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Environment Matters: Examining the Lived Experience of

First-Generation College Students at Private, Four-Year Universities

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

By

Emily Allen

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

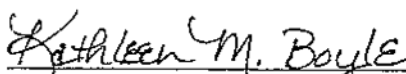FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA

Environment Matters: Examining the Lived Experience of
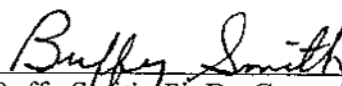
First-Generation College Students at Private, Four-Year Universities

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approve it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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April 11, 2016

Final Approval Date

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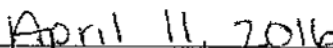This dissertation represents the contributions of many people who came alongside me in various ways. I am thankful for everyone who provided guidance and support throughout my doctoral studies and made the completion of this dissertation possible.

I want to thank my family and friends for their support. I experienced many moments throughout this process when I wanted to quit, but they cheered me on every time I had a moment of doubt. I am thankful for the value my parents placed on education and the support they provided through all my academic endeavors. I am especially grateful to my "Sojourners family" for their grace during this busy season and their constant encouragement. I am thankful for Amanda, whose texts always came when I most needed motivation and encouragement. Special thanks to my core group, Gwyn, Heather, and Jessie, for the weekly accountability, encouragement, and prayers they provided throughout this process.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Executive Committee of the Association for Christians in Student Development (ACSD) for their financial support. The research grant allowed me to compensate participants for their time, which helped in the recruitment process.

I am indebted to colleagues at the two institutions in my study for their assistance in recruiting participants. Although I cannot mention names to protect the identity of participants, I owe special thanks for their role in this dissertation. I am especially grateful to the participants of my study for their willingness to share their stories with me. I hope my writing honors their voices.

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I would like to express my gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Buffy Smith and Dr. Tori Svoboda for their support and their insightful feedback and advice. I am grateful for their expertise, which greatly strengthened my dissertation. I am also thankful for the literature references Dr. Svoboda provided that added important perspectives to my study.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of first-generation college students at two small, private, liberal arts universities. Initially, the study focused on the identity development of first-generation students and how their familial relationships and culture influenced their development. However, as the study developed, the college environment emerged as another significant environmental factor influencing students' experiences and development.

For the majority of participants, family offered support and encouragement in their academic endeavors prior to and during college, which positively influenced their success and persistence in college. Additionally, many participants named professors as a significant source of support and mentioned feeling known and cared for by professors. Participants also found academic and emotional support through relationships with peers, which developed through classes, on-campus jobs, and extracurricular involvement. Overall, participants felt a sense of belonging at their institutions.

The community created around shared values at small, private institutions of higher education provided an environment conducive to the success and persistence of participants in this study. However, the majority of participants identified as White and middle class and attended predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Further study from the perspective of students of color at small, private PWIs would add to lessons learned about the influence of environment on the experiences of first-generation college students.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

When I began my graduate studies and work in the field of student affairs, I found myself drawn to the stories and experiences of first-generation students (those whose parents do not have four-year degrees). As I learned more, I realized I resonated with this group of students because pieces of their stories reminded me of my own. I always assumed I would attend college, yet we rarely talked about it in our home. My parents married at the age of 19, and my mother worked to support my father through his education. She attended a trade school for training in medical transcription and spent the first years of their marriage working while my father completed his bachelor's and master's degrees. Growing up, I remember hearing a lot of comments from my mother that made it seem as if she felt inferior to those who attended college.

Years after my step-grandfather died, my grandmother found an old letter addressed to my mother. When my mother opened and read the letter, she realized she held a college acceptance letter. She always assumed she did not hear back from the admissions staff because they rejected her application, fueling her belief that she lacked the intelligence needed for college. She never felt like she measured up to anyone who attended college. Yet in that moment, she finally learned the truth. The school accepted her, but her stepfather hid the letter because he did not want to pay for her to attend college. Her false assumptions left her scarred for years. I was old enough to recognize the powerful impact of that moment for my mother.

My mother encouraged and supported my siblings and throughout our academic endeavors. All five of us attended college, and she never made us feel guilty about it. However, I felt like I had to defend her whenever she made comments about having less intelligence than those with college degrees. I reminded her that when she took us to the doctor as kids, she could explain our symptoms and likely diagnosis to the doctor because of her experience as a medical

transcriptionist. At first the doctors did not believe her, but after numerous correct diagnoses, they started paying attention to her educated guesses.

One day, after my mother figured out something really challenging with my tax return (that a tax specialist could not understand), I reminded her again that many college graduates could not figure out what she did. She responded by saying she finally believed me. That day felt like a victory to me. I knew my mother was intelligent, and I never wanted her to see us as better than her because we earned college degrees. She worked hard to put my father through school and to help my siblings and I pay for college.

As I think back on my college experience, I resonate with some of the experiences of first-generation students. Although my father attended college, I did not hear much about his experience growing up. As I approached the time to apply for colleges, I navigated the process without a lot of guidance. The majority of students in my youth group attended one of two colleges in the area, so I applied to both of them without touring either one. My mother helped me fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), but I completed the rest of the applications on my own. Ultimately, I made my decision based on the college that cost less after receiving information about the offered financial aid packages.

Although my older sister started college three years prior to me, I did not receive any information or advice from her. I began my time in college with little guidance on what to expect or how to make the most of my experience. A lot of what I learned about college I learned by watching my peers. After I graduated, I passed on the lessons I learned and advice I wished I received to my youngest sister. My realization about how little I understood about college before enrolling fueled my interest in first-generation students and their college experiences.

Similar to the way my college journey began, many first-generation students "feel the tensions of entering new territory, and their parents are unable to reassure them. Their fellow college students often seem to be members of a club of insiders to which they do not belong" (Cushman, 2007, p. 44). For many, the culture of higher education feels foreign, which can affect their sense of belonging, persistence, and success. As more first-generation students enroll in college, researchers must critically examine the culture of higher education and its inclusivity for the growing diversity of students.

First-Generation College Students

Enrollment in postsecondary institutions continues to rise, and today's college students are more diverse than ever (Broido, 2004; Renn & Reason, 2013; Shang & Barkis, 2009). DeBard (2004) reported the current generation of college students is "the most racially and ethnically diverse in this nation's history" (p. 33). First-generation college students represent another population increasing in postsecondary attendance (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). Though difficult to count, researchers estimate that first-generation students account for at least 20 percent of the undergraduate student population (Chen, 2005). One of the reasons for the growing diversity in higher education is the improved accessibility.

The Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 served a significant role in making college more accessible for first-generation students (Tate, Williams III, & Harden, 2012). President Johnson and Congress enacted the HEA to increase opportunities for low- and moderate-income families through work-study programs, scholarships, and federal loan guarantees (Strach, 2009). The HEA made college more affordable and accessible and served as an impetus for an increase in enrollment of historically underrepresented student populations (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Despite the increase in first-generation students on college campuses, many leave before earning a degree. According to a study by the National Center for Education Statistics, 43 percent of first-generation students enrolled in college between 1992 and 2000 left without a degree, while 24 percent earned a bachelor's degree (Chen, 2005). Comparatively, only 20 percent of students whose parents were college graduates left without a degree, and 68 percent completed a bachelor's degree (Chen, 2005). A growing number of researchers in higher education seek to address this gap in degree attainment to ensure the success of those who have access to higher education.

Additionally, a number of studies about first-generation students seek to understand their experiences in higher education. As I explored the literature and spoke to friends and colleagues who identify as first-generation students, I grew more curious about the cultural differences that first-generation students experience between their home and college environments. I wanted to understand how that affects their identity development as well as their experiences in college. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of first-generation college students at small, private, liberal arts institutions of higher education. I focused specifically on the identity development of first-generation students and how their familial relationships and culture influenced their development. I also examined the role college environment played in first-generation students' experiences and development.

Significance of the Problem

A college degree holds great value in the United States (U.S.), influencing employment and earnings. In U.S. society, people typically link the value of a bachelor's degree to private economic gains (Ishitani, 2006). On average, college graduates earn 65 percent more than high school graduates during their working lives (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). According to Aud and

colleagues (2012), in 2010, 71 percent of adults ages 25-34 with a bachelor's degree or higher held full-time, full-year jobs compared with 57 percent of those with a high school diploma or its equivalent. Salaries also varied greatly in 2010 for young adults ages 25-34. The median of earnings for those with a bachelor's degree was $45,000, compared with $21,000 for those with a high school diploma or its equivalent (Aud et al., 2012).

Despite efforts by administrators, faculty, and staff to meet varied needs of today's students, the achievement gap between historically underrepresented students and traditional-aged, White students remains (Aud et al., 2011). As demographics of undergraduate students change, obstacles faced by low-income, first-generation-college students in academics become more apparent (Ward, 2006). Engle and Tinto (2008) found low-income, first-generation students four times more likely (26 to seven percent) to leave college after the first year than their continuing-generation peers.

A growing amount of literature addresses student retention and success. Many researchers focused on pre-college characteristics of first-generation students, their transition to college, the importance of the first year, and first-generation students' involvement on campus. Fewer researchers examined the "intrapersonal and noncognitive struggles" of first-generation students (Tate, Williams III, & Harden, 2012). Despite the growing research on this topic, disparity in college attrition for first-generation students and continuing-generation students continues. Therefore, this area remains important for future research.

Parental involvement positively affects first-generation students' persistence and degree attainment (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006; Torres & Solberg; 2001). However, many first-generation students struggle to navigate relationships with family and friends from home and establish new relationships in college

(Guiffrida, 2006; Stieha, 2010; Tate, Williams III, & Harden, 2012; Tierney, 2013). This challenge leaves many first-generation students feeling "homeless" because they feel they do not belong in either place.

Tate, Williams III, and Harden (2012) studied survivor's guilt among first-generation students and a counseling intervention called logotherapy. Although their study informs the counseling profession, it raises the question of how survivor's guilt or the feeling of homelessness affects first-generation students' identity development. This information is important for faculty and student affairs practitioners, who promote student growth and development, with a focus on developing the whole person.

Statement of the Problem

In this study, I examined the lived experience of first-generation college students at private, four-year postsecondary institutions. I explored factors that influenced their decision to enroll at this type of institution. I also studied whether and how their family relationships and culture influenced their identity development. Additionally, I examined whether and how college environment influenced their experiences and development.

Definition of Terms

Achievement gap	"Occurs when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (that is, larger than the margin of error)" (Kena et al., 2015, p. 270); I chose this definition as representative of the field's use of deficit language.
First-generation college students	Students whose parents do not have a four-year degree (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Stuber, 2011).
Historically underrepresented students	Students who belong to a group that is significantly lower in number relative to the general population. In higher education, this typically refers to African

American, Latino, and Native American students
(Ocampo, n.d.).

Low income   A family income level of $35,775 or less for a
                                          family of four (U.S. Department of Education,
                                          2014).

Student affairs   The division within higher education "dedicated to
                                          the growth and development of students outside of
                                          the formal curriculum" (Schuh, Jones, Harper, &
                                          Associates, 2011, p. xi).

Overview of the Dissertation

In the following chapter, I present a review of literature on first-generation college students. First, I describe literature on the demographics and background characteristics of first-generation students. Next, I present literature about their college experiences. Then, I examine literature regarding first-generation students' familial relationships. Finally, I discuss analytic literature, including Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, self-authorship, and thriving.

In Chapter Three, I provide an overview of the methodology used in this study. Then, I share participant information in Chapter Four. Next, I present a summary and analysis of the findings in Chapters Five and Six. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I offer practical implications of my findings and explore opportunities for future research based on limitations of and questions brought up through this study.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

As the number of first-generation college students increases, so does the literature

focused on this population. Early researchers used quantitative methods and focused on college

access, attrition, and student retention (Billson & Terry, 1982; Ishitani, 2003; Tinto, 1993).

More recently however, research represents a wider range of perspectives in higher education,

including academic affairs, student affairs, and counseling (Jehangir, 2010a; Jehangir, Williams,

& Jeske, 2012; Kirshner, Saldivar, & Tracy, 2011; Leyva, 2011). Additionally, more researchers

turned to qualitative methodologies to explore students' experiences, student success, and family

roles and relationships (Jehangir, 2010a; Kirshner et al., 2011). In this review of literature, I

describe general information about first-generation students, their college experiences, and

common interventions. I also address the deficit ideology present in much of the discourse on

first-generation students, and highlight research that reframed the discourse. I also review

literature about the family relationships and identity development of first-generation students.

Finally, I describe the theoretical framework that served as a guide for the analysis of my

findings.

Who Are First-Generation College Students?

Defining first-generation students presents a challenging task. Throughout research on

this population, scholars use multiple definitions (Davis, 2010; Walpole, 2007). For admissions

officers, "individuals can claim first-generation student status if neither one of their parents or

guardians possesses a four-year degree" (Davis, 2010, p. 2). Some researchers define first-

generation students as those whose parents have no college experience (Billson & Terry, 1982;

Jehangir, 2010a) or as "those who are first in their families to attend a four-year college"

(Cushman, 2007, p. 44). For the purpose of this study, I define first-generation students as those

whose parents do not have a four-year degree (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Stuber, 2011).

The variety of definitions also creates complexity in research because of the intersection between low-income backgrounds, parental education, and parents' blue-collar occupations. Some research focuses specifically on low-income, first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward, 2006), since the majority of first-generation students come from low-income families (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). Other researchers focus on students from low-income or working-class families, which include, but are not limited to, first-generation students (Van Galen, 2000). Another area of research emphasizes the role of parental education and examines first-generation college students from all socioeconomic backgrounds (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). As Walpole (2007) expressed, the "lack of definitional consistency [has] hampered a holistic appreciation of the roles of parental education, occupation, income, or SES in higher education" (p. 8). Additionally, the variations in the use of these terms in research require a critical lens when applying findings. In this study, I limited participants to those whose parents did not earn a four-year degree. Therefore, I explored the experiences of first-generation students from various socioeconomic backgrounds and with a range of parental education.

Demographics

Although researchers typically study first-generation students as a homogenous group, their demographics vary (Davis, 2010; Jehangir, 2010a). First-generation students are more likely to be women, students of color, and older than 24 (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). They are also more likely to come from low-income families and have dependent children (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). Jehangir (2010a) summed up demographical information on first-generation students:

> These students have complex identities, making them hard to pigeonhole. They are more
> often than not students of color, immigrants, and they come from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds. They are also parents, employees, and caretakers of their extended families and communities. They all do not have the same story, but aspects of their narratives weave together to form a pattern reflecting both the richness they bring to campuses and the obstacles they encounter in academia. (p. 2)

Although Jehangir's research focused on students of color, this description serves as a reminder to consider the richness of first-generation students' stories and recognize their complex identities while studying the commonalities in their experiences of higher education.

Background Characteristics and Precollege Experiences

Researchers also named common background characteristics and precollege experiences, many of which place first-generation students at a disadvantage compared to their peers (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation students typically have more nonacademic demands on them than their peers (e.g., financial dependents and family roles) (Terenzini et al., 1996). They are more likely than their continuing-generation peers to experience discrimination (Terenzini et al., 1996). They often receive less encouragement from their families to attend college (Terenzini et al., 1996), and they receive less support from their families in planning and preparing for college (Choy, 2001). Terenzini and colleagues (1996) noted that first-generation students are more likely to hold lower degree aspirations than their continuing-generation peers. Additionally, researchers stated that first-generation students come to college less prepared academically (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). However, Davis (2010) made an important distinction that first-generation students are as intelligent as their continuing-generation peers, but they often think and learn differently.

