can really get on it and you can pull it together.

Nicole said that before these pep talks, she felt that she could not push past the daunting feelings, yet after discussion with her advisor, she felt encouraged. She said enthusiastically:

I haven't failed anything. And there've been times I felt like I could definitely fail. I know for a fact I would've failed some classes without having had tutoring and SSS or having encouraging words. And, I probably would've given up because I was already in the mindset of like, I am going to fail.

I wanted to know more, so I asked what Nicole's college experience would be like without SSS. She responded that she did not think she would be close to graduation because she would not have completed as many credits. She continued by saying that she probably would not have passed her classes, which would have led to academic disqualification, which would have led to her losing her financial aid. She said, "So I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be in college."

This seemed so clear cut to me, yet so sad, so I wanted to give Nicole a chance to brag. I asked, what happens next? I wanted to know what she planned to do after graduation. She told me that she wanted to enter a field where she was giving back. Ideally, she said, that would be in nursing, but she also told me that she had recently started thinking about going back to school for a master's degree. She said that she would like to get her master's in sociology or in nursing and midwifery. I wanted to push her a little further, so I asked her to look back to where she was in high school and talk about the difference she saw and the progress that she made. She said that she was proud, "I don't know if anyone else has recognized it, but I know in me um and my confidence

level. The fact that I've made it this far." Nicole said that although she had not achieved her goal of a 3.5 GPA, she sat at 3.1, and was proud to have it in the 3.0 range. She said that she was also proud that she graduated in four years. She stated,

I am absolutely proud of how far I've come, but I am also very aware and humbled that I didn't get this far on my own. I had support. I had help. There are resources available at UAF that maybe they don't have at other places that I am definitely grateful for.

I asked how Nicole's family felt about her graduation and all around success and I found out that her family was more complicated than I initially thought.

She explained that there were two important women in her life, her mother and her mom, one biological who lived in another area of Alaska and the other who lived in Fairbanks and supported her here. Nicole said that the woman who lived here was technically a cousin, but Nicole called her Mom. Nicole told me about the anger her biological mother expressed when Nicole wanted to attend UAF. According to Nicole, her mother told her it was selfish for her to leave and go to school in Fairbanks because Nicole left her behind and responsible for all the bills. Nicole said her biological mother was not supportive, "Like when I need financial aid stuff, like paperwork, she is not very um, yeah cooperative, so each year when I have to do that..." At this point, Nicole sort of trailed off. I asked how she usually received the information she needed to complete her FAFSA since she was still a dependent. She said her mother eventually sent the necessary materials, but it was a battle, "She'll say that (she's supportive), but then when it comes

around that time in the year, she doesn't really want to do it. She says it's an inconvenience for her. It bothers her.”

After the previous comment, Nicole went back to the original question of how her family felt about her being at UAF and she told me that her brother was proud of her. She said that her brother had the same desire to go to college but chose to stay home and help their mother. I asked if she thought he would ever go back to school, but she said she was unsure because he had a family and more responsibility. Nicole expressed that although her family appeared supportive, they simply did not understand what she was doing at college. One example she gave was telling her mom, here in Fairbanks, about attending summer school and her mom thought she had done something wrong. That, like in high school, summer school meant the student had failed. Although Nicole tried to explain that she had not failed, Nicole said it was hard for her mom to understand. Nicole said that her mom in Fairbanks showed her support by asking questions, and other verbal support, but also, most recently, she gave Nicole money to buy her books.

I ended the interview by asking Nicole if she wanted to add anything else about college or SSS and her experiences here. She ended by saying:

Just that it's known the role that Student Support Services has played in my education and my success here at UAF. I wholeheartedly believe that without this program I wouldn't have made it this far. I am sure it's just a fact. Like I am sure of it.

This comment concluded my interview with Nicole. I thanked her for meeting me and we left the communication department.

4.2 Jamie's Conversational Interview

I interviewed Jamie on Sunday, February 5, 2012. I met Jamie in the communication center conference room. I used the same recording device I used for Nicole's interview the day before, yet the interview was unfortunately lost. When I took my iTouch to the technology department on campus, they informed me that there was no way to retrieve my file; it was simply lost. So, the following are the highlights from my notes. They are obviously grossly incomplete as I assumed I would be able to listen to the interview later.

Jamie met me on Sunday, Super Bowl Sunday. I have known Jamie since summer 2011 when I tutored her and also served as her peer mentor at SSS. When I met Jamie in the Communication department, I explained the procedures of the interview and asked her to sign the informed consent. Jamie is in her mid-30's and is an African-American female. She grew up in Louisiana, but moved to Alaska after her first semester of college. She felt that she needed to get away because she partied too much. Nobody in her family has a college degree. She will graduate first in her family, although her sister was currently working on her degree as well.

Jamie started her degree in business. She worked at UAF for awhile and used her accounting skills, but decided that the track was not for her. She was currently working on a humanities degree, which fit what she wanted and needed much more. Jamie was completing her degree as a single mom. Although she said there were challenges with being a single mom, she enjoyed her classes and said that she found professors approachable in most situations.

Jamie qualifies for SSS as a first generation, limited income student. SSS helped Jamie by providing her the opportunity to use tutoring, peer mentoring, math help with the math coordinator and advising with her assigned advisor at SSS. Before joining SSS, Jamie said she was always satisfied with completing the bare minimum and found gratification with “C” grades, but she said the staff at SSS encouraged her to do better and in the fall 2011 semester, she received her first “A”. According to Jamie, if it were not for SSS, she would not be in college. She was confident that she would have given up. Yet, Jamie still strived to complete her degree because she wanted to better her life for both her and her daughter. Jamie did not disclose much about her family.

4.3 Carolyn’s Conversational Interview

I met Carolyn on Thursday, February 9, 2012. We did not meet until later in the evening because of our work and class schedules. We met in the Communication Department conference room. The interview was the first time I met Carolyn. I explained the interview process to Carolyn and asked her to sign the informed consent. I began Carolyn’s interview with some demographic questions. She was a 22-year-old white female. Next, I asked Carolyn to describe the experiences that led her to be in college at UAF. She told me that she had always loved school. She said:

It’s always one of those things I’ve clung on to because I got a lot of satisfaction after working hard and um, more so than anything else I’ve come across, education has always fulfilled me emotionally and really every aspect, which I know sounds cheesy, but um, I just love learning.

Carolyn told me that she particularly loved math and science, which led her to a pursuit in a science degree. Carolyn explained that she spent her first two years of school in a different major, but found that she loved the new major much more because of the tactile aspect. Although she had been at UAF for four years, Carolyn was at junior standing.

I followed up by asking Carolyn if there was something in particular that made her decide that college was the route she wanted to pursue. She told me that her parents were always adamant about her attendance in college. She explained:

I went to, oddly enough, I went to a really intense preparatory school in New England for high school, so a lot of the other kids that I went to school with were you know, they are all in Ivy League schools now.

She continued by stating that she did not feel pressured to attend college, rather, it just seemed like the natural progression from the high school she attended. Carolyn said that her mother had a higher passion for her attendance in college than her father who seemed blasé about the whole ordeal. She told me of her father, “He doesn’t really understand. He’s uh a tool and die maker, so he only has uh like a high school education.” Her mother attended a technical school for nursing. Carolyn stated that one of the main reasons she wanted to pursue her own education was because as she stated, “I don’t really want to spend time doing menial jobs. I want to be not, ‘important’ (using hand quotes), but I wanna do something that is fun and enjoyable, but also challenging.” She stated that she wanted to be fulfilled by her occupation and not live from paycheck to paycheck. Plus, she said that she really wanted to pursue a career.

Because of what Carolyn said about her family, I was interested to hear more, so I asked her where she was from. She said that she was originally from New York. She continued by telling me that even though it was tough for her parents financially, they always put her in private schools, so in New York, she attended Catholic school. This statement occurred after she told me that she went to private school, “Obviously, that was a big deal. Like, education is a really big deal for, particularly my mom, so I was always in private schools even though I was always the poor kid.” She continued with the original question of where she was from, and told me that her mother traveled to Vermont and fell in love with the area, so she attended high school in Vermont. She explained to me that the community that she lived in had open enrollment for any of the schools, so she chose to attend a private school, St. John’s Academy, which was more rigorous than the public school that was in her neighborhood. After high school, Carolyn stated that she decided to move away from family and to come to Fairbanks.

I asked her to expand on why she came to Alaska. She explained that her journey to Alaska was complicated:

I didn’t really have the best home life. And, I appreciate my parents, particularly for all the educational things they gave me, but my mom’s really controlling and my father’s really like behind the scenes, so there was always this really strong dynamic... I think my mom has undiagnosed bipolar disorder.

Carolyn explained that people in her mother’s life tried to help her to seek medical help, mainly because of the strain it put on relationships, but she always refused. Carolyn alleged that her mother did some really strange things, like even though education

seemed important to her, Carolyn said that her mother set roadblocks in Carolyn's educational success. For example, during summer semester, 2011, right before the final, Carolyn found out that her FAFSA was incomplete. She explained, "Essentially what she had done was she chose not to give the signature on the FAFSA, so I lost all my financial aid for last semester." Carolyn indicated that she was thankful that during spring 2012 semester, she was able to manage money, but her mother made the fall 2011 semester quite difficult.

I asked Carolyn if she talked to her mother about this situation. She said that she tried when her mom came to stay with her last summer, but she would not acknowledge that it had happened or that it was an issue. Carolyn detailed that her mother had done this to her multiple times with the FAFSA and even though Carolyn found it frustrating and difficult, she believed that her mother would never change, so she took matters into her own hands. She said:

It's really frustrating for me. That's actually why my boyfriend and I got married. Like, we didn't actually have a ceremony. Actually we got married on paper, uh, this September 9th I think it was. And it was just to make sure that this FAFSA period coming up um, that I would be able to access the tax information that I needed.

Carolyn moved back to the topic of her mother, and explained her behavior:

I know she means well in many ways, but since she doesn't have the college background and she doesn't realize, especially with my major, how difficult it is to keep everything in track. And I don't think she fully understands and my father

definitely, um, he doesn't understand either, um, he's kinda really far removed from the whole paperwork thing.

I wanted to find out more about Carolyn's parents, so I asked about their marital status. She specified that her parents were married and until last year they always lived together, but at the time of our interview, her mom lived in Maine with Carolyn's sister, who attended college, as well as Carolyn's 14-year-old sister. Her father still lived in the house in Vermont. She explained:

They're not like legally separated. On paper, they're married, but they don't really live together right now. I think my parents they love each other, but just, they both, especially my mom, is very destructive with her illness. It's very difficult on him and he's very introverted and he's kind of socially awkward and quiet, and subdued.

Carolyn said that her father did not get involved with the paperwork or the finances because he found it difficult. Because of this, plus her mom's undiagnosed bi-polar, Carolyn said that she believed that her parents did not lack any love for one another, but that they just did not work well as a couple.

After talking about her family, I moved the conversation toward school asking Carolyn to tell me about her experiences with professors and advisors. When she first arrived at UAF, Carolyn stated that she despised her major. She said that she was unsure why she was treated poorly in her hard science major department, but contemplated that it could have been because she was female, or out-of-state, or maybe because she did not have a stellar academic record, but whatever the reason, Carolyn said that she felt that her

treatment was unjustified. She went on to explain that her first semester at UAF was good. She struggled in calculus, but got A's in pretty much everything else, but she said that during her second semester her mother started acting strangely:

My mom started, I guess she might have been drinking or something was going on, and she started doing really bizarre, psychological things. Calling me and saying really bizarre things and I emotionally admit that I should've went to the health center or something, but I was a freshman. I didn't really know where to turn or what to do. No one was really watching me, which I realize is part of the college experience. So, I did not do well that second semester and then my second year when I talked to my advisor again, he was absolutely not interested in dealing with me again.

I asked if she explained the situation to him. She clarified that she was forced to disclose what had happened because she chose to do a late withdraw from her classes based on the situation which had occurred with her mother during the semester. She had decided to see a counselor in light of the situation and had a letter supporting her total withdrawal in order to prevent her GPA from being ruined as well as hurting her chances of receiving financial aid. She told me:

He was one of the people who had to read the letter, which was uncomfortable for both of us, I believe. And he once again, I don't know if it's because I am female or because of that element is sort of like ignored in those sort of disciplines, like the personal aspect. But, he definitely was *not* interested in like hearing any of that stuff.

She said that she felt that all her teachers in her first major department felt uncomfortable with the situation.

Next, we discussed her interactions with her professors. Carolyn said that she felt that her interactions with her teachers were mainly positive, but since she moved to the new department, she discovered she loved her professors. She declared that the professors in the new department treated her differently than her advisor in her initial major department. She explained that her new professors treat her with respect and patience:

For example, I had to retake (a class), and the person I am retaking it with doesn't judge me, or at least facially doesn't recognize, you know? I ask him questions, (and) he's calm. He's smiling. I don't feel judged or anything like that and I think that's important. That's personally really important to me because it is an inner personal dynamic that can become really uncomfortable.

Carolyn told me that overall she felt comfortable approaching her teachers as well as speaking with them, although there were some teachers with whom she did not identify. She admitted that if she did not identify with the teacher, she sometimes found it easier to just study from the book rather than to receive help from the teacher. She stated, "I feel comfortable, um. I will admit that I don't go to office hours very often, like, I'll go occasionally, if I have a homework question, but I generally like to do my work by myself." I asked if anything else prevented her from visiting professors during office hours, but she assured me that she was 100% comfortable with her teachers in her new department.

Now that I knew about her experiences with advisors and professors, I wanted to know about Carolyn's experience with financial aid. She told me that it has been "really hot and cold." She then gave me the following example to illustrate the major issue that she had with financial aid:

One of my major, major, major issues with financial aid that occurred was last semester. I talked to one of the advisors and I really like her and I don't think she's a bad person or anything, but ... before my boyfriend and I decided to legally get married on paper, she told me, 'If you get married on paper, we can change the FAFSA for this year.' And then, after I went and got married, I went back and they were like, 'oh, that's not true.' So, I had, you know, spent all this time and effort doing the paperwork for the marriage license and then it turns out that they hadn't... I know she didn't like lie to me intentionally, but it's one of those things, where I was like, oh shit.

The other issue that Carolyn had with Financial Aid was that she did not believe she received a sufficient amount of aid. She told me that when she lived on campus, it seemed to be enough, but when she moved off campus, the money seemed insufficient. After her marriage, her husband provided some of the funds to help pay the bills. In the past, her parents helped her financially as well. "I get a few hundred bucks here and there. Sporadically. For example, there's a textbook. It's a 200 dollar textbook and I had to buy it and um, I did ask my mom to buy that." She acknowledged that she did not usually ask her parents because of the strain in their relationship. She would rather suffer than ask her mom for money.

The next topic I wanted to cover dealt with Student Support Services. Carolyn said that she joined SSS during the spring semester 2011 and qualified for the program as a first generation college student. Through the program, she utilized tutoring, but found that she preferred to work through the problems on her own. She also used advising in the program, which she stated that she loved and it was great. I asked her to elaborate. She explained that because of the changes in the department with newly hired staff, Carolyn transitioned between a couple of different advisors, but she really enjoyed her new, more permanent advisor. She told me:

I really liked going through Student Support Services because all of the little ugly things on my transcript. I knew they weren't going to be like, 'Wow, she's an idiot.' Because, that's sometimes how I feel because I had a bad experience with another advisor, like, I don't want to go and deal with that crap.

With her current advisor, Carolyn checked in weekly, which helped her stay on track academically. She said it helped immensely. Although the check-ins started in an academic nature, Carolyn admitted that they covered a wide range of areas including social issues that she dealt with in a club in which she participated. She expressed her appreciation for her advisor's ear because she felt the topic too sensitive to talk about with girlfriends. She said her advisor gave a different perspective on the issue.

Sometimes Carolyn and her advisor discussed her family, but their influences were not as strong during the semester of our interview.

I asked Carolyn, "how do you think your college experience would be different if you didn't have SSS?" She replied, "Oh, I don't, I can honestly, I wouldn't, I don't know

if I would be sitting here with you.” She expressed that the main reason she felt this way was because of a new rule passed through Financial Aid fall semester 2011, which prevented students from qualifying for aid if their GPA dropped below a 2.0 for two consecutive semesters. Carolyn explained that because of the family situation that she mentioned earlier in the interview, she struggled to keep her GPA above the 2.0, so her academic position put her in a place to potentially lose her aid. Two advisors from SSS advocated for Carolyn to help ensure her continuance at UAF. Carolyn said that without the help, she would not want to be at UAF. Carolyn stated that this support from the advisors as well as her classes, which were going well made her feel hopeful about her future. She stated, “It sounds really cheesy, but I am really happy I am part of the program because it would’ve been a nightmare and I know for a fact if I were dealing with my department advisor, I don’t know if…” At that point, Carolyn sort of muttered a few words and then changed the subject. She acknowledged that without the help of her advisor at SSS she probably would have been kicked out of her program, which would have put a lot of stress on both her and her husband. Speaking about her advisor at SSS and the program in general, she stated, “I am really glad they helped me out because I really don’t think anyone else would’ve.”