In his review of the state of student retention research and practice, Tinto (2006-2007) pointed out the tendency of earlier research to view student retention as a reflection of "individual attributes, skills, and motivations" (p. 2). Additionally, Davis (2010) critiqued the ways these studies focus on negative characteristics associated with first-generation students. A

lot of the research on first-generation students' experience in college reflects a negative perspective, focusing on what first-generation students lack. I include some of this research in the following section to present an overview of the literature and to demonstrate ways in which the research continues to change.

College Experiences

Chen (2005) noted first-generation students begin college at a disadvantage due to their high school academic preparation. In addition to varying levels of academic preparation, many first-generation students also face barriers related to enrollment patterns, cultural differences, and time constraints, which all factor into the achievement gap in higher education. As the results from Terenzini and his colleagues' (1996) study indicated, institutions need to provide greater services to help first-generation students make a smooth transition from high school or work to college and also to support them through their first year.

Enrollment Trends

First-generation students are more likely to enroll in two-year colleges than their continuing-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Rine & Eliason, 2015). The highest proportion (27 percent) of first-generation students attends public non-doctoral institutions (Rine & Eliason, 2015). Seventeen percent enroll at smaller private colleges. Fifteen percent attend public doctoral institutions, and 11 percent attend private non-profit doctoral institutions (Rine & Eliason, 2015).

Academic Experiences

Compared to their peers whose parents are college graduates, first-generation students completed fewer credit hours, needed more remedial assistance, and had significantly lower GPAs after their first year of college (Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). They also withdrew

from or repeat courses they attempted more often than their peers (Chen, 2005). Consequently, first-generation students are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than their peers whose parents attended college (Chen, 2005). On the other hand, Terenzini and his colleagues (1996) found first-generation students have an advantage over their peers in that they come to college with more confidence in their major selection.

Academic Engagement and Extracurricular Involvement

The work and family obligations facing many first-generation students limit their ability to get involved on campus, further marginalizing and isolating them (Jehangir, 2010a; Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). However, when first-generation students are able to get involved on campus, these experiences lead to greater academic success (Kuh et al., 2007). Pascarella and colleagues (2004) noted the importance of academic engagement for first-generation students to help them overcome barriers:

> First-generation students tended to derive significantly greater educational benefits from engagement in academic or classroom activities. For example, hours studied, number of term papers or written reports completed, number of unassigned books read, and scores on an overall measure of academic effort/involvement all had more positive effects on a range of end-of-second- or third-year outcomes for first-generation than for other students. (p. 280)

Throughout the literature, researchers acknowledged the role of involvement on campus in academic success for first-generation students (Jehangir, 2010a; Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004). Through opportunities for involvement in academic communities, first-generation students build relationships with faculty and peers who help them understand the culture of higher education (Dika, 2012; Oldfield, 2007). These experiences increased first-generation students' social and cultural capital, which helped first-generation students succeed academically (Pascarella et al., 2004). Yet, researchers also recognized factors that create barriers to

involvement such as work obligations, family roles, and living off campus (Jehangir, 2010a; Kuh et al., 2007; Mehta et al., 2011; St. John et al., 2005).

Many scholars also found a positive correlation between extracurricular involvement and academic success for first-generation students (Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004). "Ironically, first-generation students derived greater outcome benefits from extracurricular involvement and peer interaction than other students *even though they were significantly less likely to be engaged in these activities during college*" (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 278). First-generation students work significantly more hours per week than their peers, have more financial dependents, and are less likely to live on campus (Pascarella et al., 2004). These factors create barriers to involvement on campus and generate tension in finding strategies to help students succeed that fit their needs and situation. However, some researchers suggested that students' perceptions that they do not belong, rather than time restraints, might explain why first-generation students and low-income students participate less in extracurricular activities and leadership (Barratt, 2012; Soria, Hussein, & Vue, 2014).

Addressing the Achievement Gap

Despite the range of perspectives in the literature related to first-generation students, institutional intervention strategies primarily address academic concerns and degree attainment. In part, this focus reflects the need to reduce the gap in degree attainment between first-generation students and their peers by focusing intervention efforts on student retention. First-generation students face many obstacles, and researchers studied retention, degree attainment, and student success to offer strategies for helping students succeed in higher education and earn a degree.

Attrition. Many of the risk factors for attrition are characteristic of first-generation

students. Therefore, a significant amount of literature about first-generation students relates to attrition. A bachelor's degree significantly affects the type of job one obtains and lifetime earnings, conferring a "20 to 40 percent advantage in earnings" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 447). Nevertheless, "more students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay" (Tinto, 1993, p. 1). In 1993, approximately 2.4 million students enrolled in higher education. Of those students, 1.5 million left their first institution without earning a degree and 1.1 million left higher education without ever completing a degree from a two- or a four-year institution (Tinto, 1993). The likelihood of attaining a degree lessens for first-generation students. Choy (2001) found that 13 percent of first-generation students who enrolled in postsecondary education in 1989 earned a bachelor's degree after five years compared to 33 percent of their peers. Interestingly, this highlights a tension in the literature. Although previous researchers found first-generation students less likely to persist, (Choy, 2001; Tinto, 1993), Chen (2005) noted no difference in persistence between first-generation students and their continuing-generation peers after controlling for factors such as students' demographic backgrounds, high school academic preparation, enrollment characteristics, credit production, and performance.

Engle and Tinto (2008) identified seven risk factors for attrition, which include "delaying entry into postsecondary education after high school, attending part-time, working full-time while enrolled, being financially independent from parents, having dependent children, being a single parent, and having a GED" (p. 9). Similarly, Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2008) named four of the most common reasons students leave college: "student background characteristics; precollege academic experiences; structural characteristics of institutions such as mission, size, and selectivity; and interactions with faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 22). Since first-generation students experience many of these barriers, researchers often focus on this student

population when studying retention.

Student retention. Student retention draws an increasing amount of attention as institutions of higher education strive to curb the declining enrollment (Tinto, 2006-2007). Notwithstanding all the focus on retention and the growing research on this topic, administrators and staff at institutions of higher education continuously struggle to make substantial gains in retention and the rate at which their students graduate (Tinto, 2006-2007). Many researchers focused on testing student departure theories (Ishitani, 2003). Early research viewed student retention through a psychology lens. Researchers attributed attrition as reflecting a lack of individual attributes, skills, and motivation on the part of the student (Tinto, 2006-2007). Some researchers questioned this stereotypical profile of students who drop out (Tinto, 1993). The onus of persistence fell upon students, not institutions (Tinto, 2006-2007).

One of the tensions in the literature relates to the correlation between academic and social integration in college and student retention. The view of retention changed in the 1970s as those in higher education took into account the role of environment on students' decisions about retention and attrition. Tinto (1993) made connections between the academic and social systems of the institution and student retention. In his theory of educational departure, Tinto identified the lack of integration into the academic and social college communities as the primary factor for student departure. As Seidman (2005) pointed out, one flaw of Tinto's theory is that "it was designed for the traditional-age, largely white students right out of high school" (p. 9). Since the publication of Tinto's theory, researchers, including Tinto, recognized students do not need to separate themselves from their home communities in order to succeed in college. Nevertheless, researchers still identify academic and social engagement as important factors predictive of persistence (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kuh et al., 2007; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella,

1996).

The passage of the Student Right to Know Act also placed more responsibility on institutions for student persistence and degree completion (Miller, 2005). In 1992, Congress passed the act, which required institutions of higher education to provide data to the U.S. Secretary of Education regarding their rates of degree completion (Miller, 2005, p. 123). The public can access this information, so it became one way to evaluate colleges and universities (Miller, 2005). As a result, many prospective students and their families now place the primary responsibility for retention on the institution, expecting them to do whatever it takes to help students persist and attain a degree (Miller, 2005).

Nora and colleagues (1996) identified four major categories of factors for persistence: background characteristics, institutional-related factors, environmental factors, and cognitive abilities and affective gains. However, factors differ for historically underrepresented students. Since first-generation students are more likely to be students of color (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996), factors for persistence differ. The factors predicting persistence from first to second year of students of color include "a student's high school rank, first-year college grade point average (GPA), and a self-reported measure of desire to complete college" (Kinzie et al., 2008, p. 22). For White students, "high school rank, first-year college GPA, and parental education" predict persistence (Kinzie et al., 2008, p. 22).

Financial aid plays a significant role in student persistence. In his study, Dowd (2004) linked a positive effect on second-year persistence with students who took subsidized loans in the first year of college. However, he did not observe a connection between financial aid and degree attainment. Therefore, in his study, he found first-year financial aid packages "did not offset the advantages of family income for timely degree completion" (Dowd, 2004, p. 22).

Instead, he noted the most important factors affecting persistence and degree attainment are living on campus and first-year academic performance (Dowd, 2004). Although not a direct finding, financial aid does influence decisions about living on campus and the necessity of working while in college; therefore a correlation may exist between degree attainment and financial aid.

In their study, Baker and Robnett (2012) found the college experience more important in influencing student retention than precollege characteristics. Similarly, Engle and Tinto (2008) found, after accounting for demographic backgrounds, enrollment characteristics, and academic preparation, "lower-income and first-generation students are still at greater risk of failure in postsecondary education" (p. 3). Therefore, the college experience also plays a role in students' success. As Engle and Tinto (2008) stated, "This suggests that the problem is as much the result of the experiences these students have *during* college as it is attributable to the experiences they have *before* they enroll" (p. 3). Thus, researchers started to focus on the college experience and student success, which also influenced institutional intervention strategies for first-generation students.

Student success. Kuh and his colleagues (2007) noted that most often theories define student success in college as "persistence and educational attainment, or achieving the desired degree or educational credential" (p. 13). However, they extend the definition beyond retention and degree attainment to include involvement and satisfaction of student experiences (Kuh et al., 2007, p. 13). They defined student success as "academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, and competencies, persistence, and attainment of educational objectives" (p. vii).

Within universities and colleges, administrators, faculty, and staff utilize a variety of strategies for enhancing student success. Researchers found learning communities offer students a place to belong and significantly improve the odds of retention from the first to second year of college (Carey, 2008; Kuh et al., 2007). Many institutions also have summer bridge programs or orientation programs for first-generation students to help them in their transition to college, which increases the likelihood of persistence (Carey, 2008; Kuh et al., 2007). Since researchers found the first year a critical period during the college experience, many institutions established first-year seminars (Carey, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2006-2007). Other strategies that positively influence persistence include early warning systems, academic advising (including "intrusive" advising), state-sponsored scholarships to help low-income students stay in school, student support initiatives, and student support services (Carey, 2008; Kuh et al., 2007). Seidman (2005) summed up the two essential elements of student success in his formula based on Tinto's theory: retention equals early identification plus early, intensive, and continuous intervention.

Shifting Away From Deficit Ideology

Although a lot of research examined strategies and interventions with the goal of increasing persistence and success for first-generation students, other researchers critiqued the deficit perspective prevalent in these interventions. Macias (2013) explained,

> A perpetual focus on deficits and gaps has caused us to *expect* deficiency. It is the norm, so much so that words like "poor" and "uneducated" come to mind before "family-oriented" and "determined" when we think about these students. Understood this way, it is logical to conclude that a deficit-oriented mind-set with respect to first-generation students will yield deficit-oriented solutions. (p. 18)

Macias encouraged those working in higher education to shift from a deficit paradigm to one emphasizing first-generation students' "strengths and capacity for success" (p. 20). Nonetheless,

Macias' proposal keeps the onus for change on the students rather than the institutions of higher education.

Similarly, Gorski (2011) noted that deficit ideology pervades discourse in education. However, in contrast to Macias' (2013) perspective of the deficit paradigm in education, Gorski's definition of ideology addresses systemic injustices within education.

> Deficit ideology can be understood as a sort of "blame the victim" mentality applied, not to an individual person, but systemically, to an entire group of people, often based upon a single dimension of identity. At the core of deficit ideology is the belief that inequalities result, not from unjust social conditions such as systemic racism or economic injustice but from intellectual, moral, cultural, and behavioral deficiencies assumed to be inherent in disenfranchised individuals and communities. (Gorski, 2011, p. 154)

Although Gorski spoke generally about the educational system, his comments apply to first-generation students. Background characteristics and precollege experiences often viewed as deficits within individuals, in reality, reflect "larger sociopolitical conditions and ideologies born out of complex socialization processes" (Gorski, 2011, p. 153). Postsecondary staff, faculty, and administrators must understand the ideologies and conditions that create inequalities within higher education in order to develop effective strategies to "deal with the symptoms of these inequalities" such as low expectations and formulations of involvement on campus (Gorski, 2011, p. 158). Some researchers used a similar critical lens in their studies to examine the inclusiveness of the culture of higher education.

Cultural Adjustment

First-generation students enter college with a worldview that differs from the dominant worldview of higher education (Cushman, 2006; Davis, 2010; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Jehangir, 2010a; Oldfield, 2007; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011-2012). For some students, campus culture is extremely different from their home culture, which can exist in differences in material possessions, values and priorities, and vernacular (Cushman, 2006; Jehangir, 2010a;

Oldfield, 2007; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). First-generation students often struggle to familiarize themselves with campus culture and the hidden rules of the middle class, which leaves them feeling marginalized and isolated (Cushman, 2006; Jehangir, 2010a, Oldfield, 2007). For many first-generation students, the difference in their understanding of the hidden rules translates into needing to learn practical skills, such as study skills, in order to succeed academically (Cushman, 2006; Davis, 2010).

Although historically underrepresented populations bring a unique perspective that would enrich the learning experience in the classroom, these students typically find themselves marginalized in the curriculum (Jehangir, 2010a). The feeling of invisibility and isolation in the classroom further marginalizes students on campus. First-generation students may feel like outsiders due to socioeconomic differences as well as differences in social styles and speech patterns (Cushman, 2006, Martin, 2015, Oldfield, 2007, Winkle-Wagner, 2009). These differences create a sense of invisibility and often leave first-generation students with the sense they do not belong in higher education.

Some researchers studied the university culture of independence and the way that environment affects students with an interdependent self-construal (Cross & Vick, 2001; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). An interdependent self-construal reflects a perspective of self as defined by relationships and group membership (Cross & Madson, 1997). Conversely, an independent self-construal refers to self-definition based on talents and attributes that set oneself apart from others. Although the dominant U.S. culture reflects an independent self-construal, society represents numerous cultures. Additionally, Cross and Madson (1997) noted "the social, institutional, and cultural environment of the United States promotes development of independence and autonomy in men and interdependence and

relatedness in women" (p. 5). Self-views direct information processing and influence one's emotional experiences, and therefore, affect students' college experiences.