When I asked Carolyn about her experiences as a first generation college student, she said that she believed that it affected her experience at UAF because her parents experienced confusion about what happened at the University and in her major department. She explained that her degree demanded a lot, yet her parents struggled to understand why she did not work to help pay her way through school. She said that her

parents had unrealistic expectations about her life at college. Carolyn expressed concern about her parents' misconception of college because it caused her to rely on graduate students as well as the TRiO program to help her negotiate through college.

At the end of the interview, I asked Carolyn if she wanted to add anything else, she told me:

I am really, super, incredibly thankful that um they're (SSS) there for advising... I am really glad to know that if something does happen, I can go and I can talk to my advisor comfortably and just be like, listen, I need to switch out of this class. This guy's crazy, or whatever, and she'll you know listen and won't laugh at me cuz, like I said, former advisors were total assholes. I am really happy I am part of the program and I do appreciate it.

After this comment I ended the interview by thanking Carolyn for her participation and encouraged her to contact me if she had any further questions or comments.

4.4 Robert's Conversational Interview

Robert and I met on Tuesday, February 21, 2012 in the evening. We met in the speaking center located within the communication department. I explained the process of the interview to Robert and asked him to sign the informed consent. I have known Robert since October when I began working full time at SSS. I knew him well enough to engage in small talk, but that was about all. I began the interview with demographic information. Robert was 29.5 years old and considered his race to be Hispanic and Asian.

When asked what brought him to college at UAF, he told me that he began considering college about a year ago because of his work at Ft. Wainwright and he found

that the money he made did not cover the expenses of his family. He stated, “I got frustrated as far as jobs and not making enough money and I was kind of ashamed of myself.” He explained that because he had been enlisted, the GI bill could pay for his school, so he quit his job and came to school full time.

Robert replied next to a question about his family and their reaction to his choice to attend college. He said that his wife was pretty ecstatic that he was attending college and his mother was glad that he “finally” decided to go back to school because his two brothers, aged 22, graduated from two separate universities in Florida within the last year. According to Robert, this was why his mother said, “finally”. Although his mother wanted him to go to college for a long time, he chose to join the army instead. When I asked him why he joined the army, he told me to make his mother mad, but then added that he wanted to get away. He told me about his father who passed away right around his high school graduation and how he felt that life sucked and he needed to get away. He was gone for six years; from the time he was 18 until he was 25. He explained that the day after he graduated from high school, he went to the recruiting office and a month later he was gone.

Robert next told me a little bit more about his family. He believed that his mother had the equivalency of a high school diploma, but he was not positive because she was an immigrant to the United States. He came here when he was six years old. He illuminated that although his parents tried to move to Southern California starting in the late 1970s, they found it difficult to complete the paperwork, so Robert was born in Columbia and in 1988, his family finally made their way to the United States. He believed that they chose

to come to America because of the opportunities that presented themselves here. When I asked Robert to elaborate on why his parents came to America, he told me:

It's not really proper of me to ask that of my parents. We don't really talk about that. I could ask, but I am not going to get an answer. It's not very open, with stuff like that, with adults.

I moved the conversation back to Robert's mother, asking why he believed she so badly wanted him to attend college. He believed that her motivation was rooted in the idea that college means stability and security. He stated, "You can have anything you want with a college education."

It seemed to me, based on his shortened answers and body language that Robert did not feel overly comfortable telling me about his family, so I changed the topic of conversation to his school experiences, specifically his interactions with his teachers. For Robert, his teachers were "surprisingly understanding." He expressed that he had come into college believing that the teachers would not understand him or cut him any leniency, but he discovered that his teachers cared and cut him slack when his daughter was sick. He explained that she fell ill a few times fall semester 2011 and because his wife worked full time, Robert had the responsibility to go home and take care of their daughter. He entered college believing that his family may have to suffer because of his studies, but has found that this has not been the case. He explained, "That's kinda what keeps me here. It's the fact that I am not being pushed one way or another." He did not feel forced to choose between his family and school, but he admitted that if he had to

choose, his family came first. He said that even with his personality, which he described as “abrasive, very impulsive”, he had not had any issues with his professors.

During our interview, Robert was in his second year of college and majoring in the humanities. He hoped to work in an area that would allow him to help out fellow veterans. He told me, “they can have a much better transition, and a better, just a much better experience when they’re done because most service members don’t know what to do when they’re done.” Robert explained that this help gave the veterans something to look forward to once they came home from their service. Many of the veterans suffered from PTSD. Robert also suffered when he returned from his deployment. He admitted that he found it hard to return to society; he felt like he had nowhere to go and that resources to help him were limited. He explained that he wanted to make the experience more positive for other veterans. He said that this type of help ensured that families did not break apart because of the lack of understanding from the family who remained at home. He said that often veterans had a hard time expressing their feelings and dealing with the memories while their spouses and other family members did not know what to do, so distance forms in the family’s relationships. He elaborated:

What I want to do is kinda bridge that and say hey, here’s what’s wrong with him. Here’s what I am going to do for him. Here’s what he’s going to do, this is what you’re going to do, and then of course too, to get an education because a lot of them don’t really have that.

He said that many veterans did not understand how to take advantage of their GI Bills and Robert hoped to help them make that transition to college as well. He believed that

his experience would help veterans believe that they also could make the transition.

Robert clarified that once he finished his degree, he wanted to obtain a full time job so his wife can attend school. He hoped that with his daughter being a little older, the stress on his family would decrease. He said that he anticipated his daughter's attendance in college, even though she was having some trouble with learning at school. At this point, I thought that Robert appeared uncomfortable with the conversation, so I switched the topic to SSS.

Robert joined the program in the summer semester of 2011. He stated that he used tutoring, computers, math help, and advising through the program. He verified that he qualified for the program as a first generation college student. He believed that he may also qualify as limited income, but he was not positive. Robert told me more about his experiences with advising at SSS:

Oh, it was awesome. I mean it was the greatest thing ever. I am in math 103 now. Three months ago I was in developmental math, the lowest level and even before then, I wasn't even anywhere on the scale. Because of math help from the staff, I was able to get on that scale... I took the fast track... and I completely skipped all developmental math and went to math 103. So, for me, it's phenomenal. It's been a God sent.

Another area that Robert mentioned as especially helpful at SSS was the support of other students in the program. He said that it helped him to know that other students within the program faced the same struggles as him. "Just to have someone else to kind of bounce off of and be able to just uh, to like have that fellowship. Not only do I have that with the

staff, but with the other students. It's just wonderful." Robert went on and told me the difference between his peers at SSS and his peers in his classes. He appreciated that his peers at SSS tended to be non-traditional like him, unlike the typical 18-year-old student in his freshman level courses. He told me about the difficulty of having class with younger students, "I am not 18 anymore. So, being in a class full of 18, 19 year olds, it's yeah. We're from two different worlds. Their world is different from mine." He said that he sometimes found it frustrating to deal with these students, mainly because their life experience differed so much from Robert's own life.

The following is a direct excerpt from our interview relating to the impact of SSS on Robert's experience at UAF:

Me: What do you think your experience would be like at UAF if you hadn't found SSS?

Robert: I would've dropped out.

Me: Guaranteed?

Robert: Yes, because it would've been too hard. I would've just given up. And, SSS doesn't let me give up and that's the best thing because I was ready to give up and one of my advisors said, 'no, you're not. I am not going to let you.' I mean, you know, that was great to know that someone is there that actually cares about me graduating... for me to have someone who genuinely cares and wants me to succeed is wonderful. It's genuine. I emphasize on the genuineness because you can say you care, but not really... They really want me to walk down that aisle

and get my degree. So, for me, that's what keeps me here. I mean, for me, that's what I need. Everyone needs that.

Robert moved on and told me about his experiences at UAF as they directly related to him as a first generation college student. He said that although he believed that it probably did affect his education, he believed that the bigger factor resided in his status as a non-traditional student. He said that he felt this non-traditional standing mainly because of his age and family, which made his day-to-day life severely different from the majority of his classmates. He mentioned that some students revolved their whole life around school, whereas Robert went home to a whole other life with different responsibilities. Robert was nervous when he first began classes at UAF because he did not know what to expect. He expected authoritative teachers and an overall terrible experience. He found, however, that his experiences ended up positive and he enjoyed every semester. He reflected on his first semester:

I had to talk myself down a bit to where everything was not such a big deal.

People understand. People here are not just uh, self-absorbed, whatever, elitists that just want to push on whatever ideas and you have to agree.

In the previous section, Robert reflected on the nature of his teachers and their consideration to his lifestyle.

Besides being first generation, Robert was also considered limited income, so I asked him how that affected his college experience. He told me that it "sucks". He and his family made sacrifices for Robert to attend classes. His daughter discontinued her Taekwondo classes. His wife worked on call and her hours had gone down, so they lived

with much less money than previously. Robert and his family lost their time for “fun stuff”, and he and his wife no longer had their “couple time” that occurred before Robert’s return to college. I asked him if he ever considered quitting school and returning to the work force. He told me that after he failed his math test, that was how he felt. Failure proved difficult for Robert, which he blamed on his background. He told me:

It’s hard for me to identify because I am half of two things. You know on this side, my mom’s Hispanic and my dad’s Asian, so I am exactly half this, half that, so I was raised according to both cultures.

I asked him again if he considered quitting school, but he said his wife provided a positive support system for him, and encouraged him to continue. He said that his brothers provided support for him on his college endeavor. Robert’s brothers and family viewed him as a hero, a type of superman, but not for his college experiences, rather, the commitment he made to his country by being a soldier. He said that he did not feel that was enough:

And now the experiences that I’ve had and surviving a tour in Iraq and coming back in one piece, I guess you can call it that, and now going to college. I’ve been to so many places around the world, so I am kinda like...bigger than life you know, I am like this legend or whatever. For me, it’s just nothing...Being here, it just blows me away.

He talked about an award he received at the TRiO Day Banquet held in February, 2012 where SSS honored him for maintaining a 4.0 fall semester. Robert said that he felt

surprised to have received the award. At this point, Robert ended the interview saying that he did not have anything else he wanted to add.

4.5 Brian's Conversational Interview

I met Brian in the communication department's conference room on Thursday, February 23 in the evening after I finished work and he completed his classes. Brian and I met each other last summer when I worked with him as his peer mentor helping with organization and time management. I explained the process of the interview to Brian and asked him to sign the informed consent. Brian is a 30-year-old white male from a small town in Alabama. Brian said that he gained many life experiences, which led him to be in college at UAF. He explained that after graduating from high school, he worked as a laborer. He did not enjoy the work, so when he turned 23, he joined the military. He rationalized that after traveling around the world, he could not do much of anything without a college degree. He said, "without a college degree, I would end up finding that, you know, only being able to find a job where I might be able to *survive*, but not *live*. So, that's what brought me to school, to UAF." He stated that he started in the diesel program and earned a certificate, but when he started applying for jobs, he found that he didn't have enough experience. He found that employers also did not like that he only had a certificate and not a degree.

When I asked him about when he decided to come to school, he told me that it happened after he returned from his deployment with the military. He had nine months left in the army, so he looked for jobs and found that without a degree, it proved too

difficult to find work. Also, he said that he looked at the men in his family, specifically his father and grandfather neither of whom had their degrees:

My grandfather's 76 years old and is still working. My dad's 56 and has not much in the way of a retirement setup. I know by the time I am retirement age, there won't be social security so I need to plan ahead. So, I need to get a job that will allow me to save money, so that when I turn 70 plus...I'll be able to retire and do things I want to do.

When he struck out in the job market and looked at his own family, Brian stated his realization that college presented the best choice for his long-term goals.

Brian chose to earn his degree in an area that would hopefully make it easy to obtain a job after graduation. During the spring 2012 semester, he said that he took sophomore level courses in his major, but decided to take his time in earning his degree because, "being a student is a very difficult thing." Brian expressed that school proved difficult for him because of the age difference between him and, "90% of the students." He also noted that he aged older than many of his teachers in his freshman level courses. He elaborated, "Not that that's a bad thing, it's just a difficult thing to understand, er, to get used to, you know? The person teaching me is younger than me." Brian regarded college as difficult because his grandparents and parents did not have their degrees, so they did not understand the difficulties Brian faced. He emphasized the difficulty of coming back to school after being out of the academic pipeline for ten years. He explained:

It made it very, very difficult to come back. Especially, like the math, uh, the math hasn't changed any, but it uh, if you take a break from it, it's impossible you know. If you take any break from it, you pretty much have to step back on that horse from the beginning.

He stated that his other subjects seemed easier for him except that professors expected the majority of homework be done on the computer and submitted online. He said that working on the computer brought new difficulties because of the easy distraction of surfing the Internet. Brian explained that because he worked jobs that did not require much technology, he learned quite a bit about computers upon returning to school. He complained that his younger classmates held an advantage in this area because they grew up with this technology.

Brian expressed his discouragement when he first started at the University because he felt that his 100 level teachers did not care about him as an individual and only arrived to teach to receive their paycheck:

(It) doesn't matter if you have two or three good students who are trying to pay attention, they (the teachers) just kinda talk at you, not with you. That was the most frustrating portion of my first couple of weeks of school because I am a human being. I am trying to learn and all these kids whose mom and dad are saying, 'oh, you're going to college' that don't want to be in class, talking, carrying on conversations, is *annoying*.

According to Brian, this behavior from students and professors made him want to walk away from the whole college experience. When I asked him why he did not just walk

away, he told me that this was his dream. He always wanted to live in Alaska. He always wanted to attend college. When he was in the military, they taught him that he could do anything he put his mind to, so he should not give up. He stated, “And knowing that I have the ability to improve myself... the fact that I am trying, to me, it means more than any job I could get right now.” He also said he wanted to provide a good role model for his sister and his younger cousins:

They look up to me. They’ve followed me everywhere I’ve been, Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan... And I feel that I owe it to them to be able to set the example that, yeah, school may not be your thing, but it’s something you have to do.

Brian said that he believed that with his role modeling as well as his uncles’ educations, his cousins would attend college when they reached the appropriate age.

Brian told me that at the time of our interview, he planned to graduate in two years. When I asked him about his ultimate goal upon graduation, he told me, “I don’t want to find a job. I want to find a life.” He hoped to get in with a large company like Alyeska or Conoco Phillips. He emphatically stated that he did not want to sit behind a desk all day, rather, he hoped to get his hands dirty, to be a “working boss”. He expressed that he wanted to transition easily from working with the entry level employees to sitting in a suit at a board meeting. He realized that when he begins his first job out of college he will struggle and make mistakes, but he knew that he would learn and hoped to find his niche.

I asked Brian to reflect on the experiences that he has had with his teachers at UAF. He said that the majority of his teachers understood him and appeared competent.

He expressed gratitude for the professors who made time to see him outside of class and gave him the extra help he needed. He had two professors who came into class and lectured, and did not interact with the students. They did not answer questions and seemed to care only about the subject. Based on those experiences, Brian talked to his peers before registering for classes to make sure he took classes from teachers who had the reputation of expressing kindness to students. Brian explained that his best teachers come from his developmental level courses. He continued by saying that other college teachers had their classes set and their classes did not have a limited amount of students. The other teachers covered a lot of material in a smaller amount of time, but the developmental teachers slowed down. He explained:

They understand that you're there because you want to learn. They're willing to take and make extra time for you. They're willing to, you know, if you're not getting something, they'll explain it. And, if you're still not getting it, they'll continue to explain it in ways until you get it... I guess they care enough that they learn your name and they recognize you and they see you around campus and they ask you how you're doing. It's not that you're just a seat number, you're a person... They have a stake in your future.

Besides the developmental level teachers, Brian divulged that his teachers at the CTC expressed more kindness and understanding than his teachers at UAF. He expressed his feelings that the teachers there were nicer because they knew that their students were generally older, plus, they were not just in school because their parents wanted them there. Rather, he explained that those students took time from their busy lives, like a

lunch break, a weekend, an evening, to take a class instead of spending that time with their husband, wife, or kids. He said that he saw the teachers take time from their own weekends and evenings to help their students succeed.

I next asked Brian about his experiences at SSS. He joined the program in the spring semester 2011 and qualified for the program as a first generation college student. Brian told me about the many services he utilized including the DEVM 065 class offered through the program with the math coordinator, which helped him complete his homework in his developmental math class. He has also used advising and attended peer mentoring. He said he liked to study in the tutoring center because it was not as loud and busy as the Wood Center. He also used the tutors to help in math and English. He admitted that the free printing provided convenience on more than one occasion. He continued by explaining that SSS helps with more than just academics:

I use Student Support Services not just for the educational portion, but when I am having a bad day, it's nice to go up to the office and walk in and see everybody. And everyone's always, 99% of the time, in a good mood. It lifts your spirit, puts you in a good mood. For me, that's the biggest help of all. (I'll) be having a horrible day, walk in, (and) everybody's just over nice. They care. The biggest thing is that they care.