Stephens and colleagues (2012) examined cultural norms at public and private four-year colleges and universities across the U.S. Although the degree to which universities promote independence as the cultural norm varies, they found that, overall, higher education in the U.S. promotes the middle-class norms of independence. In one of their studies, they tested the impact of a cultural match or mismatch for students' performance. The results revealed,

> For first-generation college students who are regularly reminded that their normative ways of being are not included in the larger university culture, a single message that runs counter to the prevailing independent discourse and that clearly matches their normative ways of beng may be especially meaningful and consequential for performance. (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 1190)

However, an encounter with a message that signaled a match or mismatch with the university culture did not significantly influence the performance of continuing-generation students.

The emphasis on middle class norms of independence prevalent in postsecondary institutions plays a role in reproducing social inequalities. Stephens and colleagues (2012) suggested slight changes to include more interdependent norms could make colleges feel more inclusive. Possible changes include working in groups and an emphasis on community and relationships (Stephens, et al., 2012).

Emphasis on Community and Relationships

Small, private colleges and universities offer an environment conducive to creating a sense of community and an emphasis on relationships, aligning well with interdependent norms. In a report by the Council of Independent Colleges, Rine and Eliason (2015) demonstrated small and mid-sized independent institutions of higher education provide the best opportunity for persistence for first-generation and low-income students. These institutions foster high-quality

and supportive academic environments and graduate a larger portion of first-generation and low-income students than other types of institutions. Pascarella, Cruce, Wolniak, and Blaich (2004) also found liberal arts colleges promote good educational practices.

> Our evidence suggests that liberal arts colleges tend to promote good practices in undergraduate education in a manner that cannot be explained by their full-time, residential character, their academic selectivity, or the background abilities, motivations, and interests of the students they enroll. (p. 69)

Many of the good practices of liberal arts colleges come from faculty interactions.

Due to an emphasis on teaching prevalent at small, private institutions, students experience a personalized academic environment and often engage with faculty outside of the classroom (Rine & Eliason, 2015). Smaller class sizes also provide more opportunities for collaborative research and academic projects with faculty and peers. Pascarella and his colleagues (2004) found students at liberal arts colleges reported higher levels of faculty interest in teaching and student development than students at research and regional institutions. They also reported higher levels of quality non-classroom interactions with faculty (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The relationships students develop with faculty affect the sense of community students experience in college. Rood (2009) reported, "The extent to which the faculty are involved in the lives of the students has a profound impact on the sense of community and support at the college, whether they live on campus or not" (p. 241). Supportive relationships with faculty benefit students with interdependent self-views. Cross and Vick (2001) examined persistence in an undergraduate engineering program. They found perceptions of support affirming one's competence and worth positively influenced self-esteem for individuals with an interdependent self-construal. Faculty belief in their competence affirmed students' belonging at the institution, which led to persistence.

Social belonging positively affects intellectual achievement (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and affects psychological and physical well-being (Ostrove & Long, 2007). In their study about social class and belonging, Ostrove and Long (2007) found a strong connection between social-class background and a sense of belonging at college. However, small, private colleges, mission-based colleges and universities may foster a sense of community and belonging for students based on the university culture and values. Additionally, the small size of the campus provides more opportunities for involvement, which influences students' sense of belonging. Results from Rine and Eliason's (2015) study indicated, "first-generation and low-income students who attend smaller private colleges are more likely to participate in a range of extracurricular activities than their peers at other types of institutions" (p. 17).

Small, private colleges and universities offer an environment more likely to include interdependent norms. The small size of the institutions provides more opportunities for extracurricular involvement and interactions with faculty. Support from faculty promotes success for first-generation students, as does support and encouragement from family.

Familial Relationships

 A variety of studies examined issues related to first-generation students and their families. Interestingly, many tensions exist in this area of the literature. Although their parents may not have personal experience in college, these studies reveal the significance of familial relationships and their influence on the success of first-generation students.

Family Involvement

Within the literature, tension exists regarding the correlation between family involvement and the academic success of first-generation students. In his work on student departure, Tinto (1993) recommended that first-generation students separate from their families and integrate into

the culture of higher education to succeed in college. Guiffrida (2006) noted that critics found Tinto's theory problematic when applied to students of color. Tinto (1993) based his theory on Van Gennep's concept of breaking away found in his transition model (Guiffrida, 2006). This concept described a developmental process within a culture. However, for first-generation students who come from cultures other than the Eurocentric middle-class culture of higher education, breaking away requires assimilation from one culture to another (Guiffrida, 2006).

In contrast to Tinto's (1993) idea that students need to break away from past associations, other researchers indicated a number of positive benefits to parental involvement (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found parental involvement to be a strong predictor of education aspirations for first-generation students. Byran and Simmons (2009) noted their participants felt a high level of support from their families in terms of attending college. However, their families lacked college knowledge and could not understand students' experiences or share advice with them (Bryan & Simmons, 2009).

Family Expectations

Parents and family members of first-generation students may not understand the time and energy required to do well in college and, therefore, may expect their children to contribute financially to the family or move out after high school (Mehta et al., 2011). First-generation students also carry the weight of the high expectations of their families and communities (Jehangir, 2010a). First-generation students may be the only person from their family or community to attend college, and therefore, feel significant pressure to succeed as a representative of their families and communities (Bryan & Simmons, 2009)

Family Roles

Since earlier research fell within career and school counseling or student affairs and higher education disciplines, Hartig and Steigerwalk's (2007) study on family roles from a family counseling field perspective filled a gap in the literature. They used survivor guilt as a new lens with which to analyze first-generation students' college experiences and the negotiation of family roles upon enrollment in higher education. Hartig and Steigerwalk (2007) noted the importance of understanding the family roles of first-generation students to serve them better in counseling. Many first-generation students experience survivor guilt as they pursue higher education while watching their families struggle to survive.

Leyva (2011) explored issues of balancing a professional identity with family roles in her study of first-generation Latina graduate students. The participants indicated experiencing stress as they negotiated differences between their family roles and professional identity. For example, their families expected submissiveness while the field of social work required assertiveness. Leyva (2011) noted the desire many participants had to create change in their family culture for future generations.

Parental Support

Although families may not understand the experiences or responsibilities students have in college, parental support positively influences the experiences of first-generation students. Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, and Alpert (2011-2012) examined parents' emotional and informational support, students' stress, and the relationship between each type of parental support and students' stress. Their study included first-generation students and continuing generation students with a sample of 339 female students at a large public four-year university. They found that first-generation students experience less stress when they perceive higher levels of emotional support

from their parents. Conversely, neither emotional nor informational support from parents influenced the levels of stress experienced by continuing-generation students.

Identity Development

Although few in number, the studies addressing the identity development of first-generation students highlight important findings that add to the conversation on this student population. Wentworth and Peterson (2001) presented four case studies examining the identity concerns of first-generation, working women students at a prestigious four-year private college. All participants in the study were White and nontraditionally-aged women at Hillside College. Wentworth and Peterson found two superordinate themes that emerged through the interviews. First, the women applied to Hillside College due to frustrations with the limitations of their working-class background. For example, one participant applied to college after retirement "to finally put to rest the feelings of intellectual inadequacy that had haunted her for years" (as cited in Wentworth & Peterson, 2001, p. 12). Second, Wentworth and Peterson noted active renegotiation of identity the participants experienced upon entering Hillside College. This renegotiation fell into two contrasting aspects of identity Josselson addressed in her theory of identity development: continuity and change.

In another study, Orbe (2004) examined identity negotiation among first-generation students, using communication theory as his theoretical foundation. He explored the centrality of the first-generation student status of their identity and found considerable variability in the saliency of this aspect of their identity. Situational contexts and institutional type greatly influenced the centrality of their first-generation student status (Orbe, 2004). He also found greater saliency in first-generation student status when it intersected with other aspects of their co-cultural identity, especially those based on age, gender, socioeconomic status, and race/

ethnicity. Lastly, Orbe (2004) noted a lack of community among first-generation students.

Although students would benefit from sharing their experiences with other first-generation

students, this did not occur very often (Orbe, 2004).

Recently, researchers acknowledged the tension facing many students in their identity

development. Bryan and Simmons (2009) noted half of their participants expressed feeling like

they had two separate identities. Some participants voiced surprise in how much they changed

during their time in college, magnifying the difference they felt between themselves and people

in their families and communities. In his study focused on identity development and first-

generation students, Orbe (2008) used dialectical and cross-cultural adaptation theories to

analyze identity tensions first-generation students face. He discussed six primary dialectical

tensions, which included individual versus social identity, similar versus different, stability

versus change, certainty versus uncertainty, advantage versus disadvantage, and openness versus

closedness (Orbe, 2008). Orbe's findings painted a clearer picture of the experience of first-

generation students and their identity development.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing number of studies on the experiences of first-generation students, few

studies focus specifically on the cultural differences first-generation students encounter in higher

education and how that affects their experiences and identity development. In their study, Bryan

and Simmons (2009) narrowed their population to Appalachian first-generation college students

and examined the role of family relationships in college decisions and success. Findings of their

study reflected values important to their culture and shed light on how their culture influences

their relationships with their families. Additionally, few studies focused on how student affairs

practitioners' can influence the identity development process of first-generation students by

addressing the campus cultural norms. Incorporating new theoretical approaches could address these gaps in the literature.

Analytic Literature

The literature on first-generation college students continues to grow, creating a clearer and more complex picture of this population and their experiences. Early studies focused on access, persistence, and degree attainment and utilized quantitative research methods (Billson & Terry, 1982; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Ishitani, 2003; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Strage, 1999; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1993). Recent studies began filling the gaps in literature by incorporating more qualitative methods and studying first-generation students' experiences (Jehangir, 2010a; Kirshner, Saldivar, & Tracy, 2011). Some researchers explored parental support and familial relationships, yet a question remains about the influence of familial relationships on the identity of first-generation students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007; Leyva, 2011; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006; Torres & Solberg, 2001). Additionally, the majority of literature focused on strategies and interventions based on deficit ideology. Thus, continued examination of the college environment would add to the literature and inform strategies for addressing system injustices and creating a more inclusive campus culture. In the next section I describe the theoretical framework from which I approached this study, including an overview of theoretical considerations that did not align with findings.

Overview of Theoretical Considerations

At the onset of my study, I focused on first-generation students' identity development and the influence of familial relationships and culture. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the way social interactions influence the meaning one attributes to things (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, I

intended to utilize symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework to address how home and school contexts influenced the meaning students made of their identity and college education. I also planned to use multiple dimensions of identity and intersectionality to analyze data regarding identity development because it considers the complexity of multiple social identities, intersection of identities, and contextual influences (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Collins, 2009; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Though I anticipated analyzing data through a critical theory lens, my participants led me down a different path. The lack of racial/ethnic diversity of my sample limited my ability to examine ways in which the universities perpetuated racial/ethnic inequalities. However, Whiteness influenced many of their experiences since participants attended predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Although participants represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, their reflections on their experiences did not differ significantly or point to inequalities.

Therefore, to honor what they shared with me, I adjusted my focus. Additionally, participants' stories raised questions for me about the influence of environment on the success and development of first-generation students. I framed my analysis through an ecological theory lens and used thriving and self-authorship to understand students' experiences better.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological model includes four main domains: process, person, context, and time. Process refers to interaction between individuals and their environment. Development depends on these proximal processes becoming increasingly more complex (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The person component reflects the role of personal attributes in a person's interaction with the environment. The context comprises four levels of influence that

affect an individual's development: the *microsystem*, the *mesosystem*, the *exosystem*, and the *macrosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Finally, all of this occurs over time.

The *microsystem* comprises the people and circumstances with which students encounter on a daily basis. For first-generation students who commute from home, the microsystem includes "parents, siblings, and any other family members who might live in the same home as the individual" (Bryan & Simmons, 2009, p. 393). This level of influence includes peers or roommates for students who live away from home, on or off campus. Depending on involvement, additional microsystems may include jobs, classes, friendship groups, and extracurricular activities (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

The *mesosystem* represents an integration of different environments. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined the mesosystem as "a set of interrelations between two or more settings in which the developing person becomes an active participant" (p. 209). The type of connection between microsystems influences the developmental potential of the setting. A *solitary* link refers to a transition between settings in which the individual is the only link between the two microsystems. Conversely, a *multiply linked* mesosystem refers to one in which more than one person is active in both settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For first-generation students, the distinction between types of links influences their experiences and development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) hypothesized,

> The developmental potential of a setting in a mesosystem is enhanced if the person's initial transition into that setting is not made alone, that is, if he enters the new setting in the company of one or more persons with whom he has participated in prior settings (for example, the mother accompanies the child to school). (p. 211)

As students enroll in college, they may benefit from a connection between a previous setting and their new setting.

The *exosystem* consists of the influences outside an individual's environment, such as neighbors, friends, or the media (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined it as "consisting of one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in that setting" (p. 237). In the case of first-generation students, this level of influence includes parents' or spouses' workplace, institutional policy makers, faculty curriculum committee, immigration policy, federal financial aid policy (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Additionally, peers from campus and staff such as academic advisors fall into this category if they do not encounter the individual on a daily basis (Bryan & Simmons, 2009).

The *macrosystem* comprises the values, attitudes, and laws of one's community and culture. First-generation students experience this difference in their home culture and their school culture, and often need help in learning the rules of higher education (Cushman, 2006; Davis, 2010; Jehangir, 2010a). This level of influence encompasses community norms, socioeconomic issues like poverty (Bryan & Simmons, 2009), historical trends and events, cultural expectations, and social forces (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

In addition to the four levels of context surrounding an individual, one's attributes also influence development. Bronfenbrenner (1993) referred to these qualities that describe ways individuals interact with their environment as developmentally instigative characteristics. The first of the four types of characteristics "consists of personal qualities that invite or discourage reactions from the environment" (p. 11). The second type, selective responsivity, refers to ways in which individuals react to and explore their environment. The third type, structuring proclivities, describes one's tendency to engage in increasingly complex activities. Finally, directive beliefs refer to one's relationship to the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

Family relationships play a key role in the social development of first-generation students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; London, 1989). Consequently, Bryan and Simmons (2009) utilized Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological model as a framework in their study of first-generation Appalachian college students because of its emphasis on the family system and other levels of influence. In their study, Byran and Simmons (2009) found seven main influences in the postsecondary success of first-generation Appalachian college students: close-knit families and communities, separate identities, knowledge of college procedures, pressure to succeed, returning home, the pervasiveness of poverty, and the importance of early intervention programming.

An exploration of the influences on the lives of first-generation students provides a clearer picture of their experiences and how their environment may affect their development. Most of the influences mentioned by Bryan and Simmons (2009) relate to students' background and family and have the potential to affect students emotionally and psychologically. However, the campus environment could influence students more than their backgrounds and lead to success and thriving.

Thriving in College

Schreiner (2010; 2013) and a team of doctoral students developed the concept of thriving for college students in order to expand the common definition of student success, which focuses on academics, to include social and psychological aspects of success. They developed the concept of thriving from Keyes and Haidt's work on flourishing within positive psychology and Bean and Eaton's psychological model of student retention (Schreiner, 2010; 2013). Schreiner (2010) defined thriving students as those who are "fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally" (p. 4).

Thriving consists of five factors that fit within three areas: academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal (Schreiner, 2010; 2013). Academic thriving consists of engaged learning and academic determination. *Engaged learning* occurs when students invest positive energy into their academics by focusing on new learning opportunities and actively thinking about and discussing what they learn in class. *Academic determination* refers to an investment of effort in academics, including time management, motivation, goal setting, and strategies for meeting those goals.