When Brian worked with his advisor, he said he felt that the conversation went back and forth rather than the advisor telling him what he should do. With the new staff changes at SSS during fall semester, 2011, Brian received a new advisor who he felt apprehension toward, but after meeting with her a couple of times, he expressed his

confidence in her competence. He said that instead of telling him what to do, she asked him what he wanted and pointed out classes that probably should be taken, but did not force him to take classes he did not feel he ready to tackle. He compared this to his major advisor who did not have such in-depth conversations with him, rather, she told him what classes he needed to take and signed the registration form. It was not so much a conversation. He did not feel that he could handle taking over 12 credits and he appreciated that his advisor at SSS did not push him to take more.

I asked Brian what he thought his college experience would be like without SSS. He said:

I probably would not have, uh, I probably would've dropped out. I probably wouldn't even be in school. I would be frustrated. Not knowing where to turn for help... I probably wouldn't be going for a Bachelor's. I'd be going for an Associate's. A four-year degree? I wouldn't even attempt it without Student Support Services.

Brian told me that he had not really even considered a four-year degree until he found out about SSS, which he felt provided a way for him to achieve his goals. According to Brian, SSS kept him sane and out of academic trouble.

Brian stated that his college experience was affected by the fact that he was a first generation college student because his family did not understand what he was going through. He relied on other students to talk about classes, which helped him realize that he was not the only one struggling or frustrated. He explained about his family:

As much as I love my parents, when it comes to school and the stresses that came with it, they just don't know what it's like. It's nothing against them, they're the last people I'd want to talk to when school's bothering me just because they don't understand... I rely on close friends when I am having a bad class or I am having difficulties dealing with something school related.

Because Brian was a first generation college student, he said he found it difficult to talk to his family, but found comfort in his friends and SSS who helped him navigate the college system. At this point I ended the interview and thanked Brian for his time.

4.6 Elizabeth's Conversational Interview

Elizabeth and I met for the first time during our interview in the communication department conference room on Friday, February 24. Because of busy schedules, the only time we could meet was later on a Friday night. I explained to Elizabeth the way that the interview worked and then had her sign the informed consent. Elizabeth stated that she was 21-years-old and considered herself a white female. I began the interview by asking her about her life experiences that led her to attend college.

Elizabeth began by telling me a bit about her upbringing. She considered her father very successful in terms of money, but said he was a raging alcoholic, which caused him to do his own thing and not put his family as a priority. Her mother dealt with her father through the use of narcotics and eventually became addicted. Elizabeth lived in these conditions until she was eight years old and then she moved in with her grandparents. She stated that she has not spoken to her biological father in nine years, but did have some connection with her mother although she did not consider their

relationship the greatest. Elizabeth explained that because of her dysfunctional family, she constantly tried to get away. She said she knew that the person she was on the inside did not show through when she was around her family. She decided that college would present a place where she could get away from all of the dysfunction and be the person for which she strived.

Elizabeth told me she resided in California and heard about UAF through the National Student Exchange Program. She graduated from high school in 2008 and wanted to attend college out of state. She had a full ride ROTC scholarship to a school in Indiana. She explained that because she had no guidance from her family, she arrived at college and realized that financially, she could not feasibly afford to stay. The scholarship she received did not cover room and board and for an out of state student, the bill was outrageous. Elizabeth continued by telling me that she returned to California and started school. She involved herself in a program called SEES, Science Educational Enhancement Services, which required its students to qualify as low-income. She also explained her involvement in the SSS program in California. When Elizabeth discovered the National Student Exchange, her initial goal was to return to Indiana, but while researching the program, she discovered Alaska as an option. Elizabeth described herself as the type of person who did a lot of research before committing to something. She commented that this resulted from the uninformed decision she made when she went to Indiana. So, she called UAF and did her research to see if this was a place she wanted to come. She expressed that she absolutely loved what UAF had to offer. She moved to Fairbanks in June 2010.

Elizabeth majored in the humanities, which was a recent switch, but she still planned to graduate in fall 2013. Prior to our interview, she had been enrolled in a science program. At this point of the interview, the conversation bounced back to her family and Elizabeth told me that her grandparents did not receive college degrees. Her two brothers, both older, did not have degrees either. She expressed that her brothers were both intelligent and expressed concern about their current situations, yet neither of them had made the transition to attend college.

Next, Elizabeth and I talked about how she paid for college. She told me that through high school she worked two jobs and started saving money for college. She said that she accumulated \$4000 by the time she graduated, which started the payments. She took out loans and received several scholarships and government aid, including the Pell Grant. Through her work with Financial Aid, Elizabeth found them helpful. She told me that the financial aid advisors at UAF treated her much better than the advisors in Indiana. When she went to the financial aid office at her school in Indiana and asked about the \$15,000 bill for housing, they told her that she had two choices, “to pay for it or pack my things and go home. That’s what I was told. That was pretty hard for me to take to say the least. I definitely felt like, I was absolutely crushed.” Although she had poor experiences with financial aid at her previous school, Elizabeth’s experiences at UAF resulted more positively.

Next, Elizabeth and I talked about her experiences with her professors at UAF. She told me:

I really make an effort to get to know my professors because... I view my professors (as) more than just a lecturer in front of the class... They're definitely a resource that is extremely valuable not only with the current curriculum, but with future jobs. Even future courses.

She used an example of one of her teachers in the humanities who took time to talk to her before she even officially declared her major. She explained that she not only loved his philosophy and passion for the field, she appreciated that he took the time to sit down with her and answer all of her questions about what it would be like to pursue a career with the degree. She explained how she looks at classes and professors:

I am not looking at the class as oh, I am in the class for an hour and a half and I am paying \$20 for this time. I am looking at it as, wow, this professor takes the time to help me out, answer all my questions, and provide me the resources I need.

Elizabeth said that her experiences in the science department were different with her professors. Her science professors were concerned with their own research and did not take the time to sit down with her to discuss careers. If she did poorly on a test, they did not talk to her about how she could improve or encourage her to study harder on the next test. When she mentioned the lack of encouragement from her science professors, Elizabeth commented, "And though it's not a requirement, it definitely helps the students' self-esteem and confidence."

I asked Elizabeth if this lack of encouragement was one of the reasons she switched her. She confirmed that it was one of the reasons, but she also felt herself

becoming burnt out. She stated that when she first started the program, she felt passionate and wanted to teach science, but as she progressed through the program, she found the excitement had dissipated. She did not look forward to the assignments and it just started to seem like a lot of work. Instead of feeling excitement, she began to feel bitter toward the end:

I was feeling towards the end a little bitter because after working so hard and dedicating all of my weekend time, I mean every free moment I had, to my science courses and not getting the results I wanted, it was really disturbing to me. I would work equally as hard as most of my classmates, and I remember one of my good friends, she would earn a 95 on an organic chemistry test and...I would still earn my 75%. And, it was just, it was really a bummer, it was definitely a bummer to me.

Because of all this angst and frustration, Elizabeth switched her major during the fall 2011 semester.

She emphasized her personality, which caused her to do a lot of research about the new department. One of the main issues Elizabeth expressed with switching her major was that she felt like she was giving up. She set out with a goal in mind and she did not accomplish that goal. Also, she stated she felt unsure about switching out of hard science to liberal arts. She stood as a junior when she decided to switch, which she felt was late in her college career. During her exploration into her new degree, Elizabeth thought about her own wants in life, including children and financial stability as well as providing a positive role model for her future children. She reflected that the important people in her

own life stood as positive role models and pushed her to do her best. She said that because of this reflection, she decided that the liberal arts degree provided the best choice.

Upon graduation, Elizabeth stated that she hoped to serve her community through a civic job, which would fulfill her personal core values of giving back to her community. Elizabeth told me that in the spring of 2014, following her graduation, she planned to do the Law Enforcement Academy through CTC. After attendance at the academy, if Anchorage is hiring, she would like to join their force, otherwise Elizabeth planned on attending graduate school. She said that she preferred to stay in school and complete graduate school, but it depended on the hiring. Elizabeth said she wanted to go to graduate school for justice or public administration.

Following our discussion on careers, Elizabeth and I discussed SSS. Elizabeth joined SSS at UAF in the fall semester 2011. She had enrolled at the SSS program at her school in California as well, so she explained some of the differences between the two programs. One component that she really liked from the other SSS was a book club where the students would get together and discuss different readings. She really enjoyed the aspect of reading something not required for school as well as the social interaction with people within the program. She said that more activities were available for students to partake in at UAF. There were several different services that Elizabeth said she utilized while being a part of SSS at UAF, which included advising, financial aid, and GRE preparation workshops. She said she loved the tutoring she received at SSS saying that

her tutor was patient and kind. Even when she felt frustrated, the tutor encouraged her and made her feel better about the situation:

He took as much time as was needed to explain every step to me...I feel like he actually got to know me. Not only was he interested in my studies, but he was interested in me as a person...I thought that was really nice.

Elizabeth also stated that she had a good experience with her advisor at SSS who was a little confused by what her actual major was, but after Elizabeth explained her switch from hard science to liberal arts, she said her SSS advisor seemed to support her decision. Elizabeth expressed her gratitude for the support, "I think I needed to hear that reassurance because if you're not feeling confident or not feeling passionate about a certain major, it's okay to switch. So, that was very, very nice to hear." Elizabeth said her advisor at SSS helped her create a plan ahead worksheet, which she had never seen before, but since their meeting, Elizabeth said she went back and made changes and enjoyed having a tangible way of tracking her progress in her degree. Her advisor suggested that they sit down after Elizabeth completed her summer courses and go through her plan again and make sure her progression toward graduation was still accurate. Elizabeth commented that it was nice to have that support system.

I asked Elizabeth what she thought her college experience would be like without SSS. She told me that SSS provided her with a lot of support and that would be gone:

It would, oh gosh. I feel like, I really look at Student Support Services as a very helpful support system, so I definitely wouldn't have that support. It would be more of a financial burden. I mean, most definitely because last semester I needed

so much help with my science class and I mean I think over the course of the semester, I spent about 30 hours with my tutor and um, if you were to break that down with a private tutor, it would be unreasonable. I wouldn't be able to pay for that. So, Student Support Services has opened a lot of doors for me.

Elizabeth continued her explanation of the importance of SSS in terms of family support. Because Elizabeth did not have support from her family, she said that SSS gave her some of that support she needed, "I never had that support group at home or with any type of family member, so I kind of consider Student Support Services as a family member just watching over me and keeping track."

Elizabeth stated that her experiences at college were influenced by the fact that she was a first generation college student. She gave me an example of how she saw this play out:

So, another friend in Organic Chemistry, absolutely brilliant, she's 23-years-old, however, so her, both of her parents have college degrees. Her mother's a nurse and her father's an engineer, so she comes from a college-oriented family, which is a wonderful thing I think. And she still lives at home. She doesn't drive. Her mom makes her, all of her meals, so she's not very independent. But, when it comes to academics, she's very on top of it.

Elizabeth commented on the importance of having parents that have a college education because they understood the time and effort it took to succeed. She continued by telling her own feelings on her friend's situation:

I feel like that's wonderful, but it's just a little unfortunate and I almost felt, I don't think I was feeling jealousy, but I was in a way feeling hurt because I never had that growing up. And I really wished I had that. That support system. I was really craving the support system, just like I could run home to my parents and be like, gosh, today was so stressful and my mom be like, oh don't worry... I realize that that case is probably an exception, but I think it's definitely very helpful to have parents or at least one family member who has gone through the college experience to help guide you along.

Elizabeth reiterated the difference that she thought it made that she was the first in her family to attend college. She ended the interview by mentioning that although she had been through some stressful, unfair situations, she never turned to drugs or alcohol to deal with those stressors.

4.7 Alex's Conversational Interview

Alex and I met in the communication department conference room on Tuesday, February 28 in the evening. Alex and I met during the fall semester 2012. During the time of the interview, we talked on a daily basis and our roles switched between me being his mentor and he being mine on a frequent basis. I knew a lot about Alex academically leading into this interview, but I was curious to know more about his personal experience. We scheduled this interview for the week prior, but he had fallen ill, so we met during this rescheduled time. I explained the format of the interview process and had him sign the informed consent. Alex said he was a 51-year-old male. He described his race as "descendant of the indigenous people of Turtle Island". When I asked what that meant, he

replied, that it meant Native American. I started the interview by asking Alex to explain to me what life experiences brought him to college at UAF.

Alex said he worked on two associates degrees at UAF Rural and had a professor who questioned him about getting a Bachelor's degree, so in fall 2009, he signed up and came back to school. He said that the idea came to him while he was riding a 4-wheeler in rural Alaska:

But that fall, I was riding a 4-wheeler back to the house to pick up tools for a job site...and then I had a brainstorm. That's when I think of something new. I think of every angle for a week and that brainstorm was the actual kicker in coming back to school.

Alex had originally started school in the math and sciences, so he decided to come back to school in that same area. He said that his plan included doing a research fellowship, which he started the summer of 2011 and can continue for 3 more summers. Following these internships, he stated that he wanted to go to graduate school in Colorado. Alex explained that he only lived outside of Alaska during his time in the military, which was from 1981-1983.

I asked Alex why he left school in 2000 and did not return until 2009. He told me that his mother died right before the terrorist attacks in 2001:

I had all the funding. I even received a Doyon grant, but I gave it back. First time, first time someone ever gave it back. My mom was just getting older and she needed help. That's it. End of story.

I tried asking Alex what happened between his mother dying and coming back to school, but he did not really answer me, so I assumed that he did not want to talk about that topic.

I asked Alex about his reasons for seeking a degree. He told me that his original idea was that he would go back to the village and teach. However, he explained that he had an idea that he wanted to prove, but he needed his PhD in order to prove the idea. He explained that his idea was pretty simple, “It has to do with dark matter, dark energy in physics, but the math is all high level.” He said that is why he required the degree to carry forth with his idea. He specified that with the degree, he would obtain the needed accreditation, “If I can get the right research, the data I need to prove these fundamental ideas behind it, pretty much you can derive the universal constants.” He said that after he discovers all of this, he will be the grumpy old man who goes back home to live.

I asked Alex where he was from and he explained that he is from rural Alaska:

My grandfather and grandmother came from one side of the mountain. My mom’s grandparents came from the other side of the mountain. Two different rivers. One was the Bull River and the other Salmon River. And they were both basically Gwich’in, not settlements as you people would say it.

He explained that a settlement consisted of two or three families because that is all that could survive. He said that he was the youngest of eight children, and 22 grandchildren. He described his father as, “a tough old man.” I asked about his siblings. He had one sister and a brother who died in a fire, as well as two younger brothers who died in the rural villages because they lacked access to medical help. He had one brother who still lived and had a family. He said that his brother wished he had his life:

I said it's easy. When they piss you off, open the door, kick 'em, out and don't let them back in EVER, which is my rule. It's just it keeps responsibility in a way, away, not responsibility in terms of studying...it's responsibility I guess, it's toward other people. I deal with people dying and all that and when they're close? No, so I keep them distant.

He admitted that he had children, but asked me not to dwell too long on them because he did not know their location:

It's easier to keep people at a distance. If they kick over then, so then, so what. Don't get me wrong, it's just that I've seen so much it would take a lot to bring somebody that close and it would be...even then, I would probably resist and fight. I don't know. It's a wall. Anyway, enough of that.

I asked Alex about his family's education level and he laughed. He said that his family members would be lucky to have a high school diploma. He told me that he was the only one to join the military, the only one who left the country and saw the world. He mentioned that finally, after all that, out of his family, he alone went to college. When he spoke of his cousins, he told me:

I am the black sheep. All my relatives ask me, when are you going to be done? I tell them, when I am done. When I am finished. But my cousins, they tease me. Geeze, you're always in school. When are you going to be done? I told them, someday, I am going to walk by and you're going to say, That's my cousin!

That's my cousin! And I am going to turn around and say, who the hell are you?

He said that after being away for so long, when he went back to the bush, he stumbled.

Alex explained to me that his difficulty in college is English. When I asked him why, he explained that there are simply too many definitions, “One is what the dictionary says, but the other is what we mean. What the instructor means.” During the time of the interview, Alex was enrolled in a math class and expressed that the language difference proved to be an exceptionally difficult issue because he and the instructor had very different definitions about what words meant. He gave me an example from his class where the teacher looked for a very specific definition and the definition that Alex understood simply did not make sense in the situation, so he failed his assignments. Because of this issue, Alex confronted his teacher and asked why he did not do well on the assignment and it appeared to Alex that it was an issue of misunderstanding, which the teacher did not admit any sort of fault. The teacher did not allow Alex to redo the assignment because he did not believe that the language issue could be the only problem.

When I asked Alex if he had any bad experiences with his teachers, he initially answered no, but also admitted that math professors are full of themselves. He liked his other science professors better because, “they understand the complexity of nature and there’s deviation and change. Nothing’s the same. Math, a bunch of logic statisticians, everything is precise, exact. No deviation, so they’re full of themselves.” Because Alex mentioned that he had trouble with the language itself, I asked him if he believed that his trouble with the math professors stemmed from a difference of cultures. Alex said he believed that we are all in the same culture as we all speak English, but to add in the Native component changed things a bit. He went back to the example he gave about his math paper where the teacher asked him to “display” his answer and he was confused

about the meaning. He explained that there were simple nuances in the different usage of words between the culture he grew up in and the culture he dealt with at the University.

Next, Alex and I moved on to discuss Student Support Services, which he joined in Fall 2011. Alex explained that in the fall, he appealed his Financial Aid because he had reached the 150% maximum of receiving funds from financial aid. Basically, he had too many credits and no degree, so he had to prove to financial aid that he was going to make progress. Prior to fall semester, Alex said he had worked with Interior Aleutians Campus and they suggested that Alex utilize his resources at SSS. He stated that he knew he had support from both SSS and Interior Aleutians, yet he could not move past the fact that he had classes he struggled to pass and his professors did not help in the situation.

According to Alex, part of the agreement made with his financial aid appeal was that he would only take one math and one physics class, which frustrated Alex because he then filled up his schedule with classes that he did not need because he already completed his core courses. Because Alex wanted to finish his degree as soon as possible and needed support, he decided to join SSS.

Alex qualified for SSS as a first generation college student. As far as services that he used, Alex noted in a joking voice that he came by simply to bug me and the other staff members at SSS, but then he stated more seriously, "They keep me occupied. Actually, I use the computer, printer, copier. Sometimes I use the telephone because I run out of minutes and need to call home." Some shortfalls of SSS according to Alex include his advancement in his courses. The available tutors cannot help him. Also, he needed help in specific GRE courses, but SSS only offered workshops dealing with the general

GRE. Alex told me that he liked the advising at SSS because he went to his advisor with a full blown idea in his head, but he talked through it with his advisor, got feedback, and collaborated on new ideas. He said it was a good place to bounce around ideas.

I finally asked Alex about his experiences at college as a first generation college student as well as how his college career would be affected if he did not have SSS. Alex said that his parents did not have an education past the fifth grade, so they were unable to help him with studying in any way. He pointed out that they did *teach* him a lot, but it was in the way of subsistence, not college education skills. He said of first generation college students, “So yeah, I think it’s different. First generation, we’re all alone. Nobody likes us. Kick the dog while we’re down.” When I asked Alex if he wanted to add anything else, he declined so we finished the interview at that point.

4.8 Emily’s Conversational Interview

I met Emily in the communication department conference room on Tuesday, February 28 later in the evening, after meeting with Alex. I have known Emily since fall 2010. I knew her from being in the office with her when I tutored for SSS. She was very outgoing, so she approached me several times while I tutored. We had some informal advising, but that was our only professional interaction. I explained the interview process to Emily and had her sign the informed consent. Emily and I started by discussing demographics. She described herself as a 32-year-old Hispanic female.

I next asked Emily to tell about her life experiences that led her to be a college student. Emily always wanted to attend college. She was first generation American, so she found that her parents understood the process of applying for college in their own

country, but in the United States, it became a completely foreign process. She stated that her parents told her she needed to go to college, but they did not know how to help her actually get into college. She said she did not know about things like completing the FAFSA, so assumed she would have to save up a ton of money before attending college. Because of this notion, Emily explained her decision to join the Air Force for five years at which time she obtained eligibility for the GI bill. She joined the Air Force about six months after graduating from high school and did not tell her mother about it. In fact, she told me a story about how she called from the airport and told her mom to meet her in Texas in six weeks when she finished basic training. She said that her mother was very angry with her, but she felt it worth the strain because that experience is now paying for college.

Emily told me that her family did not particularly like that she moved to Alaska because the rest of her family remained in Los Angeles and her mother did not see Emily's children often enough, "Like all of my cousins and sisters, and everyone, they live within a 50 mile radius of my grandma. And I don't. And they don't like that at all." Emily explained that she is the only girl who left the area and the boys who left all made their way back home. Emily told me about her three young children. Emily said that it's hard to be in school with three children:

I've got a really big problem with spreading myself too thin and then I'll miss my kids a lot. I drag them up here with me for SYF or you know, anything, I'll drag them up here with me and they hate it, but, like, I miss them too much. So, I'll go

out of my way and go pick them up... and be in a meeting here within an hour. So, yeah, that's the hardest part is missing them.

I next moved from family to UAF. During the interview, it was Emily's third year at UAF. Before UAF, she said she earned college credit through her involvement with the Air Force, which was how she obtained her Associate's Degree. Emily stated that she planned to graduate in May, 2012. She expressed her excitement for the completion of school. During our interview, Emily had sought employment for when she finished school, but she ultimately wanted to attend graduate school. She said that graduate school was an awful idea because of how much she already missed her children. With graduate school, she would work a full time job and take classes in the evening, meaning she would miss spending time with them and tucking them into bed. She said that if she did not attend graduate school, then her husband would use his GI bill to complete school. He also was a first generation college student, but Emily said that his shy nature would prevent his usage of SSS.

Emily and I talked about the teachers she had at UAF and her interactions with those teachers. Emily described her interactions with her teachers as mostly positive, in fact, she said that it was easy for her to move into the area of friendship with her teachers and she remained friends with them after the class ended. She did tell me about a professor that she had that made her cry on a weekly basis. Emily said that she's "not emotional like that." What frustrated Emily the most about this particular instructor was that she constantly dismissed what Emily had to say. The class was set up that the

students, in order to earn a grade, were supposed to openly express their opinions, yet every time that Emily tried, the teacher would not listen:

She didn't want to hear my opinion. She didn't want to hear anything I had to say. She'd cut me off. 'No, you're wrong.' You know, just the rudest person I'd ever met. And, she held my grade in her hands. And, that's what upset me. The fact that this person, she doesn't care about anything I have to say. My opinion doesn't mean anything.

Emily said she struggled through the class and did pass, but felt disappointment that she did not receive a better grade in the course. She described another professor that she struggled approaching, but this instance stemmed from the instructor's intelligence rather than his personality. She referred to his office as "The Lion's Den" because she said she felt intimidated to go see him, but she still attended office hours in order to have ideas and concepts explained to her. I mentioned that I thought it was neat that she was able to build such strong relationships with her teachers, even the ones that she found to be intimidating and she told me that she thought that the main reason for this behavior came from her advisor at SSS who pushed her and challenged her to approach her teachers.

Emily confirmed that she joined SSS in 2009, her first year at UAF. She qualified for the program as limited income and as a first generation college student. During her time with SSS, she stated that she utilized the computers and the printing as well as the advising offered through the program. Emily said that it was important for her to use all the resources she had available, so when it came time for her to register for classes, she first met with her major advisor. Immediately, after she met with her major advisor, she

set up an appointment to meet with her SSS advisor. Finally, Emily stated that she met with her Veteran's Affairs advisor. She said that all of these opinions helped her to make sure that she did not miss any classes during her college career. Besides scheduling her classes, Emily identified that she sought advice from her SSS advisor in different situations including when she dealt with the difficult professor that she mentioned earlier:

I needed a lot of guidance because I didn't know what the proper steps were. I didn't know about retaliation, if there would be any. So, I definitely went and sought my advisor's advice for that. I mean, I ask for advice when it comes to anything. I don't wanna make the wrong move. Like, I want to graduate on time.

She said that she felt comfortable talking to her SSS advisor about anything academic.

I next asked Emily what she thought her college experience would be like if she did not have SSS to help her. She admitted that it would be much harder. Since beginning school, Emily said she has not had a steady job. She worked temporary positions, but mainly focused on school. Because of this, Emily mentioned that money was tight in her household:

So, there have been plenty of Christmases where I haven't had enough money to buy a turkey or anything like that. And my SSS advisor has told me about those things (food boxes provided by SSS)... So, every single year since I've been in school and mind you before I came back to school, my husband and I made decent money... and then I came back to school, and it's hard to pay our bills... We'd be living off beans and I don't want my kids to go through the things I had to go through as a kid... With those food boxes, you should see it. I come

home and I am like, look what we got, and the kids are so excited... Seeing them so happy, it's awesome! I am very, very grateful for that.

To me, this seemed like a phenomenal sacrifice, so I asked her if she felt that her efforts were worth the outcome:

I sure hope so. I sure hope so. Yeah. I am really hoping that it is. I think that's why I am pushing for my master's. Can you imagine how much more money I can make? We've already made it through the worst, so we can make it through anything.

Emily said that as she contemplated continuing her education and the continued sacrifices she and her family would have to make, her husband was supportive of whatever she chose to do. She said that she is lucky to have that kind of support and if her father had supported her mother in a similar manner, she may have finished her degree too. Emily next told me about her four sisters. One had a certificate, one had an associate's degree, and one other sister was working on her bachelor's. It had become sort of a competition for Emily and her sister to see which one finished their degree first. Emily told me about how she was able to talk to her sister about the difficulties of completing a degree because her sister was also a senior and had two children of her own.

I asked Emily about her experience as a first generation college student.

According to Emily, the difference between her and students who are not first generation was that she wanted a degree so badly where other students seemed blasé about whether they completed their degree or not. She gave the following example:

Like, I was talking to one of my friends about that today. His dad put himself through school. He got a master's, you know? Like, he put himself through school. And when he (the friend) was in high school, he didn't care about going to college. And I am like, how do you not care about going to college? That's all I've ever wanted. He's here at school because his dad convinced him somehow. And I am like, *what?* I wish I had someone trying to convince me instead of me having to go through all that.

Emily moved on to talk about her experience with financial aid, which has been very positive. Like her teachers, Emily said she easily built relationships with the financial aid advisors. She had a step-daughter who planned to attend college, so she worked with financial aid in order to help her step-daughter. Finally, I asked Emily if there was anything else she wanted to add to the interview. She finished by saying:

Well, I think that Student Support Services has opened a lot of doors for me because I wouldn't have known about like (different programs)... They've opened up a ton of doors. I wouldn't have been able to pass calculus without tutoring... I think they're the best program... You made it so much easier for me. So much easier. I love it!

I thanked Emily for her time and we ended the interview.

4.9 Samantha's Conversational Interview

I met Samantha in the communication department on Friday, March 2 in the evening. I had initially thought that I could meet with her in the conference room like the other interviews, but I could not find anyone to unlock it for me. Because everyone

appeared to be gone for the day, we met in the main part of the communication department as nobody could hear our conversation. I have known Samantha since the fall semester of 2011. Samantha was a fairly new participant and I felt unsure that she would have much to contribute to the interview, but she said that she could speak on the importance of SSS, so I decided to interview her anyway. This was probably my shortest interview because Samantha did not elaborate much on her answers. I explained the interview process to Samantha and asked her to sign the informed consent.

Samantha told me she was a 28-year-old white female. She wanted to attend college for a long time, but always felt intimidated by the cost to attend college. When she married her husband, she realized that through him, she was eligible for different GI Bills, which assisted in paying for her education. Because the GI Bill paid for tuition, books, and even a stipend for housing, Samantha stated that no excuses stood in her way of pursuing her education. She said she started taking classes in Fall 2009 in Alabama and then transferred to UAF during the fall 2011 semester. Samantha's mother attended college for awhile when she was younger, but never obtained a degree. She mentioned that her mother was supportive of her being in school. Her husband showed support too, but during our interview, he was deployed. I asked her what it was like attending school with the stress of having her husband gone. She said, "it's been stressful, definitely, but it actually has almost been good in some ways because I've been taking on really heavy course loads the last couple of semesters, so I don't have the responsibilities I normally would." Samantha planned to graduate in Spring 2014, but only if she went full time as well as a couple of classes during the summer.

Samantha stated that her graduation will not be from UAF, however, her and her husband planned to move to Washington, but she hoped to finish her education there. Samantha chose her major in science, and even though she had not checked on the transfer of credits, she assumed they would transfer with no issue. I asked about her initial plans for post-graduation. She stated:

Well, when I was wanting to get into the ROTC program, I was hoping I could do that and then graduate from college and commission into the army and then submit a packet to go to PA school, which is in Texas actually. So that way I would be getting paid well and going to school for free. I would have a 6-year commitment to the army, but I would be able to leave with all this education for free and have money in my pocket. So, that's what I was hoping to do, and I am still exploring other options, like the reserves or something like that.

She was unable to join the ROTC program in Washington because they had limited spots, which were already filled.

Our conversation next moved to the interaction of Samantha with her teachers. She said that her interactions were mainly positive, but she struggled in math and her math teachers caused some conflict:

I feel like math teachers are really kinda interested in either math majors or engineers or people who are really math minded and I don't feel like the math curriculum is at all geared towards people who are (science) majors or who are in majors that still require that math, but maybe just not as extensive. So, you know,

there's kind of a disconnect where I don't feel like I, I like my other teachers I guess.

Samantha said that she did not go talk to her math teachers when she faced a difficult math problem. She said this struggle stemmed from an experience where she tried to go talk to her math teacher during his posted office hours and he acted inconvenienced by her presence. She felt like she could approach a TA or a tutor though. The classes that Samantha said she particularly liked were the core classes, which she assumed would be terribly boring but it turned out that she was not bored, but enjoyed the class and teacher. This happened on a couple of occasions. Other classes that she liked, especially in her major department, she enjoyed because of the teaching style and enthusiasm of the teacher.

Samantha joined Student Support Services about half way through the fall semester 2011. She qualified as a first generation college student. When I asked if she thought that being first generation affected her college experience, she said she was not sure:

I mean, I don't know. Probably, just like the fact that I started college so late is probably related to that. Just cuz, I had a single mom and she had to work two jobs and stuff. And, I've always been really aware of like bills that needed to be paid and budgeting and stuff like that. My mom always wanted me to do well and go to college. It wasn't ever something where she said, you *are* going to go to college, because, who's going to pay for that?

Samantha said her mother talked to her about college growing up, but Samantha admitted that her mother found more interest in her graduation from high school, which Samantha found difficult. She said that her attitude was much different now because of her age and maturity level. She did not feel that being a non-traditional student affected her college experience except that she sometimes found herself annoyed with the younger students.

I pulled the conversation back to SSS and asked Samantha what services she used, which she said was mainly tutoring. She stated that the tutoring was beneficial to her even though she still struggled in the class. Mainly, she felt that she performed better than if she did not have any tutoring. Samantha had not utilized the advising at SSS, but she did meet with her major advisor. Even though she did not know her name, she felt that the advisor helped and took the time to answer all the questions that Samantha had. When I asked her if there were any other services at SSS that she utilized, she mentioned that both she and her husband felt that it was an injustice that not all students had access to SSS because before her entrance to the program she paid \$25 per hour for her tutoring sessions in math. There were other places on campus to get tutoring, but they were not one-on-one like SSS.

I asked Samantha what her experience at UAF would be like if she did not have SSS and she explained:

I think that I would be repeating trigonometry. And, if I wasn't, for some reason, repeating trigonometry, I think I would be wanting to drop out of my calculus class because I think I would feel like I was drowning and couldn't get above it.

When I asked Samantha if there was anything else that she would like to add, she reluctantly told me about a bad experience that she had with a tutor at SSS. Samantha explained:

(The question) was a little below what we were working on and I was just kinda confused about something and I asked about it and the tutor sort of like did an eyeroll thing and was like, that's 107 level math. It kinda embarrassed me and then it, you know, and then when that happened, you kinda shut down and you're not open to listening and you feel like you've been insulted. And I don't think that the tutor meant it that way, but I think that maybe they were caught off guard that I asked a question I should've known. I wouldn't say it's even a big deal, but people should know that they're coming for tutoring and they feel it's already hard to ask for help, so it's important not to step on their ego. It was only one time and wasn't a big deal.

I apologized to Samantha that this had happened to her and asked if there was anything else she wanted to add. She told me that despite the negative experience, she was glad that SSS was available and it certainly made a difference for her passing her class.

4.10 Mandi's Conversational Interview

I met with Mandi on Saturday, March 3 around noon. A TA let me into the communication department, but she did not have keys to the speaking center, so Mandi and I met in the main area of the communication department. After the TA let me in, she left, so there was nobody in the department, so we conducted the interview in the main area of the department. I have known Mandi since Fall 2010. I never tutored Mandi or

advised her. I only knew her from seeing her around the SSS office and chatting briefly with her. I explained the interview process to Mandi and had her sign the informed consent.

Mandi described herself as a 24-year-old white female. I asked her what brought her to UAF. She explained that after her graduation from high school, she decided to work at a ski resort where she met a guy and they moved to Alaska. They worked at a ski resort in Alaska and during that time, Mandi realized that she was tired of working “crappy” jobs and wanted to do something with her life. She said she chose to come to UAF rather than UAA because she considered herself a ski bum and did not want to be distracted by a nearby ski resort. Plus, she considered UAF cheap. She pursued a college education because she wanted to be a lawyer and a college degree was necessary in order to practice law. Mandi said that for her and her family, school was never a big deal. She said, “It was just like, if you go, you go. If you don’t, you don’t. None of my brothers have went.” I asked if she thought that either of her two brothers would ever go to college. She explained that her older brother talked about going to college, but Mandi believed that was because he was competitive and did not want her to do something that he had not. She said:

I don’t think he likes that I talked about it for two years because I waited so I could become a resident so I could get in-state tuition and I didn’t want to deal with bureaucracy or anything like that. Because, I have heard horror stories from other people in town who were like, I went there and I was a resident and then once you start school, if you start paying out of state tuition, they don’t let you

change it even if you don't leave the state. So I was like, I am going to wait a couple of years.