Intrapersonal thriving entails *positive perspective*, which reflects an optimistic way of viewing life (Schreiner, 2010; 2013). Students with a positive perspective see the long-term view of events, which allows them to reframe negative experiences. These students typically handle stress better and have high levels of satisfaction with their college experience.

Interpersonal thriving comprises social connectedness and diverse citizenship (Schreiner, 2010; 2013). *Social connectedness* involves "having friends, being in relationships with others who listen, and experiencing a sense of community within the college environment" (Schreiner, 2010, p. 5). *Diverse citizenship* refers to a desire to help others and contribute to one's community. It includes openness, valuing differences in others, and an interest in building relationships with people from diverse backgrounds (Schreiner, 2010; 2013).

Schreiner (2010) and her team developed an instrument, called the Thriving Quotient, to reliably measure thriving. This survey instrument consists of 35 items based on the five factors of thriving. Based on research conducted in the United States, Canada, and Australia the Thriving Quotient proved predictive of variation in grade point average (GPA), intent to graduate, institutional fit, satisfaction, perception of tuition worth, and learning gains (Schreiner, 2013).

Students' characteristics at the time of entry into college, long the staple of higher education regression analyses, were insignificant predictors of these outcomes once their thriving levels were taken into account. Even race/ ethnicity no longer contributed any predictive value to student success outcomes—good news indeed, as such demographic characteristics are not aspects of the student experience that can be changed. (Schreiner, 2013, p. 43)

Additionally, findings revealed great variation across ethnicities in the impact that various factors had on students' level of thriving. Therefore, thriving benefits all students, but the pathway to thriving varies based on ethnicity (Schreiner, 2013).

Schreiner (2013) discussed three contributors to thriving for White students that influence thriving for students of color in different ways. For example, Schreiner, Kammer, Primrose, and Quick (2011) found that campus involvement benefited Latino students the most. Involvement also benefited White and Asian American students, especially when it included student-faculty interaction. African American students benefited the least from involvement, unless they engaged in ethnic organizations. Spirituality may also influence thriving for students. Schreiner and her colleagues (2011) found "no direct effects of spirituality on Latino thriving levels, yet spirituality had a substantial effect on thriving in Asian American and African American students and a moderate effect in Caucasian students" (p. 46). One size does not fit all for students' pathways to thriving. However, a sense of community greatly benefited all students. As Schreiner (2013) noted, "Creating a sense of community on campus is the single best way to help all students thrive" (p. 46). Sense of community comprises four key elements: membership, ownership, relationship, and partnership.

Thriving serves as a beneficial analytic tool because of the focus on aspects that staff and faculty can control. Rather than analyzing students' experiences through the deficit ideology, thriving provides a framework for examining the college environment. Additionally, the

emphasis on creating a psychological sense of community benefits students with an interdependent self-construal.

Self-Authorship

Baxter Magolda's theory about the journey toward self-authorship developed from her 27-year longitudinal study. In this study, she interviewed participants during two phases: college and postcollege. During the postcollege phase, she conducted annual interviews with 30 of the original 80 participants through their mid-forties. Baxter Magolda (2008) defined self-authorship as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (p. 269). In her study, she found that most traditional-age college students rely on external authority during college, yet quickly start to question it after they graduate. However, Baxter Magolda (2014) also noted that students who experience marginalization might shift toward self-authorship during college.

The journey toward self-authorship includes four phases (Baxter Magolda, 2001). In the first phase, *following formulas*, students rely on external authorities yet refer to the plans and ideas as their own. They often base decisions on what they believe others expect of them. The second phase is the *crossroads* phase. Eventually, students experience tension between what others expect of them and what they want. The crossroads help students establish their own beliefs. During the third phase, *becoming the author of one's life*, students learn to live out their beliefs. This requires an understanding that belief systems can change. Through intensive reflection during this phase, students establish a strong identity. In the final phase, *internal foundation*, students develop a strong system of belief and make life decisions based on their internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Baxter Magolda (2008) identified three elements of self-authorship: trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments (Baxter Magolda, 2008). When students learned to trust their internal voice, they took ownership of the meaning they make of the world, understanding that some things are beyond their control. As students learn to trust their internal voice, they create an internal foundation that guides their beliefs, identity, and relationships. The last element, securing internal commitments, refers to students' commitments to live out their internal foundation.

Summary

As first-generation students enroll in postsecondary institutions in growing numbers, researchers, administrators, faculty, and student affairs practitioners must seek to understand their experiences better. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, thriving, and self-authorship allowed for a deeper analysis of the college and family environments. Though often viewed as a homogenous group, first-generation students are a diverse group of individuals. These theoretical approaches provide the framework to examine factors that influence first-generation students' identity development. How do the cultures of first-generation students influence their familial relationships? How do first-generation students' familial relationships and culture influence their experience in higher education? How do university norms and the college environment influence the identity development of first-generation students? How can student affairs practitioners utilize the answers to these questions to better help students in their development? These questions would add new perspectives to the ongoing conversations about first-generation student success.

CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore experiences of first-generation college students at small, private, liberal arts universities. I focused specifically on the influence of familial relationships and culture on the identity development of first-generation college students. I examined participants' relationships with their families and whether or not they experienced changes in those relationships during their time in college. I also studied ways in which first-generation students' home and college environments influenced their identity development. In this section, I discuss the methodological approach I used in this study. I begin with an explanation of why I selected phenomenological methodology. Next, I discuss data processing for the study, including data collection and analysis. I also describe selection of participants and sample size. Finally, I explain ethical considerations and researcher bias in my study.

Design

I selected qualitative research methods for this study first and foremost because of its focus on individuals and their lived experience. I also selected this method for the opportunity it presented to showcase participants' voices, create a complex and detailed picture of the issue, and make a call for change in higher education (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative methodology provides the platform for voices typically marginalized in research. The analysis of data is inductive and deductive and seeks to determine patterns and themes. Another advantage of qualitative methods is the ability to add new pieces to the research puzzle while collecting data (Charmaz, 2006). This allowed me to follow the data and make adjustments in my analysis as I continued to collect more data. Although I started the study with assumptions based on my

review of literature, this methodology provided space for participants to change the direction of my study when their experiences did not match my assumptions.

Phenomenological studies examine the shared meaning of lived experience of a phenomenon for several individuals (Creswell, 2013). Through phenomenological studies, researchers provide a description of the essence of the selected phenomenon based on data collected from individuals who experienced the phenomenon. Phenomenologists "attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (Bogdan & Biklan, 2007, p. 25). These studies focus on the meaning individuals make of their own experiences (Bogdan & Biklan, 2007).

I used this approach for my study because it allowed the voice of participants to remain central, which helped broaden my focus from the influence of their family relationships and culture on their identity development to the influence of the environment on their college experiences and identity development. In order to enter participants' worlds and create a full, accurate picture of their experiences and the meaning they make of those experiences, I relied on open-ended interview questions that provided space for participants to voice their thoughts. Additionally, I used detailed, descriptive field notes and observer comments to keep an accurate record of my thoughts and perspective, as researcher, throughout the process.

Selection of Participants

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand family and environmental influences on the experiences and identity development of first-generation college students. In order to understand this phenomenon better, I used criterion sampling to ensure all participants qualified as first-generation students (Creswell, 2013). I primarily interviewed students who recently completed their third or fourth year of college in order to understand their identity

development throughout college better. I also interviewed one sophomore and one recent graduate. I did not limit my sample by any other factor, such as age, socioeconomic status, or race/ ethnicity because I wanted to explore ways in which other dimensions of their identity factored into their experiences. Due to limitations for recruitment and the connections and resources available, I relied heavily on convenience and snowball sampling for this study. This method, along with the demographics of the universities, limited the racial/ ethnic diversity of my sample. However, participants represented diverse backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status and whether they grew up in rural, urban, or suburban areas. I interviewed 10 students from one university and eight from another university; I reached data saturation after interviewing 18 students (Bazeley, 2013).

I wrote a letter to perspective participants explaining my study and what I would ask of them if they decided to participate (see Appendix A). I gave an electronic copy of the letter to my contacts at each university and asked them to pass it on via email or intercampus mail to students that fit the requirements of being first-generation students, preferably in their third or fourth year of college. A few contacts passed on names of interested students, so I emailed a copy of the letter to them myself. The letter explained the study and described my request for a two-hour initial interview with a potential follow-up interview or questions via email. I also attached the consent form to provide perspective participants with more information about confidentiality, risk and benefits, and the option to remove themselves from the study at any point (see Appendix B). The letter included my contact information with a request for interested students to contact me by a specified date. I did not contact them a second time if I did not hear back from them in order to avoid feelings of coercion.

Research Sites

The majority of first-generation students enroll in public two-year or four-year institutions of higher education (Rine & Eliason, 2015). Though fewer in number, 17 percent enroll at smaller private colleges, which still represent a significant portion of first-generation students. Since many studies focused on students from public institutions, I wanted to explore the experiences of first-generation college students at small, private, four-year institutions. I submitted materials to the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at two universities located in the same metropolitan area in the Midwest and recruited participants from those sites.

Midwest Christian University

Midwest Christian University (MCU) is a private Christian institution located in a suburb of a large metropolitan area. Approximately 3,000 undergraduate students and a total of nearly 6,000 students when including graduate and professional programs attend this institution. Students from approximately 50 states and more than 20 countries attend this university, although nearly 80 percent come from in state ("National Center," 2016). Roughly 60 percent of the student body is female and 40 percent is male. Approximately 80 percent of undergraduate students are 24 years of age and under. More than 80 percent of undergraduate students are White ("National Center," 2016).

Many participants described the Christian environment and strong sense of community as important aspects of MCU. According to participants, this institution has a two-year requirement for on-campus housing, and many remain on campus after their first two years. More than 70 percent of undergraduate students live in campus housing ("Best Colleges," 2016). Approximately 85 percent of undergraduate students attend full-time ("National Center," 2016). MCU has an overall graduation rate of nearly 75 percent ("National Center," 2016).

Social Justice University

Social Justice University (SJU) is located in an urban area, and the total student body comprises roughly 4,500 students. Approximately 2,000 undergraduate students attend SJU. This university attracts students from more than 40 states and 30 countries. However, around 70 percent come from in state ("National Center," 2016). Nearly 60 percent of undergraduate students are female and 40 percent are male. More than 90 percent of undergraduate students are 24 years of age or under, and roughly 70 percent of undergraduate students are White ("National Center," 2016).

Participants described the culture of this university as a community focused on diversity and social justice. According to participants, no requirement for on-campus housing exists. However, approximately 40 percent of undergraduate students live in campus housing ("Best Colleges," 2016). Less than 5 percent of undergraduate students enroll part-time ("National Center," 2016). The overall graduation rate at SJU is approximately 65 percent ("National Center," 2016).

Data Collection

As Bogdan and Biklan (2007) described, data that is rich in description characterizes qualitative research. "Rich data are detailed, focused, and full. They reveal participants views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 13). To collect this data, I used a questionnaire to gather general information about participants (see Appendix C), relying on self-reporting methods. I also collected data through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D). After each interview, I also compiled observer comments to record my thoughts and observations throughout the process.

Data Analysis

I planned to use grounded theory methodology to assist in data analysis. Paired with phenomenology, grounded theory provides a framework to move beyond a description of the phenomenon to creating a theory (Creswell, 2013). As Corbin and Strauss (1990) explained, "the procedures of grounded theory are designed to develop a well integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study" (p. 5). My study followed the guidelines set by Charmaz for grounded theory.

I transcribed some of the interviews and used a transcription service for the rest of the interviews (see Appendix E for the transcriber confidentiality agreement). Next, I added initial codes using the program *NVivo*. Charmaz (2006) described the role of coding in grounded theory as "the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data" (p. 46). Initially, I added codes, or names, to each segment of the data. I wrote memos to record my initial analysis and thoughts on emerging themes and possible theories. These focused codes provided ideas of areas to pursue further in subsequent interviews and allowed me to explore emerging theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2006).

I started analyzing data with the intention of developing a theory. However, the theoretical explanation that emerged from findings aligned well with other theories. My participants' responses led me to utilize ecological theory, the concept of thriving, and self-authorship theory to inform my qualitative analysis.

Ethical Considerations

I chose to use multiple sites for my study as a way to protect my subjects. In my recruitment letter, I fully disclosed risks and benefits for participants and clearly explained what I would ask of participants. Immediately prior to the interview, I shared my story with

participants to build rapport and give background on my interest in this topic. I explained the study to participants, talked about the consent form with them, asked questions to ensure their understanding of it, and obtained their signatures and consent.

I also protected participants by keeping data secure and confidential. To maintain confidentiality, I gave each institution and participant a pseudonym. As I transcribed interviews, I automatically used pseudonyms. When I used the transcription service, I immediately replaced actual names with pseudonyms when I received transcriptions. I kept one hand-written list of names with the pseudonyms and secured it in a locked file cabinet in my apartment to which only I have access. Once I completed the study, I shredded the list. Within 24 hours of the interviews, I transferred the digital recording of the interview to a password-protected computer and deleted the recording from the digital recorder. I stored recordings of the interviews on my password-protected computer and kept a back-up copy in a password-protected network folder. I also kept all field notes and memos stored on a password-protected computer.

Although themes that emerged from my study may apply to other first-generation students, qualitative research methods limit the generalizability of the study. My study was constrained by time, sites, and the number of participants (Creswell, 2013). My research focused primarily on first-generation students in their third or fourth year of college, so it was limited to one group of students at a specific time in their college career. I only focused on two small, private institutions in one geographical region, which also limits the generalizability to other institutional types and geographical regions.

Researcher

My experiences, beliefs, and values influenced my research. As Creswell (2013) stated, "Whether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical

assumptions to our research" (p. 15). Despite my interest in the topic and my desire to gain a better understanding of the experiences of first-generation students, I knew my lack of personal experience as a first-generation student would affect my ability to describe and understand this phenomenon. Therefore, I used triangulation to limit the influence of my biases in the findings and analysis. I utilized member-checking when possible with latter interviews to ensure the validity of my analysis and accurate reporting of participants' perspectives. I also asked a colleague who is a first-generation student and attended a private university to read my dissertation and provide feedback based on her experience.

Conclusion

I selected qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach because I believed this approach provided the best framework for examining my research question. The purpose of my study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students with a focus on environmental and familial influences on their identity development and college experiences. Qualitative methods allowed the voices of participants to remain central in the analysis, which matches my values as a researcher and provided a rich description of this phenomenon. In the following chapter, I describe the participants in my study.

CHAPTER FOUR
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

I found it challenging to discuss first-generation students in my study as a group with common attributes and experiences. Although I limited my study to two private, liberal arts universities in the Midwest, participants in my study reflect the richness of the stories and backgrounds of first-generation students. In this chapter, I describe demographics of the participants, including information about their family backgrounds. I requested each participant submit responses to a questionnaire identifying background characteristics prior to interviews (see Appendix C). I interviewed 18 students; 10 from MCU and eight from SJU. Table 1 and Table 2 summarize participant information for each university. The majority of participants were women (15), but that reflects the population at the institutions and of first-generation students. Approximately 60 percent of undergraduate students at MCU and SJU are women, and first-generation students are more likely to be women (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Although this sample primarily included White students, these numbers, for the most part, represent the demographics at participants' universities, even though nationally first-generation students are more likely to be students of color. One participant identified as Asian. His parents immigrated to the United States from Laos in the 1970s. However, he attended a private, predominantly White, Christian K-12 school, so the culture of MCU felt familiar. Another participant identified as White/Hispanic. His father is from Brazil and his mother is from Colombia. His parents met and married in Venezuela and immigrated to the United States when he was two-years-old. The remaining participants identified as White, including one participant who identified as White/Italian and grew up in Tennessee. The majority of participants grew up in one of two neighboring states in the Midwest.

Participants also differed from the typical experience of first-generation students, since the majority enrolled in college immediately after high school. One participant played junior hockey for two years before enrolling at SJU. They ranged in age from 19- to 22-years-old. Additionally, all participants enrolled full-time in college. Only two participants transferred; one came from another private, four-year liberal arts college, and the other participant transferred from a large, public, four-year university in a different region of the country.

First-generation students are also more likely to come from low-income families (Choy 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). Four participants in my study came from low-income families. Of the remaining participants, half came from lower middle-income families. A few identified as middle income, and five grew up in upper middle-income families. I used self-reporting methods to collect demographic information, so participants reported information about family income based on their perceptions.

Diversity among participants included their hometowns. Two participants came from out-of-state metropolitan areas in another region of the country. Eight participants came from small towns in the Midwest. One participant grew up in an urban area near SJU, and seven came from suburbs within an hour of their university. Among other factors, their hometowns influenced how much of a cultural difference participants experienced in college.

Table 1

Self-reported Participant Information for MCU

Participant	Academic Class	Sex	Race/ ethnicity	SES	Major	Mother's Education	Father's Education	Guardian's Education
Grace	Senior	F	White	Low (mother)/ Middle (father)	Elementary Education	High School	Associate's Degree	NA
Kelly	Junior	F	White	Low (parents)/ Lower Middle (guardian)	Nursing	High School	GED	High School
Chelsea	Senior	F	White	Lower Middle	Nursing	Technical Certificate	High School	NA
Rachel	Junior	F	White	Lower Middle	Business Marketing & Graphic Design	High School	Associate's Degree	NA
Moua	Senior	M	Asian	Lower Middle	Computer Science & Math	GED	High School	NA
Adriano	Junior	M	White/ Hispanic	Lower Middle	History	High School	High School	NA
Lindsey	Junior	F	White	Middle	Nursing	High School	Technical Certificate	NA
Erynne	Senior	F	White	Middle	Elementary Education with Spanish K-8 endorsement	3 months of college	High School	NA
Emma	Graduate	F	White	Upper Middle	Communication	Associate's Degree	GED	NA
Amber	Junior	F	White	Upper Middle	Social Work	1-year degree (LPN)	3 semesters of college	NA

Table 2

Self-reported Participant Information for SJU

Participant	Academic Class	Sex	Race/ ethnicity	SES	Major	Mother's Education	Father's Education	Guardian's Education
Sierra	Sophomore	F	White	Low	Communication & Sociology	Some college	High School	NA
Carly	Junior	F	White	Low	Psychology & Communication	High School	Did not complete high school	NA
Sabrina	Senior	F	White	Lower Middle	Physics & English	High School	Associate's Degree	NA
Stephanie	Junior	F	White	Lower Middle	Biology & Psychology	Technical Certificate	Technical Certificate	NA
Tim	Junior	M	White/ Italian	Middle	Business & Marketing	Some college	High School	NA
Nicole	Senior	F	White	Upper Middle	Psychology & Exercise Science	Some college	High School	NA
Kristin	Junior	F	White	Upper Middle	Chemistry & Physics with Forensic Science Certificate	Technical Certificate	Technical Certificate	NA
Hannah	Junior	F	White	Upper Middle	Exercise Science & Psychology	High School	Associate's Degree	NA

Family Background

Participants' families also influenced their transition to and experience in college. The goal of this study was to examine the role of environment and familial relationships and culture on the identity development of first-generation college students. Therefore, understanding some aspects of their family backgrounds was important for me. In this next section, I describe their family structure, parents' education, and type of work their parents held.

Family Structure

For many participants, their family structure played a role in their relationships with their family members and influenced their identity development. The majority of participants said their parents are still married. Most have at least one sibling and others have half-siblings or stepsiblings as well. A few come from large families. Moua is the second of nine children. Kristin comes from a blended family with three siblings and three stepsiblings. A couple participants have larger gaps between some of their siblings. Sierra has two sisters who are two and four years younger than her. She also has twin sisters that are 14 years younger than her. Rachel, similarly, has two brothers who are 13 and 15 years older. One participant lived with her guardian, her aunt, from the age of 13 when her mother passed away.

Parents' Education

Participants in this study came from a variety of backgrounds, including their parents' education. I chose the broad definition of first-generation students for my study, which includes any student who does not have a parent or guardian with a four-year degree. Therefore, participants' parents had varying levels of education. The mother and father of a few participants had some college experience or an Associate's or Technical degree. A little more than half of the participants had one parent who completed a GED or high school and one parent

who completed some college or an Associate's or Technical degree. Remaining participants came from homes in which their mother, father, and guardian completed high school or a GED but did not continue their education. One parent of a participant did not complete high school.

Parents' Work

Although I found it helpful to understand parents' educational background, their work history created a more complete picture of the participants' family backgrounds. A few participants shared that their father attained a job early on and continued to work the same job or move up in the company. Fathers of a few participants started their own businesses. Nicole's father started working at an electric company at age 16, but eventually started his own cattle business. Tim's father worked several small jobs until he earned the money to purchase a semi-truck with his father. He drove semi-trucks until he raised enough money to buy a car repair shop, which he still owns and manages. Adriano's father emigrated from Venezuela and started his own graphic design company. Emma's father started a company that sells lunch food containers.

Overall, participants' parents and guardian represented a wide range of jobs. A couple of the mothers stayed at home. One of them helped with bookkeeping for the family business. Approximately half of the mothers worked in retail or as secretaries or receptionists. Two mothers served as nurses in a nursing home and at a high school. One participant's mother worked in loans at a bank and another worked as a medical transcriptionist. Fathers of the participants also held a variety of jobs. They worked as cops, civil engineers, draftsmen, construction workers, deputy and sheriff, director of public works, machinist, head custodian, and social worker for immigrants. One participant's father worked in an oil refinery, which she explained is a very dangerous job. Several participants shared that one or both of their parents

struggled to find a steady job and therefore held a lot of different jobs separated by periods of unemployment.

Conclusion

Families represented one of the primary microsystems for participants as they grew up. Their families strongly influenced their view of education and their understanding of themselves and the world around them. Although participants in my study did not reflect the racial/ethnic diversity of first-generation students, they did represent diverse backgrounds in terms of their socioeconomic status, hometown, and parents' educational attainment. In the following chapter, I present my findings, including ways in which participants' family culture and relationships influenced their views of education and their identity development. Although participants did not mention race or class as significantly influential in their experiences, race and class might explain the findings of this study and some of the discrepancies between this study and previous research.

CHAPTER FIVE
FINDINGS

I began this study focusing specifically on the influence of familial relationships and culture on the identity development of first-generation students. However, participants' descriptions of their college experiences shifted my attention to the environmental influences as well. In this chapter, I initially discuss participants' college choice and decision process. Next, I explore participants' college experiences (involvement, positive experiences, and sources of support). Later, I describe some of the characteristics the participants shared. Finally, I discuss the identity development of the participants. The discussion following these individual experiences and characteristics presents environmental influences that shaped participants' decisions, experiences, and identity development.

Parental Influence

Parents of the participants in my study influenced their student's college experience in many ways. They shaped participants' ideas about education and college. They also influenced participants' understanding of the meaning of a four-year degree. The majority of participants received the message that education is important and college is expected.

Value of Education

All of the participants stated that their parents highly valued education. Many parents encouraged participants to attend college because they believed it necessary for success in society today. Nicole stated that for her parents, education is "important and in this society, you need to have higher education to be able to be successful, kind of, or just to get by." Some parents recognized obstacles they faced in their careers and did not want their child to struggle in the same ways. Kelly explained the importance of college for her family,

> Yes, it was always very almost seen as something that was expected in my family even though none of them have been to college. They all would always tell me and my cousins that it's something that's important to better yourself, and they're just very focused on like, "Don't do what I did. Don't make the mistakes I did." I think it was very much pushed by not only directly my mom and my aunt but, I mean, even to this day, my grandfather still says, "Make sure you're studying. Get through it. Don't drop out. Keep going." It's very much a thing that they push for.

She received encouragement to attend college from many members of her family. Several participants mentioned high expectations their parents had of them. Hannah shared her dad wanted her to earn her doctorate someday.

Parental support of college varied among participants. Tim recognized the importance his parents placed on education through their financial support. They told him they would pay for the first four years of college, and then he needed to pay for any education beyond that time. Stephanie explained that her parents helped with homework and everyone in the family talked about what they learned that day in school. Lindsey shared about ways her mother supported her education,

> With me and my younger sister I know that my mom, when she worked in the factory she worked odd hours, so on her off hours during the day sometimes she wouldn't be working. She'd work nights, and so during the day sometimes she would come to school and like help out in the classroom, and do stuff kind of like that, so she was pretty involved in that way, and then my dad worked in town and he gets to decide when he leaves or whatever, so sometimes he would go to our little Halloween parades and stuff. They were involved in our schooling.

Even though her mother worked full time, she took the time to help in Lindsey's and her sister's school. Chelsea received support through accountability. Her father insisted she finish her homework before doing anything else.

Culture greatly shaped the high value Moua's family placed on education. Moua explained that the education of one family member increases their family status:

> Since my parents aren't successful by their standards or by many people's standards, they pushed us really hard growing up to be successful because the more education you have,

the higher family status, and so to be successful and to increase our family status, we need education.

Moua had the ability to improve his whole family's status by earning a four-year degree.

Despite parents' strong encouragement to attend college, some participants talked about different expectations parents had for their siblings. They believed that college is not the best choice for everyone. Kristin reflected on the difference in expectations in her family,

> My family's always pushed me for education. They've never really done it to my twin brother or my other siblings, but for me, for whatever reason, they've always really pushed it, but it's also really different because they don't talk to me about it. Like when I go home, they'll kind of like, how's school going? And I'll be like, good, and that's the conversation because if I try to go any further into detail they... eyes glass over and they just don't pay much attention to it.

> None of my stepmom's children have ever completed college. Actually all three of her kids started college and dropped out so none of them have ever completed a degree. My stepsister is the only one with a certificate, and she went to beauty school and that was the certificate. Then my siblings, my sister got a technical certificate in business management and that's it otherwise. It's never really been pursued with any of the other kids.

> We were very different academically. I was a straight A, honor roll student, and he was average. He didn't fail any classes, and you know, it was never a question of is he going to graduate, but it was just school didn't really seem to interest him too much. It was, he went to class. He did what he had to do, and that's about it.

Similarly, Emma felt her parents viewed college as important but not necessary for everyone. When she began looking at colleges, her dad told her, "Well, you don't have to go to college." She said they always emphasized good grades and working hard, but did not pressure her siblings or her to go to college if they did not want to attend.

Meaning of a Four-Year Degree

For many families, though, a four-year degree carried a lot of significance. As Moua explained, it represented "stability, security, status" for him and his family. For some families, the degree was a source of pride.

I know that they are definitely proud of me. They, I mean because even my extended family, I think there's only maybe a handful of people who have gotten a four-year, and even then like I think it might be two or three from my extended family of 30. So I mean, it's a pretty big deal, especially when I go back for holidays and stuff, you know. Everyone is asking me about it or asking me little things and just telling me how proud they are and stuff like that, because none of them like went to... some of them didn't even go to a tech school. Yeah. I think it's definitely something that is rare in my family but it's also something that they appreciate. (Lindsey)

Carly mentioned her parents bragged about her accomplishments. They take pride in her academic success and talk about it with their friends and coworkers. In a similar way, Sierra described a four-year degree as representing that "you can do anything even like when people might not think so." She also recognized that for her family, a degree represents a lot of hard work, and she acknowledged her inability to do it alone. Her success was dependent on the support of her family and, therefore, a source of pride for all of them. Lindsey said, "It's a big deal," and mentioned she had 25 people at her graduation, many more than the allotted five per graduate. Adriano also talked about it being a source of pride because his parents have seen his hard work and supported him from the beginning.

Additionally, for many families, a four-year degree represents more opportunities for jobs. It opens doors for steady work, which would allow participants to avoid the struggle one or both of their parents had with work. As Erynne explained,

They never really talked to me about why it would be important for me to get a four-year degree. It's more just like you should go to college to get work, and to get money. It wasn't more like to better your education or anything like that. It was like you should do this because you need to get work or else you're going to end up like your mom bouncing from job to job. At least that's what my dad says. It was more just going to get a job and not so much education, stuff like that.

Many agreed that a four-year degree increases job options since many jobs require a four-year degree. In addition, as Kelly stated, a degree can open doors beyond a specific major.

I think it's like we view it as giving yourself more opportunities. It opens more doors for you to even I would say decide later in life. Even if you change your mind on what you

want to do. I am going for nursing right now, that could completely change what I want to do in five years – and I still have the opportunity because I have more education – to switch to something completely different if I choose. So I think definitely just a lot more opportunities.

Many participants watched their parents struggle to find steady work or work they enjoyed, so a four-year degree offered them possibilities not available to their parents.

Although a degree could provide them with more options, a few participants recognized the growing reality that a four-year degree is not always enough. Nicole shared a conversation she had with her mother about it:

> To have more education under your belt for more job experience, I guess. My mom did ask me one time, "So, Exercise Science, what can you do with that with just a four-year degree?" This is a good question. Sometimes a four-year degree doesn't … get you everywhere.

Some felt increased pressure to continue their education in order to obtain their desired job. Others looked forward to education. For example, Carly already had plans to earn her doctorate and knew she wanted to study the experiences of students who have parents with disabilities.

Beyond job opportunities, for many of the participants' families, a degree represents financial security. Amber's father specifically views a degree as opening opportunities for high-paying professions. Therefore, she said he feels skeptical of her pursuing a social work degree.

> To my dad, it means opportunity. My dad, I don't think, has high expectations of me to become a lawyer or a doctor, have a really high-paying profession. He was skeptical of me coming to MCU because of the money, and he's skeptical about the degree that I'm pursuing, which is social work, because social workers don't make a lot of money. Social workers work very hard and receive very little benefit, which is strange that I have a passion for something like that. I know my dad has high expectations of... He wants me to be comfortable. He is the enforcer of the money, so a four-year degree means opportunities for you to get jobs that are going to pay your bills. That's the way that he thinks.

> My mom is a little bit more lenient with it. I think she would have been more accepting if I chose not to get a four-year degree. I'm struggling right now with getting my master's. I don't know if it's something I want to do. I know it's something I don't want to do right now. I don't know if I want to do it later, and just looking at all the pros and cons of that.