Mandi changed the topic back to her family by saying that her brother has a good job, so she thought that would make it even more difficult for him to return to school.

I asked Mandi about her family's support. She explained:

Uh, I think they're pretty proud, but I don't think they understand what it's like at all, like, they're like, I don't know. It's really weird when I go home now. I've been in Alaska for five years, so when I go home it's really weird. They're all there and I'm up here. And I am not going to be coming home anytime soon and even when I do graduate, then I am going to go to law school and I am probably not going to go to law school in Oregon. And then when I graduate from law school, I don't know what I am going to do.

I tried to get Mandi to tell me more, but she did not seem ready to me. Because it was early in the interview, I made a note to go back to her relationship with her family later in the interview.

Mandi stated that she planned to graduate spring 2013 with her Bachelor's and then hoped to go to law school. She also would like to work in politics, but admitted that it was a strange and difficult field to get into. Mandi expressed interest in working as a prosecutor within the system to change things that she did not feel were right or fair. For example:

There are a lot of things in our legal system right now that don't make sense. The people that are in jail shouldn't be there. A lot of them could benefit from

rehabilitation services rather than being locked up in a freakin' cage where they just hang out; become more criminalized. And then, there are other people who kill people and get out in 2-3 years. That's ridiculous. I'd like to be in the position to work within that so I can change that.

Mandi stated that her want to work within the system came from the fact that she did not believe that much change would occur from the outside.

Next, Mandi and I discussed her experiences with her teachers at UAF who she felt were, for the most part, nice and understanding. Mandi considered herself pretty weird and felt that her teachers had been understanding of her uniqueness. Mandi described herself as a free spirit and when she came to UAF, she said she had, "short, crazy hair and was like putting crazy stuff in my hair all the time. I didn't wear shoes... I was the weird kid." She described her feeling of loneliness and a sense of wandering when she arrived at UAF as she tried to fit in. But also, Mandi said her high school academics did not go well, so she was nervous about her classes at UAF. At this point in the interview, it came out that another reason that Mandi came to UAF was because the school was not as competitive in its admissions process and she did not believe she would have been accepted in Oregon with her poor high school grades.

After the first semester at UAF, which she described as horrible, Mandi sort of figured out how college worked. One of the ways that she figured things out and did not drop out of school was because of the friends that she made at UAF. She also found SSS during her first semester at UAF. She said that she believed that her first semester at UAF

was when the SSS program proved most beneficial to her. She involved herself in tutoring and told me:

I had a tutor and he was really great about like just being a friend. I didn't have a lot of friends yet. Just kinda like giving me encouragement and that was really helpful. Like, he didn't help a lot in geology, but I didn't need help in class. I needed help in social skills and functioning. I didn't need help studying. I needed help figuring out what the heck college is. I find myself fortunate in that I don't need help. I don't have a learning disability or anything. I can be a little socially awkward though... I didn't want to quit... I worked my butt off. I am not going to quit. I'll fail out, but I am not going to quit.

Mandi acknowledged her second semester went better than her first as she made more friends and continued to adjust to college life. Mandi involved herself in different clubs and activities at UAF, but had to cut back because of the course load she was taking. She stated that she was focusing on her major department's international honors society because she wanted students to build stronger, lasting relationships with each other.

I asked Mandi to tell me more about her high school experience and why her GPA had been so low. She explained that most of her classes were boring and all she had to do was show up and then she would pass. Mandi would skip class until she received in-school suspension at which point she completed all of her missed assignments and then she skipped school again. She missed so many classes her senior year, she was unsure how she passed and graduated.

Our conversation moved back to SSS. Besides tutoring, Mandi said she used equipment check out. According to Mandi, this proved important one semester because all of her possessions were stolen and she needed a computer to use until she could get another one. She also used a graphing calculator and enjoyed the free printing. Mandi also utilized advising through SSS. Besides fall semester 2011, when Mandi registered through the honors program, she said she always used SSS. She said that she liked coming to SSS because the major advisors for the departments were always so busy, but she was able to sit down with her advisor at SSS and have an individualized session:

She knows me. She knows what I am doing. There's not weird politics involved.

When you're dealing with the department, I feel like I have to be on. When I meet with my advisor at SSS, I don't feel like I have to be on. I feel like I can be me, which is a little bit frazzled and scatter brained.

Mandi said her SSS advisor also helped her with scholarship essays as well as the initial process of looking at law schools. She appreciated her advisor's honesty when she told Mandi that she should go talk to someone with more experience about law school. She also appreciated SSS paying for her LSATS, which were \$160.

When I asked Mandi what her college experience would be like without SSS, she expressed concern about her first semester at UAF:

I mean that first semester, I don't know if I would've been able to get through it, but I mean I am pretty resourceful as it is, so SSS is a resource for me. Um, I think that for other students though, I don't know... I am pretty good at finding

this and that and loopholes and stuff like that. But, I think there are a lot of students here that definitely need the tutoring and stuff.

Mandi told about another experience with a math tutor who used to work at SSS. She felt he went out of his way to help Mandi be successful, he even offered her help when she expressed her hatred of math on Facebook. She believed that the tutoring was really helpful to her as well because it brought up her grades, which was really important for getting into law school.

Next, Mandi and I discussed her negative interactions with her teachers. She admitted that she had recently had a falling out with her faculty advisor. She felt that the advisor was childish and overly dramatic; immature. At the time of the interview, Mandi was no longer that advisor's student, but it was stressful for her in the midst of everything. Mandi said that every teacher and student had separate strengths and weaknesses and the bad experience was just part of life. For math, she said that her teacher really knew the material, but when it came to teaching, the teacher lacked the skill of explaining the concepts to the students.

I asked Mandi how she paid for school. She explained that she worked, which helped with the tuition and she also received grants and scholarships. She had the Pell Grant the last three years, but the regulations changed and with the new income amount, and Mandi made \$300 too much, so she was not eligible for the Pell Grant for Fall 2012. If she would have known, she was sure she would have taken a weekend off or something in order to prevent herself from making that little bit of extra money. Mandi tried hard not to have any debt from her undergraduate degree because she felt that her degree was

not something that, according to Mandi, she could immediately make money with, like other degrees. She did not want such high debt that she could not afford to go to law school. Plus, law school would be harder, so she might not be able to work while going to school. She said, "I made my goal... not to take out loans while I am in school." She had been successful with this goal so far. Mandi was worried about paying for the 2012-2013 school year, but said she will just work. She assumed that she will still receive scholarships and because she knew she lost her Pell, she planned to apply for even more. She explained the difficulty, or rather, time consuming process of applying for scholarships through UAOnline and that she discovered that she did not qualify for many of them because they were designed for first year students.

Mandi decided that she could handle working 15 hours per week, but during the semester of our interview, the business she worked saw a heavier stream of traffic, so she worked much more, which was hard because of the class load she took, but quitting was not an option because she needed the money. I asked if she was able to keep up with her schoolwork and she stated, "I am looking forward to spring break. And no, I am not. I am barely getting by right now, so I am going to try to catch up on spring break." Mandi said that she could have made it easier for herself by taking out loans, but she did not want the weight of debt hanging over her head.

Mandi next told me what it was like for her as a first generation college student:

It's interesting being a first generation college student and I think that even though it's really good to like be um, doing that and going through that process and stuff, it definitely, I don't think people realize that kind of rift it puts upon

you and your family. It's really hard to explain, like, I don't know if that's because I've been away so long now... Maybe if I was in school in Oregon and was there... there's this part that your family, they just never understand. It's not necessarily a bad thing. It's just weird.

I asked Mandi to elaborate more on the rift between her and her family. I was curious as to whether she felt it was jealousy or misunderstanding or something else entirely. Mandi stated that she was not sure what caused this distance, but reiterated that it was just weird. Sometimes she felt bored even having a conversation with them. She gave the example of her middle brother whom she felt she was completely different from:

I went home and he has two kids and he works for Gypsies and um driving cars and like moving them and stuff and he drinks beer all the time. He has a big ol' beer belly. He smokes a lot of pot. He's not doing anything. I look at that and I am like, how are we even related?

Her other brother, the one who was competitive with her, never graduated from high school and did not obtain his GED until Mandi graduated from high school, which she attributed to the jealousy. Even though he wanted to go to college, Mandi said she thought it would be really hard for him because he was lacking any school experiences. She said that he was always belittling her and she was not sure why. She stated, "Maybe they think that I think I am better than them or something like that, which isn't true." Mandi explained that her mom and step-dad were proud of her, which Mandi mainly attributed to the fact that they probably didn't think she would even graduate from high

school. She thought that maybe one of the reasons she rose above the life she lived in high school was because she got away from her family.

I ended the interview by asking Mandi if there was anything else she wanted to add to the interview. She emphasized that she really likes Student Support Services:

I think something that they try to do is be that part of the family that students like me can't get because like, you know, you look around campus and it's not that it matters, but kids with their parents who have jobs and have gone to school. And, they send them like care packages and they do things, like, they can give them advice about what to do in school... It's like what SSS does with the banquet... They feed us and they give us certificates and uh, it's kinda cheesy and everything, but at the same time, it's really sweet. Because, you know, we're not really going to be getting that from our families. So, it just kinda steps in and fills that hole and you can see that's what they're trying to do.

I thanked Mandi for taking the time out of her very busy schedule to meet me on a Saturday and wished her luck with the remainder of her semester.

Mandi's interview concluded the 10 interviews I conducted for this thesis. The following section is the analysis and discussion regarding the findings from this section.

Chapter 5: Analysis & Discussion

As I transcribed, read, and reread the interviews, I observed the themes emerge from the data, and I realized that not nearly enough literature exists which focused on first generation college students. Through the interviews, I discovered advising plays a critical role in student retention at the college level and helps students to navigate toward a degree and graduation. In chapter one, after reviewing the existing literature, I posed a research question, “What are the lived experiences of first generation college students utilizing Student Support Services at the University of Alaska Fairbanks?” The answer to the research question is revealed throughout the six themes that emerged from this research. In order to address my research question, I organized the themes in a progression ranging from the tough barriers that hold students back- to the areas that bring them success. The six themes are as follows: (a) I should be at home tucking in my kids; (b) “First generation? We’re all alone. Nobody likes us;” (c) “There’s this part that your family, they just never understand;” (d) I think I’ll change my major; (e) Thanks for making an effort; and (f) “I probably would’ve given up because I was already in the mindset...to fail.” Through these themes, some seeming hopeless, I found there is light at the end of the long, tedious track to a college degree.

Most of the themes, addressed in the discussion, relate back to co-cultural communication theory (Orbe, 1998), which is the framework that was used to create a communication lens for the research. The most obvious part of co-cultural communication theory that I observed throughout the themes is the disproportionate relationship between the dominant culture, in this case: professors, academic and

financial advisors, and the non-dominant culture: first generation college students who struggle to negotiate through the barriers that exist within the university system. The relationship presents itself not only in Orbe's theory, but also in his foundations, which include standpoint theory (Harding, 1991) and muted group theory (Kramarae, 1981). Standpoint and muted group theories assist with the analysis of the struggle the non-dominant group faces when communicating with the dominant counterparts. The reason the themes become critical is that according to standpoint theory, the way that the non-dominant part of culture views the world presents a unique understanding that the dominant culture cannot understand (Harding, 1991). In this research, the way first generation college students regard their life experiences at UAF and as a participant of SSS is not fully understood by the dominant culture. Students also made a conscious decision about which of Orbe's (1998) communicative strategies to employ when placed in a situation where they faced a dominant aspect of culture.

5.1 I Should be at Home Tucking in My Kids

This theme directly relates to the extremes, sacrifices, and all the truly tough decisions students made and endured during their time in school. This theme is divided into two areas the *financial extremes* and the issues *dealing with family*, both present and past.

5.1.1 Financial.

As a reminder about the interviewee criteria for the study, the students who participated were all first generation. Many of these students also qualified for SSS as limited income. One of the largest obstacles for students to overcome is financial,

specifically, Federal Financial Aid, which aids many of these students in paying for school. Financial Aid issues vary among the students. Alex dealt with an appeal process for his financial aid because he had too many credits. Students are only allowed to have a certain amount of credits paid for before they are prohibited from receiving more funds. Because he reached the maximum amount, Alex no longer met the standards for satisfactory annual progress (SAP), so he appealed his ineligibility, which meant that he had to go before a committee and explain why he deserved to receive additional assistance. Once the decision was made that Alex could receive aid, many stipulations followed. For example, Alex explained, “They require that I take one physics with my math and I don’t go over two maths, well actually one math and one physics.” For Alex, this presented a problem since he was so close to completing his degree. He stated, “Problem is I have all my core, so (I am) throwing in junk classes. (It) is not my idea of being up here. What am I going to do with fencing?” As Alex explained this, it demonstrated to me the requirement created a major barrier for him. Without financial aid, he must find other funds to pay for the completion of his degree, which would be quite difficult. Alex shared his frustration with the other classes that he did not see as important, and was at risk to drop out.

Vivian (2005) defined at-risk students as “those who are socially, financially, or academically underprepared or under supported” (p. 336). At-risk students are more likely to drop out or not succeed in college. I would suggest that this stems from a lack of education as well as privation of information, which is explored in later themes. The lack of financial preparedness is seen in Alex’s predicament as well as Mandi’s frustration in

her loss of the Pell Grant. Because of the money that Mandi earned over the summer and changes in FAFSA requirements, she made \$300 too much, which resulted in the Pell Grant not being available. The Pell Grant is vital for several reasons. First, for Mandi, this grant aid that did not need to be paid back, allowed her to complete her education debt free. Many scholarships stipulate the recipient have financial need, which is usually determined through the Pell Grant application. The scholarships Mandi secured in previous years may not be available to her any longer. Mandi was frustrated with the lack of money, and the hoops that she had to jump through to receive extra money. She explained the process of applying for scholarships through UAOnline and the burdensome process it entailed:

The scholarship is kinda weird because like they make you think you can just go and fill out the one part and then you're good, but that's not how it is. Then you have to go to the UAF part and look through all of those...and apply for all those that you would qualify for and a lot of them I don't qualify for because they're for first year students...A lot of the fat ones are for your first year of college. What are you supposed to do after that, like seriously?

Mandi not only dealt with the loss of money that she received previous years, she also had the daunting task of navigating through the application process for scholarships, which was frustrating.

The most drastic example of Financial Aid issues came from Carolyn's story. She struggled to find a way to complete her FAFSA because her mother refused to complete the necessary paperwork. When Carolyn consulted an advisor at the Financial Aid office,

she was counseled to marry her then-boyfriend on paper so she would appear independent from her mother. Carolyn elaborated:

She (Financial Aid advisor) told me, um, if you get married on paper, we can change the FAFSA for this year. And then, after I went and got married, I went back and they were like, oh, that's not true. So, I had spent all this time and effort doing the paperwork for the marriage license and then it turns out that they hadn't, but it was one of those things, where I was like, oh shit.

Although Carolyn's example was drastic, it showed the length that students reach in order to continue their education and receive the finances they need.

Other financial issues arose during the interview that did not directly relate to Federal Financial Aid. Robert spoke of the sacrifices he made financially in order to stay in school. Although Robert received a stipend from being a veteran as well as his GI bill, he and his wife still found it difficult with their daughter to make ends meet. He mentioned two specific things he had to give up because of school: his daughter's athletic classes as well as quiet time with his wife. He stated:

It is not pleasant. We don't get to do all the fun stuff anymore. Me and my wife as a couple, we don't get to do couple stuff anymore because we don't have the funds anymore, so it's been kinda hard.

Emily's family also made sacrifices. She reminisced about the comfortable life she lived before going back to school, "And then I came back to school and it's hard to pay bills right now... There are some days, right before my husband's paychecks... we'd be living off of beans." She went on to say that this is not the life that she wanted for her children.

Because she did not have enough money this Christmas and because she wanted her children to enjoy a nice holiday meal, she accepted a donation of food from SSS to help her family stay fed through the holidays.

Another financial struggle surrounded the actual payment of school. Both Nicole and Mandi worried about debt and both worked jobs to help supplement their Federal Aid. Mandi worked in retail and originally set her schedule to work 15 hours per week, but because of heightened business, she worked more and her boss called her to come in on her days off. She did not want to go in to debt, so she continued to work the long hours. Mandi wanted to go on to law school and worried about being too far in debt before she entered law school. During the time of our interview, Mandi had not taken out any loans.

Nicole expressed similar concerns as Mandi:

I realized the type of things that it took to get to college and I still wanted to go, but I didn't think I would be able to go because I didn't have the financial backing to pay for it and didn't want to get into a lot of debt.