> I can tell the different opinions that my parents have. My mom is more like, "Do what you need to do." My dad is more like, "You're going to regret it, and you're going to financially struggle if you don't get your master's degree."
>
> My dad's the one in the family with the least education. He makes very good money right now, and he's very financially responsible with it. I think he just wants me to carry on the financial responsibility, especially since my boyfriend does not have a four-year degree and is not planning on getting one. I think he wants me to be fiscally responsible, which is hard, because my focus isn't all about money in life.

The different values placed on a four-year degree by Amber and her father created some tension around her choices about a major and the possibility of pursuing graduate school.

Chelsea also experienced tension with her parents due to differing values. As she explained, "For them, I think a lot of it is about money, and I don't want it to be as much about money, but I can see where they think that just because they struggled so much." Her mother encouraged her to get a two-year degree and then enroll in a four-year degree program. However, Chelsea feared that, like her mom, she would not go back to school after finishing the two-year degree. Kristin also recognized that a four-year degree created tension with her parents.

> My stepmom has told me that for her it's intimidating to her that I'm getting that. It kind of represents that thing that her and my father never pursued, and so to them, it's an intimidation thing that I could be more successful, I guess. But to my siblings, it's more like a pride thing, that they're really proud that out of seven kids that I'm the only one that's going to do this and pursue this.

For parents like Kristin's stepmom, their child's pursuit of a four-year degree can, at times, be intimidating or serve as a reminder of opportunities they did not have themselves.

College Choice

Growing up, participants in my study learned the importance of a four-year degree from their parents and others around them. Therefore, the majority of participants never considered college optional. Their primary decision became where they would enroll rather than if they would enroll. They received help in the process from many people and other resources. All of

the participants chose a private, liberal arts, university and their primary reasons were fit and financial aid.

Resources

When discussing their process of choosing a college, participants mentioned a variety of sources of information that helped them in the decision and application process. The high schools provided a lot of resources for the participants. Carly participated in a program through her high school called Step Up that brought students on campus visits. She also visited some colleges with her mother. In addition, she received a lot of help from a school counselor who worked in the Career Center. The counselor helped with a lot of the college search and application process, including pointing Carly to scholarship applications. Amber attended a couple college fairs at her high school where a lot of schools, primarily those in the region, had booths and staff available to talk about the institution.

Other participants turned to older friends or the parents of their peers for advice and help with the college decision and application process. One participant received a lot of advice from an older friend who was also a first-generation student. He specifically helped give guidance in choosing a college and the application process. Another participant mentioned going on a college tour with some friends and the parents of those friends.

A few participants relied on other media for information about colleges. One participant looked at the brochures sent to her by various colleges. Another participant looked up a current student's Instagram account in order to learn about the friends of that student and what they did for fun. She wanted the student perspective and did not want to rely on the information she received from the school to ensure she found the right fit for her.

Fit

Fit became an important factor for the majority of participants. Many pursued private institutions because of their academic programs, the small size, and the Christian environment. Over half of the participants searched for schools with specific majors and wanted to find an institution with a good program in that area. One participant looked at a published list ranking liberal arts schools in the Midwest to compare institutions and chose the university with the higher ranking of two he considered.

Almost half of the participants mentioned the importance of the size of the college and the classes. For some, they appreciated the size of the campus because it made everything really accessible. Others mentioned the importance of small classes because they felt they could develop better relationships with professors and could ask more questions in class.

Half of the participants at MCU wanted to attend a Christian university. A few participants said they hoped to find friends who had similar values and did not want to be a part of the party scene. Lindsey searched for schools with good nursing programs; she also wanted to find a Christian school.

> Definitely a Christian background because going to public school, I just did not like it and I struggled through it just because it was hard to find people who, especially going to a small school, it was hard finding people who were into their faith and wanted to come with me to youth group and stuff like that. I went to a youth group that was a half hour away because I didn't have any other options where I was and also just because that is where all my friends were, a half hour away, because I was really involved in different church ministries in that town, and everyone in my school just liked to go drink and party and so I lost a lot of friends that way. I was just done with that scene. I've seen that scene. I kind of wanted a more mature, more faith-based education. That was, I mean, that was my biggest thing and then, obviously to have nursing, which MCU has a great program, so those were really my only two considerations.

For participants like Lindsey, the culture and mission of the school played an important role in finding the right fit.

As participants described their college decision process, many talked about choosing the school that felt right. Emma did not plan to pick MCU where her sister attended college. However, she said "Then nothing felt like home after I thought about it and looked at my other options that I was really leaning towards. I'm home, it's MCU." Similarly, Amber said she first visited MCU's campus and then all the other institutions she looked at "didn't really measure up." Many participants talked about the institution having the right feel. Sabrina did not know what to look for in colleges, but said that SJU had the "right vibe" when she toured the campus. Sierra used similar language when describing her college choice. The other school did not give her a good vibe, but when it came to SJU, "It felt right, that's what it was. It just felt right." Many expressed the same sentiment about their university of choice.

Financial Aid

Although all the participants looked for institutions based on a number of factors, over half mentioned the role of financial aid in their decision. As Kristin stated, "Scholarships, like financial aid, were a big factor in it [the decision process]. SJU ended up giving me the most so that they actually became cheaper than the [state school] for me to go. Financial aid is huge." A few participants specifically applied to private universities based on the advice of a parent or high school counselor who said that private institutions grant more financial aid. Adriano expressed the sentiment that many had about the cost of private universities:

> So it was more of a - I applied believing something could happen - but it was like the price tag of a private university was a huge just, not a scare, but it was a little bit of a hesitation. So I had to say, I really want to go there but I'm not sure if it will work. So I was hesitant to try but I tried anyways hoping that something could happen and thankfully I applied to MCU and I got some good packages and financial aid and it was worth it. So I decided to take that leap of faith and come here.

Many mentioned some hesitation about the cost of private institutions, but after applying they received better financial aid packages than they expected.

On the other hand, a few participants did not worry about the financial implications of applying to a private institution. Kelly received money for college due to her mother passing away, so financial aid did not factor into her decision. Lindsey knew MCU was an expensive college, but chose not to worry about it since her scholarships cut the tuition in half. Erynne also expressed a lack of concern over money, preferring to take things one day at a time. She explained,

> I didn't really care about money so much because I knew I was going to get scholarships because of everything that I had done in high school, like working hard and NHS [National Honor Society]. So I wasn't really worried about money. I'm like the kind of mindset that one day at a time. I don't really look to the future much because it stresses me out. And so, money, okay, I'll pay some right now and get loans and pay that off as it comes.

Besides these exceptions, financial aid factored significantly into participants' college choice.

College Experience

The comments participants shared about their college experience affirmed that the majority of them found a college that fit them well. Most found ways to be involved through extracurricular activities and engaged academically through connections with faculty and internship or research opportunities. They had a lot of experiences, both positive and challenging, that created opportunities for growth and influenced their identity development. In this section I discuss their housing, their on-campus involvement, the experiences they cited as positive and challenging, and their sources of support during college.

Housing

Contrary to a lot of research on first-generation students, all of the participants in this study lived on campus their first year in college rather than commuting from home. Only two participants from MCU moved off campus. One moved into a house near campus with some friends from MCU. The other participant moved home her senior year. She said she appreciated

the independence for a while, but missed being home and having her parents around to help her with things like laundry and car repairs. The majority of students at SJU moved off campus to an apartment or house near campus after one or two years in on-campus housing.

Involvement

Although work and family obligations can limit first-generation students' ability to get involved on campus (Jehangir, 2010a; Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005), these experiences often benefit their academic success (Kuh et al., 2007). Almost all of the participants in this study worked during the academic year. In addition to their jobs, all but one participated in extracurricular activities. More than half of the participants joined a club or organization on campus. Several participated in sports, choir, intramurals, student activities, and orientation leadership. More than half were highly involved on campus. However, two participants shared that they were less involved in college than they were in high school. Approximately half of the participants worked on campus and some of their jobs connected to extracurricular activities. For many, their on-campus jobs and extracurricular involvement created some of their most positive experiences in college.

Most Positive Experiences

When asked to describe some of their most positive experiences, the majority of participants quickly recalled a variety of accomplishments, experiences, and relationships. Their responses fell into three categories: academics, experiences that stretched or challenged them, and sense of belonging. Many of these experiences led to personal growth and increased confidence.

Academics. Many participants selected their major before starting college. However, for some of those who did not begin college knowing what they wanted to study, figuring out

their major became an important milestone. For example, Nicole thought she wanted to major in

Psychology, but through her first-year seminar about Health Sciences, she realized she wanted to

work as a physical therapist. A couple other participants noted academic accomplishments as

one of their most positive experiences. Chelsea said the day she learned the professors accepted

her into the nursing program became one of the best days of her life. Sierra noted making the

Dean's list as a positive experience.

Similarly, Adriano pointed to his intellectual growth as one of the most positive aspects

of college.

> One thing that I like a lot is that even if it's not related to my class, my ability to learn just on my own has increased. So whereas to say I could pick up a book and read it or I listen to podcasts or I'm constantly just learning things and somehow it all connects back to my classes in some way or another. I see it's like I've learned how to learn on my own sort of thing…

> Also, the ability to process large amounts of information faster. I've gotten used to it now. I can do a paper a lot faster now than I did when I was a freshman. I can read a book faster or I can summarize or synthesize, and not have to go through everything as in depth if I can't. I feel like if I want to, which I think I will, continue my education, it won't be that difficult because I do feel like I've learned something. Whereas, unfortunately I've encountered a lot of individuals that they say, "Oh, you know, I went to college" or "I'm in college right now but I don't feel like I'm learning anything." I can't say that. I think I have learned a lot.

He saw a lot of progress in his ability to learn on his own and gained more confidence

academically. He also recognized that he thought for himself and did not automatically agree

with everything his professors said. Erynne commented that she loves learning in general, but

was thankful for classes that incorporated her faith.

> So being able to now learn more about my faith while bettering my education like that is a really awesome experience. I'm really thankful that I get that because I don't know, it gives me a better perspective on who I am and why I'm doing it.

The inclusion of faith in the classroom helped her development since she could include an

important dimension of her identity in her learning.

Experiences that stretched or challenged participants. Another area participants

mentioned as their most positive experiences included those that stretched or challenged them,

such as meeting new people, studying abroad, and gaining leadership experience. Stephanie

identified the opportunity to meet new people as a positive aspect of her college experience.

> I think just meeting new people. Branching out. It's definitely been a culture change,
> too. There's a lot of different types of people here, different ethnicities, different sexual
> orientations and everything. It's been quite an experience. I find it interesting just to
> learn about it and meet people and see how they grew up, compared to how I grew up.

Stephanie also mentioned the chance to travel. She studied abroad in Italy and never imagined

having that opportunity. Grace also studied abroad in Italy. When I asked her what made that

experience significant, she replied,

> I think because first of all, it was a chance to explore a different country while not having
> to worry about where I was going to live because they provided all that… I was starting
> junior year so I was thinking about going abroad, teaching abroad and just what it was
> like abroad anyway and how it was so much different than America. Italy itself is so
> much different and their values that it really changed how I looked at my time and how…
>
> For them, education is really important, and of course, for me as a teacher, I really like
> education and I value it, but taking time to focus on family and friends and not all school
> and not all … Sometimes it feels like college is all about school. Sometimes I never even
> know what my siblings are doing because I'm so involved in school and in so much stuff.
> I learned a lot of things from it, learned about myself.

For Grace, studying abroad helped her recognize and learn from other perspectives. She also

learned a lot about her own faith as she spent time with others who had different beliefs. She

said the experience challenged her understanding of what life will be like after she graduates and

leaves a school where most are Christians.

> Sierra expressed her gratitude for her leadership opportunities as a new student mentor

and in student organizations.

> Finding out that I got accepted into the MSN program, which is new student mentor or
> orientation leaders is pretty competitive here between the first-years that… cuz they hire
> x amount of first year, x amount of returners. That was really cool. I don't know. Just

like all the orgs I've been a part of here. And like now, this year, like getting leadership roles within them. It's just been really happy for me to see and just like to see even in the next two years what I can accomplish and like what I want to accomplish.

She and another student talked about the positive experience of serving as a mentor for new students. Hannah recently learned that her teammates selected her as one of the captains for cross-country the following year. These experiences provided positive relationships and the opportunity to challenge themselves through new experiences or leadership opportunities.

Sense of belonging. The majority of participants described their most positive aspects of college as those that increased their sense of belonging. Several participants shared their appreciation for their professors. Hannah found significance in them knowing her name. She explained, "I feel comfortable here, too, like the professors, like they know me by my first name. And I can call them by their first name. They actually, like they truly care how well you do." Lindsey also valued the level of care professors showed.

I think one of the big things is professors in general. If I ever need anything, they are there for me, or just like, you know, if I need extensions on anything for any reason, or like just to talk to in general. I'm a junior now in the nursing program and the faculty are awesome and they are always willing to help you out. I think faculty is a huge positive experience here.

Emma also felt known by the professors and appreciated that some of them gave out their cellphone numbers and allowed students to call them to talk anytime.

Other participants felt a sense of belonging due to their involvement on campus. The extracurricular activities provided a group in which participants belonged. Nicole spoke highly of her cross-country team.

The team is like a family and it's such a great support system. At 3:05 everyday, you have the same people you can always rely on. You always go to your workout together. Because we all love to run, it's just something that you can enjoy with people, and you get so close. I mean, running long distance especially, like you just talk all the time, so we all know each other's quirks and weird things, and it's a great support system especially for college students that have a lot of decisions to make.

Their extracurricular involvement provided them with a group of friends with similar interests.

These friends became strong support systems for many of the participants. Amber shared the

impact of choir on her sense of belonging at MCU.

> I got into MCU Choir my sophomore year, and it was the best experience ever. We got to go to Europe together. Then last year, we were in San Diego. This year, we get to go to Chicago. I have made my best friends in choir. I'm actually better friends with people in choir than people I lived with for a couple years. I have grown a lot and developed lifelong friendships that have been really significant, because I didn't see that happening freshman year. I was starting to second-guess my decision. When I was able to get into that choir and be around people who were passionate about similar things that I was, that was super cool for me.

Amber and many others found a significant sense of belonging through the friendships they

made in their extracurricular activities.

Even those participants less involved on campus shared that the relationships they made

became one of the most positive aspects of college. Moua talked about the impact of his

friendships.

> The friends that I've made here have been life-changing, the experiences that I've had. The community that is here is very sincere and people just care about you randomly, which is really great. You don't see that very much in the real world. After I graduate, that's going to be missed very dearly. Just the relationships that are had on a daily basis are something that you won't forget because once you get out of here, you face the real world and you face the dog eat dog company world, which is what I'm going to be at, so yeah, that's probably going to be the most memorable.

Similarly, Chelsea said that the friends she made and the experiences they had together are some

of the most positive aspects of her college experience.

For others, extracurricular opportunities provided leadership training and a sense of being

"known" on campus. Kristin worked with student activities as the yearbook editor and as a

volunteer for the programming board. She explained the impact of these leadership

opportunities.

Otherwise working with student activities has been really phenomenal for me, whether that be as yearbook editor or volunteering with the programming board, getting to work at events, meeting different people, and doing things that I didn't expect to do. I have people that talk about me and know me. I have students that don't even go to SJU that will email asking, you know, are you going to be hiring next year? What do I do? When is that process? Being given those opportunities and having my email and my contact information being displayed as a student leader is really phenomenal.