Mandi worried about having too many loans and not finding an adequate job to pay off the debt. Samantha expressed a similar concern from when she was younger. Her mother did not say she *should* go to college because it was unclear who would pay for her schooling. Financial burdens weigh heavily on the students I interviewed as they tried to complete their classes and obtain a degree.

5.1.2 Family.

Besides financial issues, students struggled with family problems, which began many, many years ago. For example, when I asked Nicole about the education of her parents, she was unsure of her father's education level because he had been in prison. Nicole never felt close to her father, but traveled to visit him periodically. Although Nicole did not appear affected by this situation, a parent in prison seems an extreme circumstance. While growing up, Elizabeth also experienced tumultuous situations with her parents, whom she said abused her when she was a child. Elizabeth lived with her parents until she turned 8-years-old and then she moved in with her grandparents because of the abusive nature of her parents' household. She remained in contact with her mother, but ceased communication with her father nine years ago. Elizabeth expressed a desire to be different from her family:

It wasn't the ideal Brady Bunch home. And I always wanted to get away from that. I knew that the person who I was inside wasn't who I was able to express around my family. So, college was always this place where I could get away and express who I was and be who I was, so that was my main driving force of getting to college.

Although it seemed that Elizabeth's hardships drove her to college, they still stood as a barrier from her childhood that she overcame. It proved a more extreme challenge than most of her peers had to face.

Robert also dealt with a past family issue. His parents both immigrated to America and had very different views on education, not only from each other, but from

other people in Robert's life. In his interview, Robert expressed the difficulty of being "exactly half" of two races. He stated:

I was raised according to both cultures. So, my culture is an amalgamation of both. So, the strict Asian style of you know, you're going to go to school and learn, that was a part of me, so it's really hard for me to accept any form of failure.

Robert's parents moved to the United States for a better life for their family, including Robert's two brothers. It appeared that Robert felt a lot of pressure from the success of his younger brothers and their college attendance. The pressure of being from two different cultures and obtaining success like his parents weighed heavily upon Robert.

Some of the family issues that co-researchers dealt with happened more recently. I am not certain that Jamie considered her situation an "issue". I think it is an extreme that many of her peers do not deal with, so I included her story in this section. Many of the students in SSS are parents, like Jamie. She raised her child and attended classes and tried to be an active participant in SSS as well as other clubs in which she participated. In a similar situation, Emily expressed the struggle of having children while attending school. She had three children and a husband supporting her as she finished her degree. However, she explained, "It's hard. I didn't think it would be this hard... I miss my kids a lot!" Emily really wanted to go on for her graduate degree, but felt an incredible amount of guilt about leaving her children for a longer period of time while she completed a second degree. She said that she should not want to go back for a degree and when I asked her why, she said:

Because I miss my kids. I should just want to stay home with them, but instead I am thinking, they can just come with me. They don't want to come with me . . .

I'd be working during the day, when they're in school, and going to school, when I should be at home tucking them in. That's the hard part about having kids while you're in school.

Emily planned to finish her degree and perhaps she will decide to go on for her graduate degree. She struggled to maintain a relationship with her husband and children, which is a sacrifice that differed from most of her 18-year-old classmates.

Although Samantha did not have children, she struggled with loss and sadness in her own situation because her husband was deployed. He was overseas doing a hardship tour. She described his absence, "It's been stressful, definitely, but it actually has almost been good in some ways because I've been taking on really heavy course loads the last couple of semesters, so I don't have the responsibilities that I normally would." Samantha put a positive twist on the absence of her husband, but admitted the stress that it had on her to have him gone. Because Fairbanks is a military city, many students, both in and out of SSS, deal with their family members being deployed throughout their educational career. However, this sacrifice from their family members sometimes allowed the student to attend school. This scenario proved true in Samantha's case as her husband's GI Bill paid for her education.

Carolyn, as mentioned in the section on financial sacrifices, decided to marry her boyfriend in order to distance herself from her mother when completing the FAFSA; however, I believe it is worth mentioning Carolyn again in this section and the major

influence of her mother on her personally and her education. She believed her mother had an undiagnosed mental disorder, which caused her mother to act and treat Carolyn in strange ways. For example, when Carolyn was in her second semester at UAF, she struggled in her classes because her mother started acting in a weird manner. Carolyn described it like this:

My mom started, I guess she might have been drinking or something was going on, and she started doing really bizarre psychological things and calling me and saying really bizarre things and I emotionally admit that I maybe should've went to the health center or something, done counseling or whatever, but I was a freshman.

In this statement, Carolyn showed the struggle of handling a parent who poorly coped with a mental illness while Carolyn tried to complete classes. Carolyn demonstrated her lack of knowledge in regards to free counseling on campus and other resources that she could have utilized.

The last example for this theme came from Alex. Although his experiences were similar to some of the other participants, his story is unique. Alex struggled with building and maintaining relationships because of past experiences in his life that were extreme. A lot of people walked out of Alex's life either by choice, like his children, or because of death, his siblings, except one, and his parents. He did not elaborate much on this situation, but from his demeanor in our interview it appeared that he struggled because he lacked a support system through his family. He said that his cousins teased him for being

in college and that he did not feel that he fit in anywhere, not at college and not in his hometown.

This theme demonstrates the struggles these students face as first-generation, limited income students. They have hardships stemming from their financial situations as well as from their families, both past and present. Alex and Carolyn both tried to use accommodation communicative practices to survive in the dominant culture. Alex and Carolyn both struggled with family relationships as they transitioned into college life. Alex's cousins and Carolyn's mother used the communicative strategy of aggressive separation as they attacked and sabotaged in order to prevent the students' success in college (Orbe, 1998). Orbe describes attacking as "verbal abuse and personal attacks" from the non-dominant to the dominant group (p. 82). It appears that the family members see the movement from non-dominant to dominant, yet Alex and Carolyn still do not have the skills to navigate the dominant culture of college. At-risk students come in with barriers already in place. The next theme will look at how students view their position as a first-generation and non-traditional student.

5.2 "First Generation? We're all alone. Nobody likes us." –Alex

This theme examines how students viewed themselves in three separate areas. First, as a *first generation college student* because all co-researchers in this study were the first in their family to, hopefully, complete a Bachelor's Degree. Second, this theme will examine the experiences of *non-traditional college students*. I did not begin this research thinking about the experiences of non-traditional college students; however, when I interviewed the students, they viewed themselves differently from their

traditionally aged peers. For this research, a traditionally aged student enters college directly after high school. The co-researchers who identified themselves as non-traditional, ranged in age from 25 to 51. When I asked co-researchers about being first-generation, they shared experiences of attending college as a non-traditional student. The final sub-section of this theme will examine the *low self-confidence* that impacts the students. I cannot assume this low self-confidence is *because* of the co-researchers position as first-generation, but I believe it belongs in the same section.

5.2.1 First generation.

One of the questions I asked each participant included a variation of, “How are your college experiences different from those of students who have parents with a Bachelor’s Degree?” Many students began their answers with stating that there was not much difference. As they continued to talk, some interesting information emerged. The first example is from Alex, whose quote titled this theme, “First generation? We’re all alone. Nobody likes us.” Alex used a joking tone when he said this to me, so I am not sure how seriously he took this statement, but I found it profound and telling. The reason the SSS grant targets this population for assistance is because of their unique backgrounds and lack of support, so perhaps they do stand alone.

Emily spoke not of loneliness specifically, but the lack of access. She did not understand what she needed to be successful in college, which created the feeling of being alone, without entrance to the knowledge of her peers. Emily is first-generation American, so her parents understood how college worked in their native country, but were unable to help her with any of the process when she entered college. She explained:

So they (Emily's parents) kept telling me go to college, go to college, but they didn't know how to help me get into college. And, we didn't know about FAFSA. We thought I had to work really hard to save money to go to college and we weren't in a place for me to go to college.

This lack of understanding and misinformation caused Emily to wait several years before attending college. Perhaps, if Emily's parents had attended college in the United States, she would have better understood how the college process worked and completed her education at a younger age.

When I asked Elizabeth about her experience, she told me that she didn't think her experience differed from her peers. Then, she told me a story about one of her classmates whose parents both have their degrees,

Her mother's a nurse and her father's an engineer, so she comes from a college oriented family, which is a wonderful thing I think. And she still lives at home. She doesn't drive. Her mom makes her all of her meals, so she's not very independent. But when it comes to academics, she's very on top of it. I feel like that's wonderful, but it's just a little unfortunate and I almost felt, I don't think I was feeling jealousy, but I was in a way feeling hurt because I never had that growing up. And I really wished I had that. That support system.

Throughout this quote, Elizabeth tried to find the negative in the fact that her friend received so much affection and support. The friend lacked independence, which appeared as the biggest flaw that Elizabeth found, yet she admitted that she wished she had that support from her family. Elizabeth romanticized this situation when she talked about

what it would be like to go home to her parents and talk about a stressful day over a hot meal her mother prepared for her - an experience that Elizabeth has never had.

Emily experienced a similar situation with one of her friends who attended college because his father told him he should and pushed him to be in school. Emily felt that her friend was smart and capable, but attended college without any drive. She stated, "I wish I had someone trying to convince me instead of me having to go through all that." Again, there lingers a tone of jealousy and romance about having parents who obtained degrees. Orbe and Groscurth (2004) had similar findings about students who had difficulty fitting in with their peers so they adjust their speaking patterns and keep their feelings to themselves in order to fit in with their peers (p. 43). Although both Elizabeth and Emily told me about their experiences, I do not believe that these are feelings they shared with peers, rather they kept the feelings inside. Further evidence comes from the fact that both of them told me that there was no real difference between them and their non-first generation peers, yet they later acknowledged these discrepancies.

While Elizabeth and Emily discussed the difference in experience in comparison to their peers, Mandi discussed the strain that attendance in college had on her relationship with family. Mandi acknowledged that going to college was a good thing for her to do, but emphasized the effect that it potentially had on family. "I don't think people realize that kind of rift it puts upon you and your family. It's really hard to explain." Mandi puzzled whether this rift occurred because she lived so far away from her family or if the sole blame rested on her attendance in college. Either way, something about her college experience in Alaska caused distance with her family. Smith and Zhang

(2010) discussed this lack of support and distance between parents and their children who were first-generation college students (p. 53). Orbe (1998) explained the ways that people within the non-dominant part of society negotiated with dominant society. As was discussed in the literature review, this paper views students in SSS as the non-dominant part of society trying to navigate through the dominant college world. One technique students use in their communication is nonassertive assimilation. In this orientation, students tried to maintain face and blend in with their surroundings (p. 110-111). I argue that this orientation describes Mandi's experiences. She used nonassertive assimilation to blend in and become a part of her college surroundings, but when she went home, she and her family struggled with communication.

5.2.2 Non-traditional students.

The next subtheme looks at non-traditional students. As was stated in the introduction, many students at SSS are not only first-generation, but also non-traditional college students meaning that they did not start college directly following high school. The typical, traditional college student comes to college after high school, which is an easier transition for most students. Non-traditional students do not go to college directly following high school. Their transition is more difficult because they must relearn skills, like math, and they have other responsibilities, like a family. Students do a wide range of things before returning to school including serving the country in the military, raising a family, or starting a career. Robert and Brian emphasized throughout their interviews the unique experiences a non-traditional student has in college. First, Brian explained the

sheer difficulty of coming back to school. The main difficulty Brian had returning to school was math. He explained:

It (was) difficult to come back. Especially, like, the math. Uh, the math hasn't changed any, but it uh, if you take a break from it, it's impossible you know. If you take any break from it, you pretty much have to step back on that horse from the beginning.

Many non-traditional students place into developmental math classes, which rang true for Brian. This can have a negative impact on a student's ego. Brian explained, it was quite difficult to remember and maintain the necessary math skills.

It appeared Brian and Robert felt a stigma about being older than the other students and they were frustrated by their younger peers. Robert talked about the difference between him and the other college students with whom he attended class:

Because I am a lot older, it's a lot different for me because my whole home setting is a lot different. Everyone's lives pretty much revolved around the University. They live here... I don't live here. I live somewhere else, so I have another life I go to. So, for me, I have my home life and then I have my life here as a student.

Robert went on to explain his apprehensions about coming to school because of the difference between his life and the life the other students in his class lived. Brian also emphasized the age difference in his classes. He felt the University was obsessed with these age groups and that even some of his teachers were younger than him. He also complained about the other, younger students in his class:

I am, you know, trying to learn and all these kids whose mom and dad are saying, oh, you're going to college, (they) don't want to be in class. (They're) talking, carrying on conversations, (which) is *annoying*. That was one of the hardest things.

Brian and Robert's stories illustrate that non-traditional college student status can cause difficulties for students, just like being first-generation.

5.2.3 Low self-confidence.

One of the most disheartening parts of this process was hearing the students talk about themselves in a cruel, diminutive way. I am not sure where this feeling stemmed from, but I certainly think it is significant enough to mention. Both Nicole and Robert talked about themselves in destructive, self-loathing manners. It started for Nicole coming into college with her grades from high school, which placed her in developmental classes. The placement in developmental classes can delay students' graduation date because they have to take more classes in order to catch up with their peers. Even though Nicole made educated decisions by asking and looking for resources to help her graduate, she stated, "I don't think I am very smart, so I try to use as many resources as I can get to make up for that." This seems contradictory, but she saw asking for help as a sign of weakness or something that made her less intelligent than her peers. Robert engaged in similar damaging self-talk during his interview. When I asked him if he wanted to add anything to his interview, he ended by saying, "I don't think much of myself. That's pretty evident. Anybody who knows me, knows that I don't think much of myself, which is, I guess you could say sad. We'll say it's sad."

Nicole talked about how she came to SSS when she felt nervous about a class because she already had the mindset and felt like she would fail the course. Both Nicole and Robert, instead of expecting to do well in college and be successful, seemed shocked they have made it this far. Nicole stated, “I am very proud of it (getting ready to graduate). I don’t know if anyone else has really recognized it, but I know in my um and my confidence level. The fact I’ve made it this far.” Even though she showed pride in what she accomplished, she followed it with being unsure if anyone noticed her accomplishments. Robert had a similar statement about his GPA. I asked him if he had a 4.0 GPA for the fall and he responded:

Yup, 4 for fall. 3.9 for the spring and then 4.0 for summer... Yeah, completely mind blown. I actually called the school and asked, is this right? I did! I swear I did because this doesn’t seem right. I think there might be a mistake.

I asked him to explain why he felt that way, why he was so surprised. He continued, “Cuz I am not the one that does good in school. I am not the one who is supposed to do well in school I guess. But I did.” Although this type of self-talk did not prevail in the majority of my co-researchers, it is another barrier that stands in the way of the students. They expected failure and seemed shocked when they did well and succeeded.

5.3 “There’s this part that your family, they just never understand.” –Mandi

This theme looks at the relationship between first-generation students and their families. The relationship takes two essential forms. The first is in *basic disconnect* where the family still supports the student, but they do not understand what the student is

going through at college. Second, is the relationship that comes from the *lack of support* that some first generation students experience from their families.

5.3.1 Disconnect.

Students appeared to feel greatly disconnected from their families as first-generation college students, which made sense since they were experiencing something completely new. How could their family possibly comprehend or understand what the student was going through. Nicole told a story about telling her family about her attendance in summer school and her family assumed that she had done something wrong to have to attend school during summer. She elaborated:

I try explaining to people why I have to go to summer school and they think it's because I failed something. It's like, no, I didn't fail. You know, it's different when you're in college...It's just different than high school.

Carolyn also felt a disconnect from her mother when she explained the difficulty of her classes. She said of her mother:

Since she doesn't have the college background and she doesn't realize, especially with my major, how difficult it is to keep everything in track and I really need it (financial aid). (It) would be really difficult for me to have a job.

Carolyn's mother did not understand why Carolyn did not have a job to help her pay for school.

Brian's family also struggled to understand the difficulty of classes. Even though they tried to support Brian in his schoolwork, they simply did not understand what he faced in college. He elaborated, "When I am having difficulty with a class, all my parents

can say is, we're proud of you, good luck." Brian relied on his friends to help him when he had difficulty in class because his parents did not provide the necessary support. Orbe (1998) described this behavior as mirroring. Because Brian did not have anyone who taught him how to deal with these difficult classes, he looked to his peers whom he saw griping and commiserating about the difficulty of class, so he also engaged in this behavior. Orbe explained this behavior as a way to "reflect to others – the appearance of the dominant culture" (p. 61). Many students made the choice to mirror the dominant culture of their college peers in order to succeed in school.

Outside of specific classes, co-researchers explained the disconnect they felt about the entire college experience. Alex felt this disconnect from his family because they stated that his college life was easy. His brother was jealous because he saw Alex with a seemingly carefree life, while he had a family and had to make a living to support them. He told Alex he wished he had the college life. Mandi also felt the struggle with her brother, but his jealousy came in a competitive nature. Because Mandi's brother did not want her to graduate before him, he considered returning to school. He had not done so at the time of our interview. Mandi's brother never had a formal education and did not graduate from high school until Mandi neared graduation. At that point, he decided to return.

Carolyn explained that her parents, especially her father, just had no idea what she was doing in college. He never really encouraged her to attend college and Carolyn believed that was because he did not know much about school. She explained, "He doesn't really understand. He's uh, a tool and die maker, so he only has, uh, like a high

school education.” Like Carolyn, Mandi felt a disconnect from her family. Mandi, whose quote was used for the title of this theme, vocalized this phenomenon clearest. At the beginning of our interview, I asked her if her family was proud. She answered, “I think they’re proud, but I don’t think they understand what it’s like at all, like, they’re like, I don’t know, it’s really weird when I go home now.” By the end of the interview, Mandi explained that as a first generation college student, her family could not understand her college experience. She explained, “It’s not necessarily a bad thing, it’s just weird. I don’t know.” Mandi had a really hard time pinpointing exactly what had happened to the relationship with her family, just that there was a definite change. Many students found their families remained supportive, even though they had no idea what the student was facing at college. This is why many students use the communicative orientation of aggressive assimilation through mirroring (Orbe, 1998, p. 61).

5.3.2 Lack of support.

A separate sub theme exists for students who felt a disconnect. Unlike the students in the previous section, it manifested itself in a lack of support for the student. Jamie was alone in Alaska without any of her family to support her endeavor in pursuit of an education. When I asked her about her family’s support, she answered simply, there was no support. Carolyn also felt a lack of support from her mother. Her mother had unrealistic expectations of Carolyn’s college experience. Carolyn’s mother thought she understood what Carolyn was going through, but really she had no idea, which put strain on their relationship. Her mother’s lack of support manifested itself in several forms including Carolyn’s Federal Financial Aid. As was discussed in an earlier theme, Carolyn

married her boyfriend in order to continue receiving her financial aid because her mother refused to complete the FAFSA, which Carolyn needed as a dependent. Last summer, Carolyn took a class and found out her FAFSA was incomplete. She expanded, “Essentially what she (Carolyn’s mother) had done was she chose not to give the signature on the FAFSA, so I lost all my financial aid for last semester.” When I asked Carolyn why her mother would do that, she was unsure. Carolyn struggled each year with her mother to complete the FAFSA. Carolyn believed it may stem from an undiagnosed mental illness or she simply did not understand the importance of the FAFSA, and just chose not to complete her part.

Nicole also struggled with her mother when it was time to complete the FAFSA. Her mother was upset that Nicole came to UAF because she thought Nicole should remain home to work and help support the household. When she explained her mother’s actions, Nicole said:

She’s back and forth. For the most part, she’s not supportive, like when I need financial aid stuff, like paperwork, she is not very um, cooperative... she (says) it’s an inconvenience for her. It bothers her. (She says) I don’t understand why they need these paperworks every year.

It was a battle each year for Nicole to obtain the necessary paperwork to complete the FAFSA and receive the necessary financial aid to pay for school. As can be seen from both sections of this theme, many families do not understand experiences of their first generation college student. However, Nicole’s and Carolyn’s mothers were extreme examples of unsupportive families.

5.4 I think I'll just change my major

This theme looks at the communication between students and the dominant culture in college, mainly teachers and advisors. The theme focuses on “bad” advising and teaching that occurs on the University Campus. There are two subthemes, which are that the *dominant culture is disconnected* and that *the dominant culture does not care* about the student.

5.4.1 Dominant is disconnected.

The co-researchers for this study mentioned numerous aspects that made advising and in-class experiences less than acceptable. Many of their comments revolved around the perception that their teacher was too smart to be able to help or that they simply would not help or explain concepts to the student. For Elizabeth, the lack of understanding and help resulted in her changing her major from a science based major to a liberal arts major. She told me first about her experiences in science where the teachers did not seem to have time for her. She stated:

They (science professors) have other things they're working on, such as research. They, I don't want to say they don't necessarily have the time to sit down with you and talk about future career options or anything along the sort, but I just feel like they're a little more abrupt about it. Basically, if you're not getting, holding a solid A in that class, then they're not necessarily going to invest the time in you.

Elizabeth found it frustrating when she studied so hard in science courses trying to do the best she could and she still did not do well on tests. Elizabeth mentioned that she wished the professors would encourage more and recognize her hard work because she thought

that may help the morale of students. It seemed the teachers did not want to invest in students unless they excelled in course work. Those teachers appeared to only take the subject matter into consideration rather than the whole student.

Like Elizabeth, Samantha found that disconnect with her math teachers. Samantha had to take upper level math in order to meet the requirements for her degree in science. It is certainly not her favorite subject and she struggled to do well in the courses. She emphasized:

I feel like math teachers are really kinda interested in either math majors or engineers or people who are really math minded and I don't feel like the math curriculum is at all geared towards people who are (science) majors or who are in majors that still require that math, but maybe just not as extensive. So, you know, there's kind of a disconnect.

Because of this disconnect, Samantha did not feel comfortable talking to her teachers and relied mainly on her TA and tutors at SSS to help her pass classes. She once tried to approach a math teacher during his office hours, but he acted as if she was interrupting him and he had better things to do than help her. She decided not to attempt speaking with him again.

Alex struggled with one of his teachers too, but his issue stemmed from a language barrier. The teacher asked him to "display" an answer on his homework. Alex approached his teacher to explain that he understood the concept, but he misunderstood the descriptions on the homework. He and his math teacher discussed the issue, but in the

end, his grade remained low as a result of the misinterpretation. Mandi also found issues with one of her teachers. She told me:

Like the professor just can't teach. He knows what he's doing, but he can't teach it. You'll sit there and be like, I don't understand because I don't understand what you're teaching. You don't know how to teach a concept. You know how to do it and you think if you stand up there and do it, we'll get it and we don't. This is not how teaching works, but like, so that's kinda my biggest complaint. You get these professors who are really smart and they're really good at what they do, but they have no idea how to teach it.

This frustration emphasized that the issue my co-researchers were having with their professors revolved around the fact that the students perceived the teachers as not taking the whole student with his/her personality and learning style into consideration. Rather, to the students, it appeared that the professors moved ahead with instruction assuming the students would follow and did not seem to care whether or not they understood. This caused much stress for the students as they did not feel comfortable approaching their professors for help and as we saw from Elizabeth, may even change their major in order to avoid the situation.

5.4.2 Dominant don't care.

From the previous section, co-researchers perceived their teachers as overly intelligent as well as giving priority to the content ahead of the student, which created a disconnect. Students perceived that some teachers and advisors simply did not care about them. When Carolyn first started at UAF, she stated that she "absolutely despised" her

major advisor in the science department. Because Carolyn did not have stellar grades, she perceived that her advisor had no interest in helping her. She had a particularly difficult year her freshman year and ended up not doing well in her classes and was advised by her counselor to do a total withdraw from her classes. When she went to talk to her major advisor again, she reflected the following from her perception of the interaction:

he was absolutely not interested in dealing with me again, especially after that second, um, semester... I don't know if it's because I am female or because that element is sort of like ignored in those sort of disciplines, like the more personal aspect, uh, but he definitely was not interested in like hearing any of that stuff.

It appeared to Carolyn her advisor had no interest in her, which pushed her away from him academically and personally. She stated that she did not disclose any information to him.

Emily also experienced a difficult interaction with one of her instructors who made her cry on a weekly basis. When I asked her why the teacher made her feel this way, she stated it was because the teacher was dismissive of her and would not let Emily's opinion be heard in the classroom. Emily described her as the rudest person she had ever met. The dismissive nature of the instructor caused Emily a lot of stress because she worried about her grade and hated going to class. For Emily, it appeared that this teacher did not care about her at all. Alex also felt the angst of having a teacher not care about him and the differences between the two of them, "(Some) professors are so full of themselves... They have no room for somebody else being different or seeing things different." This dismissive attitude of acting as if there is only one right answer and

refusing to allow students to voice their opinions is clearly detrimental to the students' education.

The last example for this subtheme comes from Samantha who had a negative interaction with an SSS tutor who made her feel stupid. She asked her tutor a question about her homework. Samantha told me:

It was a little below what we were working on and I was just kinda confused about something and I asked about it and the person sort of like did an eyeroll thing and was like, that's 107 level math. It kinda embarrassed me and then it you know and then when that happened you kinda shut down and you're not open to listening and you feel like you've been insulted.

Samantha continued her use of tutoring at SSS, but she switched tutors to avoid interaction with the tutor who embarrassed her.

Throughout this entire theme, students appear to be treated in a way that causes them to shut down like Samantha. Kim and Sax (2009) found that first-generation college students are less likely to approach teachers, professors, and other members of the dominant college society (p. 443). From my study, it became apparent that students who perceived that they had bad advisor or professor interactions were less likely to continue approaching that person and would either change their major or their advisor in order to avoid those situations. Orbe (1998), when looking at members of the non-dominant society, stated that they are interested in developing positive face, which includes being "respectful, polite, and more attentive when interacting with dominant group members"

(p. 67). It was difficult for students to maintain a positive face when they received negative feedback, which was why some discontinued their interactions completely.

5.5 Thanks for making an effort

After demonstrating what students view as poor advising, it is important to look at the other side of the coin because it is not nearly as hopeless as it initially appears. For the most part, students had positive experiences with the dominant group at the University and it is important to consider why those interactions were so much better. This theme is broken into three main subthemes, *advising*, *teaching*, and *students giving back to their community*. Within the advising subtheme, I will elaborate on advising the whole student and advisors who provide encouragement and support. Within the teaching theme, I will break the theme down further to teachers who provide encouragement as well as the importance of relationships. The final subtheme focuses on students giving back to their communities.

5.5.1 Advisors.

According to the UAF Undergraduate Academic Advising Handbook (2009), it is vital that advisors and students have a reciprocal relationship. The handbook states that advisors should be accessible, give undivided attention, and document interactions. The student also has responsibilities in the relationship, which include the development of academic plans, semester schedules, and ultimately making decisions about their education. The most important part of advising that my co-researchers highlighted was that a great advisor appeared to advise the whole student. They were concerned about all aspects of the student, not just what classes they planned to sign up for the upcoming

semester. Nicole discussed the advising that she received from SSS and why she utilized the services provided there. She said, “They know my history.” Plus, because Nicole did not meet the minimum requirements at UAF, she was admitted as a pre-major, so she was unable to get advising from her major advisor until she had been at UAF for two years. Nicole talked about how her advisor at SSS considered her as a person, including her strengths and weaknesses, and did not just make sure that she took the next class in the sequence. Because Nicole wanted to graduate in four years, her advisor helped her build a four year plan, but was also willing to deviate if something did not work well for Nicole.

Brian described his advising at SSS as more of a dialogue rather than someone who told him what to do. His major advisor wanted him to take over 12 credits, but Brian felt burned out, so he talked to his advisor at SSS who encouraged him to do what he felt was best for his overall experience. He explained the situation:

I am taking less credits because I was burned out by the end of last semester.

Student Support Services will let me take as many credits as I feel comfortable taking, but, uh, they won't let me take more credits than they think I can handle.

Nicole and Brian both expressed the importance of being allowed to take the classes that fit their needs rather than having to do the exact same thing as everyone else.

Elizabeth met with her advisor at SSS after she changed her major from the science department to a liberal arts degree. Her advisor seemed slightly confused by Elizabeth's major, but once her advisor understood, Elizabeth appreciated her reassurance, “I think I needed to hear that reassurance because if you're not feeling

confident or not feeling passionate about a certain major, it's okay to switch, so that was very, very nice to hear." Elizabeth emphasized that students should visit their advisors not just for a signature on their registration sheets, but to receive reassurance and kindness when the student does not feel entirely confident. Elizabeth, like Nicole, discussed the possible outcomes for graduation with her advisor and truly appreciated the ability to see what the remainder of her college career would entail.

Samantha visited her advisor in the science department and even though she did not remember her name, she recalled that she appreciated her advisor making time for her. She sat down, asked questions, and did not feel rushed because there was not a long line of students waiting for a signature. The dialogue, rather than the signature is also important to Alex who visited his advisor at SSS on a regular basis to receive feedback on different ideas. He said on one occasion he walked into his advisor's office with two different plans for the summer and he appreciated her collaboration, which helped him see all aspects.

Emily also used SSS as a place to collaborate. She visited her major advisor first for classes and immediately made an appointment with her SSS advisor just to double check the classes that she picked to make sure she was still on track for graduation. Because Emily was a veteran, she also went to the VA office on campus and made sure that the classes met the criteria for her GI Bill. Emily also appreciated the thorough explanations she received from her advisor at SSS. If Emily asked a question, her advisor answered it completely and checked for understanding and even referred Emily to other resources when appropriate.

Mandi did all of her advising at SSS because she felt that SSS was one place that she could completely be herself. She elaborated:

It is such a pain in the butt to meet with your advisor because they're busy and they don't have time to meet with you anyways. But, like, being able to sit down with (her advisor at SSS), it's very individualized. She knows me. She knows what I am doing. There's not weird politics involved. When you're dealing with the department, I feel like I have to be on. When I meet with (my SSS advisor), I don't feel like I have to be on. I feel like I can be me, which is a little bit frazzled and scatter brained.

Mandi appreciated the safe place where she spoke honestly about her feelings in regards to classes and did not worry about making a bad impression on an instructor who would ultimately assign her a grade. Orbe (1998) would describe this interaction as assertive accommodation because Mandi is "communicating self" (p. 114). There are potential costs to using this orientation, including the criticism from others, which would explain why Mandi kept her feelings about classes inside, except when she felt she was in a safe place.

When Elizabeth chose to switch her major, she appreciated her new advisor in the liberal arts who took the time to talk to her and answer the questions she had about the new department and the types of jobs she could potentially obtain after graduation. Vivian (2005) discussed the importance of mentoring for at-risk students, specifically answering questions when students have them, which is the support that Elizabeth's advisor provided her.

It appeared from the interviews conducted that part of advising the whole student was giving encouragement and all around understanding. In her interview, Jamie commented her advisor at SSS pushed her to do better in her classes. She always considered herself a C student, but with encouragement from the staff at SSS, she received an A in a class that had been especially difficult. She said that she appreciated that it appeared that someone cared enough to push her further. Carolyn also mentioned the encouragement that she received from her advisor at SSS. When she first started meeting with her SSS advisor, Carolyn had experienced an unpleasant relationship with her major advisor, so she was pleased to feel that her SSS advisor did not judge her. She described her experience with her SSS advisor:

(We) do weekly checkups because um, it helps me academically stay on track with her and it's incredibly helpful...the advising is just like a great component...I think having an advisor that's super open and calm and you know willing to talk to you for a few minutes out of the day. I think that's actually really important.

Carolyn appreciated having someone she could talk to who really understood her. Brian liked having a friendly face associated with his advisor as well as the feeling that SSS reflected a calm place. He liked walking into his advisor's office to be greeted with a smile. All of these behaviors of treating the student as a whole person caused the student to feel more comfortable and return to use the services repeatedly.

5.5.2 Teachers.

Similar to advisors, teachers made the classroom a better learning environment, especially for students from the non-dominant culture, through their encouragement and understanding toward the student. Robert felt surprised when he came to college because of how accepting and understanding his teachers seemed of his situation. Robert's daughter sometimes fell ill and his wife was often unable to stay home with her, so Robert was forced to miss school. He said that he emailed his teachers and they were incredibly forgiving when he missed class. For Robert, his family came first, so he was glad that his teachers did not make him choose between school and family because school was important, but he would not risk the safety and health of his family in order to stay in school.

Another area that students found of particular importance was building relationships with their teachers. Brian firmly believed that a relationship between a teacher and student should exist. He hated classes where he went and listened to the teacher talk for an hour and a half and then left. Rather, he liked to talk and get to know the teacher better. Brian found that his developmental teachers were the best teachers he had because:

they understand that you're there because you want to learn. Um, and they're willing to take and make extra time for you... They care enough that they... learn your name and they recognize you. And, they see you around campus and they ask you how you're doing and they say hey... You're not just a seat number, you're a person.

This relationship with teachers emulated the relationship that students built with their advisor because students appreciated when they were considered as a person in the class instead of just having information thrown at them.

Emily built deep bonds with her teachers and she remained friends with them outside of class. They went from instructor to friend. She contacted these instructors after being in their class and asked questions and received honest feedback. She elaborated, “I can text them whenever I want. I can ask for their opinions. They’re going to be completely honest with me. They’re not going to shy away because they’re afraid they’re going to hurt my feelings. I love that.” Emily respected these instructors on a professional level since she sought advice, yet also built a friendship. For Samantha, the thing that made a class really great and worth attending revolved around the teaching style, which makes sense given our last theme where my co-researchers were annoyed by teachers just teaching the subject and not taking the student into consideration. Even if it was a topic that she was not interested in, Samantha enjoyed the class when the teacher appeared enthusiastic about the subject.

The co-researchers built positive relationships with both their advisors and teachers. It proved imperative that both groups consider the student as a human being and what should be done to make the whole person better, not just the academic side.