Through various leadership opportunities participants had, others began to know them as leaders and as resources or sources of information, which increased their sense of belonging and connection to the campus.

Challenges

On the other hand, participants also experienced some challenges during their time in college. I anticipated some of their answers reflecting their experience as a first-generation student. However, most of what they shared might also be the most challenging experiences for continuing-generation students.

More than half of the participants talked about the challenge of managing their time. Many balanced classes and at least one job in addition to social activities and investing in their families and friends. One participant mentioned working 40 hours per week, but the majority of participants worked fewer hours. However, some participants worked more than one job, which added more stress to figuring out their schedules. A few participants shared that managing stress proved difficult for them. Nicole described her struggle with stress and the impact:

Stressing and trying to manage it, I think. Because I put so much pressure on myself sometimes, it's a little overwhelming and I try to do too much at one time, so I spread myself too thing. Last year I couldn't do track because I was so stressed and I didn't like racing that well, so it brought on a lot of anxiety. In effect, that it took every Saturday from my weekends and I needed to study and do stuff. I have two jobs on campus and stuff, so yeah, I'm still working on that. I'm a lot happier, but I'm still working on that because last year was a little rough.

Another participant shared that her stress caused her to deal with depression her first year in

school, but after seeking help is doing much better with managing her stress.

A few struggled to connect socially. Tim, who enrolled in college after playing junior

hockey, found it challenging to adjust socially. He was a little older and grew up in Tennessee.

He said it often felt as if everyone else knew each other. Erynne also struggled to feel socially

connected.

> I've had a lot of trouble with my friends in finding… I mean I have friends and like I said
> earlier just finding that friends group and feeling like people want to be around me is like
> super hard for me to come to terms with because in high school I would always have
> somebody looking for me or wanting to talk to me about something because I had a lot of
> friends at different places from different groups. But now, like here, I have friends here
> and they also have like their own friends groups. And so I'm not… It's just like me. So
> it's hard to come to terms with that nobody is really searching for me at times. Yeah,
> there would be somebody who is like, "Hey, you want to play pool?" I'm like, "Okay,"
> but it's not the same all the time. You know, like it was in high school. That's
> something that I had to come to terms with in coming here.

Similarly, Stephanie described the challenge of making friends after growing up in a small town

and going to school with the same people her whole life. She suddenly found herself needing to

learn how to make friends again once she started college.

Another theme that arose from a few participants included the challenge of independence

and leaving home. Moua and Stephanie expressed their struggle of not having their mom around

when they needed something or when they became ill. Sabrina found it difficult to go back and

forth between home and school. She lived on campus and spent time at home during the January

break and summer break. She shared her struggle with the transition,

> So I think going back home for like the full month of January, I don't know, was just
> weird. Because you feel at home when you're here and you feel at home when you're
> home. Then for a while you don't. I don't know. It was weird.

She felt comfortable at home and at school, but found the transition between the two challenging. Similarly, Hannah talked about her struggle to figure out where home is for her now that she lives on her own. However, she did not feel at home either place initially.

> Um, I guess, I'd say the hardest part is knowing where home is now cuz I don't go home often, so that doesn't feel like home. And down here doesn't feel completely like home, especially this summer. That was really hard. The summer was definitely like a growing experience cuz I was completely on my own. I had to cook, I had to pay rent … So I was just kind of torn. Like I don't have a home really. But I'm guessing, I'm starting to like accept that like this is home now.

For a few participants, the transition to college and living on their own required a lot of adjustments.

Academics proved challenging for almost half of the participants. A few talked about the increased academic workload. They found themselves needing to study and read more than in high school. Others took a specific course, such as discrete math, that felt especially challenging. Another participant took 18 credits one semester, so she admitted she made that semester challenging for herself. One participant felt a lot of stress around academics, which became very difficult for her. Overall, their struggles with academics related to the increased time spent studying, either in general or for a specific course.

A couple participants experienced a situation that created a lot of stress. Lindsey broke her femur the first semester of college, which added a lot of obstacles with housing and staying caught up in classes due to time in the hospital. Tim chose SJU so he could play hockey, but the coach cut him from the team. He shared the struggle of figuring out who he was apart from hockey, since his identity revolved around hockey most of his life.

Other answers reflected the experience of many college students. A couple talked about the challenge of living with others and the conflicts that arose with their roommates. One

participant described the difficulty of transitioning from her first year to her sophomore year in college.

> It was challenging to transition from freshman year to sophomore year. Everything was still new, but you're expected to know a lot more. You're still expected to know professors and know how the school works. I did, to an extent, but I still didn't know where certain classrooms were, and I still didn't know what was expected of me in some of my classes. My underclassmen years were difficult, because I wasn't in my major fully. I was taking classes that were general that I wasn't good at. (Amber)

As participants described their challenges in college though, it became clear they had great sources of support.

Resources and Sources of Support

Throughout their time in college, participants found support in many different ways. The majority talked about people who were resources for them. However, a few did mention specific campus resources or tools. One participant found utilizing tutoring sessions offered for certain classes was helpful. She also used online library resources, which she learned about in her college writing class and utilized for many other classes later. A couple participants said they took advantage of counseling services and health services on campus. Others shared about various offices on campus that provided support for them, including Student Life and Campus Ministries.

The most common responses about resources and support involved people. Half of the participants mentioned their parents or their family as resources. Many participants called one or both of their parents for encouragement or space to process things in their lives. Adriano, for example, shared about the support he received from his mother.

> My mom definitely I would say is a huge, my mom and dad, both of them, but because my dad works a lot my mom's more available for that. But there are times or even in the past where I would call her if I was really stressed or if I really needed to just kind of like empty my mind from my preoccupations and just talk to my mom about life and just how things are going. And she was always very helpful. She is helpful.

Although many received support and encouragement from their families, some participants

recognized the limitations of the type of support they could receive. Grace explained,

> My family, they are a resource. When I was having trouble, I could always call them, but I wouldn't say they were the first resource because they didn't go to a four-year school, and none of them are teachers or anything. I'm the first teacher in my family. I think mostly going to classmates and friends would be my first resource in school because I like to talk about things with people, whether it be a lot of… I'm a group work kind of person or a partner work.

She viewed her family as a resource, but chose to get help with academic work from friends and

classmates. Chelsea shared a similar description of the different types of support she received.

> When I get really stressed, I usually call my p… They tell me that… They always joke with me. And it's kind of true. Sad, but true. I call them when I'm like really stressed, indecisive about something, or… Sometimes I'll call them when I just want to hear from them, but more the other two than not.

> My mom has just always been there, and will be like, "One day at a time, Chelsea. Let's figure this out. Let's talk this through." Just very encouraging. Yeah. Just like telling me, "You can do this." Just all those positive thoughts and everything. It has been more so them, and then more academically has been my professors and friends here, and classmates and things like that.

Although some participants did not expect to receive academic help from their parents, their

parents often served as their primary source of encouragement and emotional support.

Half of the participants talked about their peers as a significant resource. As Grace

mentioned, some of the participants appreciated the ability to study with peers. Erynne described

the mutually beneficial relationships she had with classmates.

> It's really helpful to have… to work with people in your class on homework and studying for tests because then, I mean, just last week I was studying with one of my friends for a chem test and she told me a bunch of things that I didn't know. I was like, "Oh, really? Okay, great." And then there are things that I helped her with and it was a good resource to have people in your class studying together, doing homework together.

She received help with homework from her peers, but also recognized that other times she

provided the help for her peers. Those involved in extracurricular activities or working on

campus talked about older students providing support to them. Carly secured a job on campus in the student center and started training before the academic year began. For her, that opportunity gave her a head start in gaining familiarity with campus.

> Then I was working here before I moved on campus, before I knew anyone and it was really actually nice working with sophomores and juniors. They were explaining the way and they were telling me what to know. I didn't know my first shift was with another who was on the track team and we talked the whole four-hour shift about random stuff, stuff to know because he knew I was here for school. I guess it really helped to work here because when you work here you're supposed to know the campus so I went on multiple tours for like in the building so I knew what to point out to guests.

Others received similar help in understanding campus culture and systems through peers in their extracurricular activities.

In addition to their peers, half of the participants shared the importance of their professors. They described school cultures in which faculty know students by name and care about their life beyond academics. For some participants, the relationship they had with professors helped them feel known. Amber described flexibility and understanding offered by professors.

> I have professors who are involved and engaged, and are okay with you missing class when you have to deal with… even if it's not a funeral or whatever else it could be, even if you're just having a really tough day or your anxiety's really bad. Professors are really understanding of that. That has helped me a lot, because I feel like at college, I've been finally treated as an adult or as an equal, where all my life, I always felt like I was just one step lower than everybody else. That's been a really positive thing for me here.

Kelly also shared about feeling known by professors. She kept in touch with friends at other universities and felt they did not receive the same attention and care from faculty.

> I think one of the things that I and from talking to other friends at other universities, I am very lucky where I'm at for the professors. Looking back at some of the issues I've had or just having a bad day and happening to see a professor and they can tell. They are a great resource for you, not only academically but your personal life. They're willing to listen, to talk to you, to help you.

> I've had professors just considering my family situation. Like I said, I don't even see my family on Thanksgiving even, I've had a professor invite me to her house for their Thanksgiving dinner. I think that that is by far what I have used as the biggest resource for myself. It's just really getting to know my professors on more than just an academic level.

As this example from Kelly demonstrates, many of the participants shared specific examples of ways in which professors showed their concern for other areas of students' lives besides the academics.

Overall, as participants discussed resources contributing to their success, all of them had quick answers and showed a lot of gratitude for support they received. Lindsey shared a great example of the variety of resources students accessed during college.

> Definitely my friends. I would say that they are a huge, huge aspect in my success here just because I can always go to them for questions, especially my nursing major friends. I mean, I can always go to them with questions. We can study together, the academic part, and just even other aspects of my life going on, they can help me cope with that and stuff, and like after the whole accident and breaking my femur, it was a huge, huge low point for me and my life in general, and so my sophomore spring I decided to go to counseling here at MCU and it kind of helped but I wasn't really too into it. I think I did need that at that time and that's a huge resource to help me get through things that I was going through, just from that accident, and then health services was there because I ended up having UTI's and kidney infections and just a bunch of random stuff. I don't know if they were connected to that at all but that was a huge thing just having them be there and I'm trying to think, professors, family, everybody.

Many of the participants found academic support and emotional support that helped them thrive in college despite some of the obstacles they faced.

Characteristics of Participants

As Gorski (2011) stated, "It is popular in the education milieu today to talk about the dangers of assuming a deficit perspective, approaching students based upon our perceptions of their weaknesses rather than their strengths." Although first-generation students may not have the same cultural and social capital as their continuing-generation peers (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Oldfield, 2007; Stuber, 2011), they possess many qualities that help them thrive in college.

Participants in my study demonstrated resourcefulness, self-efficacy and ambition, resiliency, and leadership.

Resourcefulness

In the application process, a few participants talked about figuring things out on their own since their parents did not understand the process. Lindsey explained,

> I mean, going through the whole housing process, and doing all the stuff for the school that they require you to do, and then also I applied for financial aid and stuff like that. I did my own private loan and then the government loans and stuff. I did that sort of stuff and then figured out scholarships and different stuff like that, and then just got stuff that I needed for school. I did all that on my own, mainly just because I think I was the only one who understood kind of what was going on, or like I just did everything on my own. I applied for my own loans. I did all that stuff. Obviously with a little bit of help from [my parents] when I needed it, like FAFSA stuff. Your average stuff you had to do.

Although the application process involves a lot of details, Lindsey and others figured it out on their own with a little help from others. Nicole talked about the process of figuring it out as a learning experience. She shared, "I think the process of figuring them out yourself and making those decisions is just all more of the process to figure out how you deal with things and how you cope. It's a learning process." She then explained that she heard about scholarships through her high school and then applied for them. She knew she needed money, so though she did not have a lot of guidance in the application process, Nicole found, applied for, and received a lot of scholarships to help her pay for college.

Before moving to campus, two participants found jobs and started training before classes began. Carly became acquainted with some of the track team members the summer before she started. She mentioned her interest in an on-campus job to a teammate on Facebook, who knew the supervisor hiring for positions in the new student center. Carly sent her resume to him, went to campus for an interview, and had an email with a job offer when she arrived at home. She started working in August before school started and had the opportunity to get to know the

campus and some upperclass students. Hannah also demonstrated resourcefulness in finding a

job before school started. She worked at a coffee shop in her hometown, so during summer

orientation she asked the coffee shop on campus if they were hiring. She applied and started

training in August.

Self-Efficacy and Ambition

Many participants demonstrated self-efficacy and ambition. More than half of the

participants mentioned plans to attend graduate school. One participant did not feel challenged

during college and explained, "Undergrad for me was like a stepping stone just to get to a Ph.D.

program." Another participant plans to get her Master's degree soon and has a long-term goal of

earning a doctoral degree.

When faced with obstacles, many participants talked about strategies they used and their

determination to succeed. A few participants said their positive outlook helped them through

challenging experiences. Lindsey described her transition to college and the way her positive

attitude influenced her.

> I mean, it was definitely different from high school, but I don't, I wouldn't say that it was
> overwhelming. Maybe that was just because I was so excited to be here that I wasn't, I
> don't know... maybe it just, well, obviously it just flew over my head because I don't
> remember anything about that, but I think some parts were overwhelming just because I
> was, I don't know if I'm ever going to be able to find my way around this place sort of,
> like finding all my different classes with some of the girls that I just met. We went
> around and looked for each other's classes and I'm like, "I'm not going to remember any
> of this," so I remember that being overwhelming, but also I was just like, "You know
> what? I'm going to find it and it's going to be great," I had a very positive outlook on
> how my college experience was going to be. I was never like, "I don't think I can do
> this," so I think, overall, it was just like very positive and I knew that people were there to
> help me if I ever needed it.

Her positive attitude helped her face situations that started to feel overwhelming, and her belief

in herself and her abilities attributed to her success in college. Sierra received news that her

parents filed for divorce on the first day of classes. Despite everything going on at home with

her family, she became very involved on campus and stepped into a couple leadership roles when

given the opportunity.

Other students found themselves in challenging situations, and through hard work,

proved to themselves that they could accomplish their goal. Kristin shared an example of hard

work paying off,

> I took analytical chemistry which was a junior-level, writing intensive chemistry my first
> year here… I knew it was a junior level, but I didn't know it was writing intensive, but I
> think really that class turned out to be one of my favorite classes that I've ever taken
> because it was the first class where I had to teach myself to study and to work for a grade
> because I've always been an A student, and I wanted to stay an A student and so I wanted
> to prove that although I was in a class with my mentors that I had, I'm like, "No, I can get
> this A. I'm going to get this A." It was my first class that made me work for a grade.
> That professor did turn out to be my advisor now, and she's been really great with giving
> me different research opportunities and different scholarships and things like that where
> she's one of my favorite people now.

Kristin demonstrated self-efficacy as well as resiliency in the class.