5.5.3 I will help my community.

The final sub-section for this theme shows the importance of students giving back to their community. Although it does not directly relate to students relationships with teachers and advisors, it does show a positive aspect of what students have planned after

the completion of their degree. While some students attend college to make more money and better their lives, I found that the students in this study wanted to better the lives of others as well. This section looks at half of my co-researchers and how they plan to give back to their community once they complete their education.

Nicole majored in a degree related to the humanities and planned to graduate spring 2012, but she wanted to go back to school and get her master's degree. When I asked her what type of job she would like to have, she said, "It has to be something where I feel like I am giving back and I am going to happy in that type of position." Similarly, Robert majored in a degree related to the humanities and also hoped to give back to his community. More specifically, Robert wanted to work with veterans to make their transition back to civilian life smooth. He said that a lot of veterans came back with PTSD and their angst was aimed at their families, which resulted in broken homes. Robert wanted to help the soldiers and their families adjust to the soldiers being back home.

Elizabeth had a rough childhood and hoped that she can be a better role model for her own children once she has them. This was her hope as a parent, but as a career, she also strived to show a positive way of life through her choice of becoming a police officer. She stressed the importance of being a good role model in reference to her application to her major department. She explained:

I really took the time to explore my core values as an individual. What I wanted to give back...I can be a very good role model to them (her future children) because

that's something that I never had growing up. And, thankfully, I was blessed with several very, very important people in my life to kind of keep me on track.

I think that Elizabeth shed light on a key element that my co-researchers chose to give back to their communities in order to help others that were from similar backgrounds so that they too could be successful and happy in life. Mandi also saw the injustice of the world in which she lived and hoped that she could make a difference too through her career as a lawyer. Mandi wanted to work in criminal law as a prosecuting attorney or maybe even a judge. She discussed the change that she would like to make within the system as a lawyer:

There are a lot of things in our legal system right now that don't make sense. The people that are in jail shouldn't be there. A lot of them could benefit from rehabilitation services rather than being locked up in a freakin' cage where they just hang out (and) become more criminalized.

Like her peers, Mandi also hoped to make a difference through her college career.

There are many reasons why people choose to attend college, but for my co-researchers, the reasons appeared to intertwine with the hope of benefitting their communities. I am tempted to stretch into the presumption that they wanted to make the world better for people who come from similar situations. I know from my own experience that I choose to give back and to help others because I think everyone deserves a right to an education and the tools necessary to achieve that dream. Going to college, being a teacher, and now advising college students allows me to help students understand the importance and quality of an education. Perhaps my co-researchers

featured in this section have similar ideals, although, none of them said as much in their interviews.

5.6 “I probably would’ve given up because I was already in the mindset...to fail.” – Nicole

For me, in perhaps every selfish way possible, this theme made writing this thesis worthwhile. Sometimes at the end of a long week at work, I wonder why I continue to go to work each day and I think that this theme explains why. This theme stems from one question that I asked each co-researcher in some variation, “What would your college experience be like without SSS?”. I was expecting answers pertaining to losing their free printing or the disappointment of not having a quiet place to study, but I was shocked at the emotional, sincere recognition of the program. This theme focuses on the gaps, which are filled by SSS for students who served as co-researchers in this study.

First, there were a couple of pure academic recognitions. Robert told me about his experiences during the Fall 2011 semester when he worked with SSS on math related issues. He tested into the lowest level of developmental math, but with resources provided by SSS, he retested at the end of the semester and placed out of developmental math. He stated, “I completely skipped all developmental math and went to math 103, so for me, it’s phenomenal. It’s a god sent.” Samantha also received help in math from SSS. When I asked her what her experience in college would be like without SSS, she told me:

I think that I would be repeating trigonometry and if I wasn’t for some reason repeating trigonometry, I think I would be wanting to drop out of my calculus class because I think I would feel like I was drowning and couldn’t get above it.

For these students, free tutoring and other resources provided, helped make it possible for them to pass their classes and move forward in their college career.

As I discussed in the first-generation theme, first-generation college students often lack the support that they need for success in college. They need other support. This section analyzes how SSS fills that gap. Nicole explained to me what she thought the purpose of SSS was for students:

I feel like it fills in where I was lacking, like the support I didn't have, in multiple areas like, family support, financial support, just educational academic support, they filled in those voids, those gaps that needed to be filled.

She also explained that support happened in different ways including tutoring, free printing, as well as providing a friendly, safe place to study.

As a non-traditional student, Robert found students like him at SSS, so it formed a peer support group for him. About the peer support group, he stated:

It's always nice to talk to other people who are also in the program. That to me is great. Just to know that I am not the only one in the situation. Just to have someone else to kind of bounce (ideas) off of and be able to just, uh, to like have that fellowship. To me, that's great.

During his interview, Robert mentioned being older than his peers several times, so this was a really important part of SSS for him to be around other non-traditional students. Many of the students also had families like Robert. According to Orbe (1998), people from the non-dominant culture will censor themselves, careful not to draw attention to their differences (p. 68). Because Robert told me about his experiences with the non-

dominant culture and the comfort he felt there, it appeared that Robert was fulfilling this idea that Orbe wrote about. Therefore, he relaxed and acted like himself when he reincorporated with other students who were from the non-dominant culture.

Students built relationships with their peers at SSS, and also with the peer tutors who were employed through the program. Often the tutors heard and knew more than the staff since they worked more often with students. Elizabeth discussed her experience with a particular tutor in a subject that posed difficulty for her. She expressed her frustration of working so hard and not seeing any results and the tutor kindly walked her through the steps. Elizabeth admitted to her tutor that she could not understand why everyone understood the topics except for her, and her tutor stopped her and explained the problem again. The tutor told her not to be so hard on herself. By the end of their many sessions together, Elizabeth felt that this tutor knew her as a person and genuinely cared about her and her education.

Elizabeth also mentioned the support provided to her by the program because her family was not present to support her:

It's really just, like I have already said, but I never had that support group at home or with any type of family member, so I kind of consider Student Support Services as a family member just watching over me and keeping track. And, I feel like as an individual I am very on top of it. I know what I want, but it's so nice to run it past someone.

Phinney and Haas (2003) found in their study that students could cope better with stress if they had some sort of support system whether institutional or otherwise (p. 710). These

students did not receive the support from home, so they relied on SSS to provide that familial support.

Mandi described the family support that SSS provided. Mandi looked around campus and knew that other students had families that supported her peers, but she knew she was not part of that group. This made the adjustment to college difficult for her. Her first experience with tutoring at SSS revolved less around the subject matter than helping Mandi figure out how to fit in at college. About her first semester here, she said, “I needed help in social skills and functioning. I didn’t need help studying. I needed help figuring out what the heck college was.” Her tutor at SSS helped her a lot with that, but also her SSS advisor. When we spoke, she was further along in her college career, and Mandi did not need the social help of fitting in. She described SSS as being similar to the military because people supported one another based on their subjection to similar situations. She explained:

I really like Student Support Services. I think something that they try to do is be that part of the family that students like me can’t get because, like, you know, you look around campus and, like, it’s not that it matters, but, like, you know, kids with their parents who have jobs and have gone to school and they send them like care packages and they do things, like, they can give them advice about what to do in school.

For many students, not having that support from family is quite difficult, but SSS provided a place where these students had the support they needed.

The next section of this theme will give some insight into what students believed their college career would be like without SSS. Mandi, the student who needed social help, discussed the fact that her first semester would have been difficult without SSS there to provide the transition help she needed. Carolyn, Robert, and Brian retold more drastic influences of SSS. When I asked Carolyn what her college experience would be like without SSS, she told me:

I don't know if I would be sitting here with you because last semester I was put on academic probation and they made some new rule... They were going to kick me out of my program and if my advisor hadn't helped me out... I can't say that I would really want to be at UAF right now, so that was enormously helpful.

Carolyn's issues stemmed from her difficulties the prior semester in school, which dropped her into a category where disqualification from the university was a possibility. Although taking classes was still technically an option, her eligibility for federal aid would have disappeared and in order to receive aid again, she would have had to reapply to her program once her grades were higher, so from Carolyn's reaction, it was reasonable to assume that she would not have completed her degree at UAF.

The following conversation occurred between Robert and me.

Me: "What do you think your experience would be like at UAF if you hadn't found SSS?"

Robert: "I would've dropped out."

Me: "Guaranteed?"

Robert: "Yes."

Me: “Why do you think that?”

Robert: “Because it would’ve been too hard. I would’ve just given up. And, SSS doesn’t let me give up and that’s the best thing. I was ready to give up and my advisor was (like) no, you’re not. I am not going to let you. I mean, you know that was great to know that someone is there that actually cares about me graduating.

Robert’s sincere belief that his survival in college would prove impossible was similar to the sentiment from Brian. When I asked Brian the same question, he replied, “I probably would’ve dropped out. I probably wouldn’t even be in school. (Because why?) I would be frustrated. Not knowing where to turn for help.” To me, this is the most profound part of this paper. The students believe that SSS supported them to this point and they do not believe college an attainable feat without assistance from SSS.

5.7 Summary and Suggestions for Further Research

These six themes give a clearer understanding into what barriers first generation and limited income undergraduate students at UAF face during their college careers. The barriers prove difficult and trying for students, but the co-researchers overcame the difficulties and continue to push forward to successful graduation with bachelor’s degrees. The literature supported the findings regarding the importance of advising (Truschel, 2008), to the difficulties that first-generation students face (Kim & Sax, 2009), to how students deal with these situations using a communication theory lens (Orbe, 1998), and finally to the success that SSS had with helping students (Chaney, 2010). The research question for this thesis asked about the lived experiences of first generation college students utilizing SSS. In conjunction with Orbe’s co-cultural communication

theory (1998), my co-researchers experienced the struggle of communicating with the dominant part of culture as non-dominant members. Using Orbe's Co-Cultural Communication Orientations, it appeared that students either used a form of accommodation or assimilation in order to communicate with the dominant society. Most of the examples given fall under nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive assimilation as students strived to fit in with the students and felt insecure about their differences. The examples of accommodation were not prominent and there were no examples of students attempting to separate using communication orientations.

The phenomenon of students' clear use of assimilation communicative orientation leads me to the first limitation of this research. It makes sense that the students who volunteer for research would be using the communicative strategies that bring them closer to the dominant group. The students know how to navigate the system. They found the resources necessary and probably the students will reach graduation. This is a limitation because the co-researchers only show a small slice of the students in SSS, let alone the students who are eligible for SSS. I am curious about the students who use separation communicative strategies. They attempt to separate from dominant society completely. I doubt these students have much success in college, so an area of further research would include students who use communicative orientations that do not work well within the dominant, college culture.

The following are other areas that should be explored in future research. First, through this research, students explained their communication with the dominant culture at the university. To explore the difference in communicative patterns when students talk

with their peers at SSS or when they go home, would provide fascinating insights. Another area of further research would include the collection of quantitative data on this population in order to determine more specifically which of Orbe's (1998) orientations are used among the students. I was able to draw conclusions based on the conversations we had, but I think more research is necessary. Next, I am curious about what happened to the students who didn't make it to graduation. As the academic coordinator at SSS, my job includes recording the data to submit for our Annual Progress Report to the federal government, so I see how many students are not successful in college. I want to know why. I only talked to students who are making a steady gain toward graduation. Also, what about the students who are first generation and not utilizing SSS who still make it to graduation? Their stories could provide interesting insight. Finally, I would like to know what SSS students do after graduation and if they believe SSS benefitted their career and if they believe college was the correct route for them. It is fascinating to me that through the journey of writing this thesis I have finished with more questions than I began. I believe this must be the nature of research.

There are certain implications surrounding this research for SSS and UAF including the importance of the relationship between the student and his/her advisor and teacher. It is vital that SSS advisors and other faculty and staff at UAF understand the importance of their interactions with this population of students. Through a communication lens, it is known that all meaningful knowledge is reached through interaction. SSS should strive to maintain relationships with students in order to reach

knew knowledge. As the literature review has suggested, attitude and relationships between advisor and student can offer SSS a model to provide quality student advising.

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Appendix A: Co-Cultural Orientation Matrix

	<u>Separation</u>	<u>Accommodation</u>	<u>Assimilation</u>
<u>Nonassertive</u>	Avoiding Maintaining Interpersonal Barriers	Increasing Visibility Dispelling Stereotypes	Emphasizing Commonalities Developing Positive Face Censoring Self Averting Controversy
<u>Assertive</u>	Communicating Self Intragroup Networking Exemplifying Strengths Embracing Stereotypes	Communicating Self Intragroup Networking Utilizing Liaisons Educating Others	Extensive Preparation Overcompensating Manipulating Stereotypes Bargaining
<u>Aggressive</u>	Attacking Sabotaging Others	Confronting Gaining Advantage	Dissociating Mirroring Strategic Distancing Ridiculing Self

This chart provides a visual representation of the behaviors and outcomes described as communication orientations in co-cultural communication theory (Orbe, 1998, p. 110).

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board

909 N Koyukuk Dr. Suite 212, P.O. Box 757270, Fairbanks, Alaska 99775-7270

(907) 474-7800
 (907) 474-5444 fax
 fyirb@uaf.edu
 www.uaf.edu/irb

January 26, 2012

To: Jean Richey
 Principal Investigator

From: University of Alaska Fairbanks IRB

Re: [286644-1] Exploring Lived Experiences: First Generation College Students Utilizing Student Support Services

Thank you for submitting the New Project referenced below. The submission was handled by Exempt Review. The Office of Research Integrity has determined that the proposed research qualifies for exemption from the requirements of 45 CFR 46. This exemption does not waive the researchers' responsibility to adhere to basic ethical principles for the responsible conduct of research and discipline specific professional standards.

Title: Exploring Lived Experiences: First Generation College Students Utilizing Student Support Services

Received: December 30, 2011

Exemption Category: 2

Effective Date: January 26, 2012

This action is included on the February 16, 2012 IRB Agenda.

Prior to making substantive changes to the scope of research, research tools, or personnel involved on the project, please contact the Office of Research Integrity to determine whether or not additional review is required. Additional review is not required for small editorial changes to improve the clarity or readability of the research tools or other documents.

Appendix C:

Informed Consent Form

IRB Consent Form

You are being asked to take part in a research study of how you use Student Support Services at UAF as well as how you speak with University of Alaska Fairbanks employees. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to learn how students utilize Student Support Services and speak with employees at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. You must be part of Student Support Services at UAF and considered a first generation college student in order to participate.

What I will ask you to do: If you agree to be in this study, I will interview you. The interview will include questions about Student Support Services and college in general. The interview will take about 45 minutes to complete. With your permission, I will tape-record the interview.

Risks and benefits: I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

There are no benefits to you. UAF is a demanding place to be a student and I hope to learn more about students who use Student Support Services.

Compensation: There will be no compensation to you.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I make public I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file. If I tape-record the interview, I will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed, which I expect will be within one month of its taping.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. Participation in this study will not affect any part of your participation in Student Support Services. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with UAF. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Sarah Smith. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Sarah Smith @ 406-459-6018 or sarah.s@alaska.edu. You may also contact Sarah Smith's advisor at UAF, Jean Richey @ 907-474-7405 or jarichey@alaska.edu. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 907-474-7800.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I agree to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date

Your Name (printed)

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Your Signature _____ Date

Signature of person obtaining consent _____ Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____ Date

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study and was approved by the IRB on January 26, 2012.

Appendix D: Flier Distributed at SSS

Are you a first-generation college student?

Sarah's interested in hearing about your overall college experiences including:

Communication with Professors & Advisors

Financial Aid

Classes

Student Support Services

Must be a SSS Student to participate.

Students who choose to participate will be asked a series of open-ended questions on the above topics. The purpose of this study is to see how students utilize Student Support Services and communicate with employees at UAF. The interview will last 45-60 minutes.

If you want to participate or find out more, please contact Sarah Smith @ Sarah.S@alaska.edu or stop by her office Gruening 512E.

Research is being conducted through the Communication Department at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Research has been approved by the Office of Research Integrity located in Suite 212 of the West Ridge Research.

Appendix E: Informative Flier for SSS

Student Support Services



Program Services:

- Academic advising and mentoring
- Tutorial services
- Supplemental Math Skills class
- Instruction in basic study skills
- Laptop loan program
- Direct financial assistance to qualified low-income participants
- Cultural and social engagement

Who is eligible?

- First generation college students (neither parent earned a four-year degree)
- Low income students according to federal criteria
- Students with a documented learning or physical disability

Additionally, a student must be a US citizen or Permanent Resident **AND** enrolled in a 4 year degree program for 6 credits or more each semester.

How to apply:

- Visit our Web site: www.uaf.edu/sss and print out an application form
- Or request an application form by phone
- Fax or mail your application
- Visit our office to apply in person

Our Mission:

Student Support Services (SSS) provides opportunities for academic development, assists students with basic college requirements, and serves to encourage students to stay in school and to motivate them towards the successful completion of their bachelor's degree. All services are provided free of charge to program participants.

Student Support Services

512 Gruening
PO Box 756350
Fairbanks, AK 99775

(907) 474-6844
(907) 474-7480 fax