Resiliency

In addition to the challenge of earning an undergraduate degree, a few participants cited

obstacles they faced during college. One participant broke her femur the first semester of

classes. Although she recently arrived on campus, she quickly learned to access the school's

resources as she dealt with missing classes and moving to wheelchair-accessible housing. Tim

enrolled at SJU planning to play on the hockey team. After being "cut" from the team, he turned

a negative circumstance into an opportunity to learn more about himself.

> I, really to be honest, I think as much as I hated getting cut from the hockey team here
> last year, last year kind of seemed like a rough year as a whole but at the same time I
> think I learned a lot more about myself in that year where I didn't have practice every day
> to get my mind off things. I didn't, you know, I had weekends where I had to figure out
> what to do and it wasn't just, "oh, we're getting on the bus at 5:00 and driving to this
> school to play with another team."
>
> I had more freedom to kind of do what I wanted and it took a while for me to realize
> exactly what that was. But, you know, I guess since last year I've… I took a class this

year that made me realize what I actually want to major in. Well, I already had one in mind so I'm double majoring. I got a job for marketing campus recreation and I started up an organization on campus. So it took about a year and me punching my roommate's dresser after several shots of fireball last year to fracture my hand and then kind of realize… after I got cut to realize like, "Okay, hockey is not everything."

He eventually started a club hockey team on campus, providing him with a great leadership opportunity.

Leadership

The majority of participants engaged in extracurricular activities on campus, and approximately one third of them stepped into leadership roles. One participant recently received news of her nomination as team captain for the following cross-country season. A few participants applied for and became orientation leaders, which is a very competitive leadership position. Two participants became leaders when they started a club on campus. As participants described their leadership positions and other experiences on campus, they often talked about ways they grew and discovered more about themselves through those experiences.

Identity Development

Participants in this study changed in a number of ways as they navigated their college years. A few noted growth in their leadership or faith. Others discussed changes in their personality and lifestyle. For some participants, their growth affected their perspectives and worldview. Changes they noticed in themselves influenced their family relationships and those relationships, in turn, influenced participants' identity development.

Leadership Development

The majority of participants participated in extracurricular activities, and many of them held leadership positions within those activities. The teammates of one participant voted her in as captain for the following year. Two participants served as new student mentors in the

orientation program. A couple participants started clubs on campus. As she spent time in

college, Kristin found herself taking on more leadership roles.

> I'm more apt to kind of take the lead in things, which is backed that I have so many leadership roles on campus. Like in high school, I was part of the National Honor Society and I was yearbook editor, but I was kind of a little bit more standoffish, like I wasn't like president of student council or did any of those flamboyant, here I am things, whereas here I kind of have stood up a little bit more and kind of taken advantage of those opportunities, I guess. That's given me a lot more confidence in myself as a person since I've gotten to college I'm a lot more independent than I used to be, kind of because you have to be.

Although they gained a lot of skills through their leadership roles, most participants commented

on the confidence they gained.

Faith Development

College also provided space for their faith development as they had exposure to classes

and other opportunities on campus (SJU participants did not raise this). Most participants from

MCU grew up in Christian families. However, a few discovered other expressions of the

Christian faith in college through friendships, classes, and other campus experiences. Erynne

expressed gratitude for the opportunity to take classes that discussed Christianity since she

attended a public high school.

> Obviously I love learning in general. And so the positive experiences would be going to classes that I've never taken like intro to Bible and CWC like these are just classes that I've never been able to take before because I went to a public school. I mean there's a lot of people who went to private Christian schools in high school or in elementary school and middle school and I mean, I never got that. So being able to now learn more about my faith while bettering my education like that is a really awesome experience. I'm really thankful that I get that because I don't know, it gives me a better perspective on who I am and why I'm doing it.

She learned more about herself as she grew in her understanding of her faith.

Personality and Lifestyle Changes

Additionally, participants commented on changes related to their personalities and

lifestyles. A few noticed they became more introverted or extroverted in college. Moua

explained,

> I think when I came to college I was a really big extrovert. I couldn't sit still. I would
> have to go and talk or have to go and do something proactive, and as I'm ending my
> career at MCU I think I'm more of an outgoing introvert. I can go out and hang out with
> people and talk along with people, but then at the end of the day, I need just a couple of
> hours to myself and just to be able to sit and relax.

Similarly, Amber shared her surprised in how she became more isolated in college. She

participated in many extracurricular activities in high school and was very social. However, she

became very withdrawn her first year in college because she felt over stimulated by all the

changes and living on a floor with so many people. On the other hand, a few mentioned they

became more involved in college than in high school or were more outgoing.

Sierra discussed her increased self-confidence, which helped her become more assertive.

> I'd say I used to be a little like less assertive of a person, or like a little more like quiet,
> but then like once you meet me like I break out of my shell, but like now I'm just kind of
> like less filtered in a sense like in like having a conversation of like I don't really care but
> like SJU has like a good space for that to like not really care what people think of you cuz
> there's just so small of a student body and they're all like very different, but … So I
> guess I just am more myself and that's a difference.

The environment at SJU made her feel safe expressing her thoughts honestly without fear of

others' opinions of her.

Since all participants lived on campus at least one year, they experienced living away

from home. The majority talked about the independence they had in college. For Moua, living

away from home developed responsibility in him.

> I've become more responsible because coming into college, the responsibility was my
> parents can take care of it kind of thing, and so growing up, it's just a part of the process

of being able to be responsible for yourself and being able to take care of yourself.

Similarly, Hannah expressed the challenge she faced the first time she moved into an off-campus

house with friends from school during the first summer of college. She had to think about

paying rent and cooking on her own for the first time.

Rachel discussed a lifestyle change since coming to college.

> Well, I used to be like into drugs and alcohol. And that probably carried on 'til like
> halfway between sophomore year and then I stopped all that… And like I've just grown
> in Christ a lot, and made some really close friends that—I had close friends in high
> school and whatever, but like I can't describe like what I have with these people, that I
> know I didn't have anywhere else. So.

When asked what contributed to this change, Rachel said, "Just - not like figuring out life, but

kind of. Like it's not all about that. Like there's a point to why we're here and what we're doing

here." College provided friendships and an environment that help her figure out the priorities

she wanted to have in her life, which led to a drastic lifestyle change.

Changes in Perspective

For many participants, college broadened their perspective through new experiences and

meeting new people. Lindsey made the connection between college and her different

perspective.

> It's completely different and I think that I've grown in ways that I never would have if I
> didn't come to college and experience everything here with everything put on your plate
> and different people that you meet and different things that you hear about. It puts a
> different perspective on everything in life, so I think that's one of the biggest things that
> has happened.

Stephanie agreed, saying, "I think I'm definitely more open to experiences and to people. Seeing

and talking to all kinds of different people and different backgrounds. It's really broadened my

perspective on things."

Some participants felt more open-minded. Amber gained humility, and an appreciation for diversity through her classes. She described the changes she experienced,

> I would say I've done a complete 180. I'm a very different person. I came to college thinking I knew a lot. I wasn't arrogant and thinking I knew everything, because I knew I was going to learn a lot at college, but I thought I had pretty much most of the world figured out and how the world worked. In social work, being able to work on cultural competence and working around diversity, there's a lot of stuff I never thought about.
>
> Now, I feel so confident in who I am. My worldview has completely changed. I have different expectations of myself. I approach every situation so differently. I'm a lot more open. I thought that I was open before. I didn't think I was a closed-minded person, which I don't think I was ever, but I realize now how much more open I could have been back then. Now, I am so open to everything, which I think is perfect for being a social worker.

Her new worldview led to greater confidence in her identity, which helped her be more open-minded.

Lindsey also demonstrated growth in her awareness of others. She and her roommate had different preferences about the cleanliness of the room, but the experience of sharing space with a roommate helped her see the importance of understanding another person's perspective. Lindsey admitted, "I definitely had to think about how the other person likes their living situation rather than just mine." Her experience of living on campus with a roommate helped her grow in her understanding of others and willingness to consider other perspectives.

A couple participants learned how to handle stress better. Hannah talked about learning through a tough experience.

> I'd say, I don't get stressed at all anymore. But I know last year I did, but I learned from that cuz I did not, that mentally did not do well at all. I definitely hit like a point of depression, but then I learned from it. And now I'm just like really positive on everything.

After struggling with depression due, in part, to stress, she utilized some resources on campus, connected with her coaches, and developed strategies for coping with stress in a healthy way.

Confidence and Self-Authorship

One of the most common areas of growth mentioned by participants related to increased confidence and self-authorship. Kelly described feeling inferior to people prior to college and assumed no one would listen to her. She gained confidence, though, as her knowledge increased. She also talked about deferring to her aunt in the past and learning to make decisions on her own.

> I think I probably see it differently now. More so because before, I would just say, she's the adult, she's my aunt, she's right. Now, as I'm learning more just about life, some things are things you learn in the classroom but some things are just you're on your own that you learn just from the experiences you have, not necessarily in the classroom. I think I'm realizing that even though I'm young, I still can make decisions, and I still can, you know, I don't have to take what someone tells me, and just say it's true. I can decide that for myself.

She gained enough confidence to believe in her ability to make decisions for herself. Hannah demonstrated a similar increase in her confidence in making decisions.

> Um, I'd say I'm more about I'm gonna do what I want to do. I'm gonna make my own choices. Like if I'm gonna stay down here summer, I'm going to no matter what my parents think or friends at home think.

She started making decisions she felt were best, despite the opinions of others.

Grace talked about wanting to make different decisions than her parents. Although she acknowledged she would not have her stepmother without her parents' divorce, she hopes to avoid experiencing a divorce herself. She also noted that she now wants to marry a Christian, even though she did not prioritize that when she started college. Additionally, she hopes to make healthier food choices than her father. She mentioned the value of healthy food is a small thing, but it demonstrated her awareness of the value of making her own choices.

Two participants described their confidence in choosing their own beliefs and convictions. Emma shared about the way classes challenged her to rethink what she thought she knew and believed.

I feel like I did change a little bit as far as some of my morals and stuff, like going to chapel and questioning stuff. Things that I've talked about in some of my classes, just that professors have brought up, it just made me think twice about what I believe. Going from my parents beliefs to my beliefs, it's now like, okay I believe this because my parents believe this or am I believing this because I think this. That's what a lot of my classes challenged me to think about, I think. I guess that changed who I am. If that makes sense.

College exposes students to different people and new ideas, which encourages them to ask questions about their own perspectives and beliefs.

Adriano talked about taking ownership of his beliefs and the way that affected his relationship with his mother.

That's one thing that I've realized is in the past year and a half, I've developed my own views. Not necessarily in contrast of my parents but they're like my own. They're sort of like, They're… I'm entitled… They're originated in me. My convictions, my theological views, the way I see the church. A lot of that has its roots in my parents. It has some of its roots in my parents.

But it's like if the views I took which roots are my parents, the views I got from my parents and some views I got from other sources, I've grown upon that and I've gone deeper than my parents have gone. And thankfully, when I talk to my parents about that. It's not like, "you're better than us" sort of thing. It's more like "we're really happy that you learned these things." My mom is very fascinated when I talk to her about these things. Instead of having that, "you know more than me." It's more like, "walk me through that. What's that about?" I'm happy I can see that in my lifespan I've been able to grow farther and deeper than they have. Not that I'm better than them. But I feel like if it wasn't for them I wouldn't have the groundwork or the foundation that I needed to do what I'm doing now. I think the expression they had is they're proud of me and they're happy.

He realized many of his beliefs came from his parents, but felt he had the opportunity to learn more. Rather than distancing him from his family, he talked with his mother about what he learned, which kept her connected to his college experience even though she lived in another state.

The Significance of Challenges and Disappointments

For some, the growth they described connected to a challenge or disappointment they faced. A few participants shared their struggle to figure out who they were after losing something, which felt like a core aspect of their identity. Tim played hockey most of his life, so he struggled to figure out who he was after being cut from the hockey team. He explained, "It took a while to kind of figure out who I am without hockey, I guess. That was the hardest thing." Rachel also struggled to find her identity outside of softball.

> Well last year I tore my ACL so I was out for the softball season, so I went through this identity crisis as an athlete. Like I thought that the only thing that defined me was softball. And I had to realize that I have more going for me than that. So that was one huge thing.

For these two athletes, their lives revolved around their sport, so separation from that surfaced a lot of questions about their identities. Although the circumstances differed, Lindsey grew a lot because of everything she dealt with after breaking her femur. She became more grateful, realizing she was lucky to survive the car accident. She also learned the value of friendship as she depended on her friends to help her with many things while injured. Additionally, Lindsey grew a lot closer to her parents through this experience.

Home and School

Based on the literature, I anticipated many of the participants would describe a sense of homelessness; not connecting well at home or college. However, only one participant resonated with that sentiment, but she connected it to her first year in college and feeling homesick. Sabrina explained,

> When I was here, I was sick for home. Then I would get home and I'd feel like something had just changed. I'd be homesick for SJU again. It's just like… I don't know. When I went home and talked to my high school friends, I could tell it wasn't the same and that I had changed somehow, because the town stays the same. Nothing changes there.

One of the reasons Sabrina no longer felt as comfortable at home is due to her hometown being a small town. She said a lot of people graduate and stay in her hometown. When she visited, she saw that many of her friends never left and realized that was a big reason her parents wanted her to go to college.

Around half of the participants felt a significant difference between their home and school environments. Some of that related to coming from a small town and going to school in a big city. The change from a small town to a big city felt more comfortable for Emma. She resonated more with the culture in the city. She described her hometown as a

> hick town, people shoot guns, do all that. They're at the bar every night. Coming here to college, the cities, people more my style I feel like, because I'm more of a girly person and I don't like to be in the woods hunting. Obviously the culture was very different, if there's shopping malls, there's none in my town. There's a lot of people who liked doing more things that I enjoy and I like that.

She felt more comfortable in the city, but she also faced criticism from people in her hometown.

> Sometimes some people back home who didn't go to college, I think they feel like they see me differently because I did go to college. Like, "oh, she's done better than us." I don't see that because it's differing… I enjoy learning, you don't… They call me citiot. "Oh, the citiot's here." Like, okay, thanks. I'm trying to think of good examples for you. I just get that impression because they live in [hometown] and they don't really do much, I'm sorry to say, with their lives. They look at me like, "Oh, look at you. Doing something with your life." It's like, yeah.

Although her family encouraged her to go to college, Emma felt like others in her hometown did not respect her decision.

The main difference Amber and Grace acknowledged between their college and home related to their faith and the way their families lived out their Christianity. Grace described changes she noticed.

> Definitely my first couple of years of college, it was like … Well, especially when I came to MCU because my family wasn't like … We went to church but we never talked about it other than at church. And like, like I had, I would always talk with people here, like,

"Oh, like God has changed me in this way," but when I'm at home, I never use that kind of language because my family would be, like, "What? What are you talking about?"

She then mentioned that her mother now says things like, "God will tell you this," which surprises Grace because they never talked that way when she lived at home. She thought this change in their relationship reflected the influence she has on her mother.

Family Relationships

As participants changed, some noticed differences in their relationships with their families. Almost half of them described improvements in their relationships. The majority felt their relationships stayed the same. However, changes and growth experienced by participants affected the way they related to their parents.

Stronger voice. A few participants felt they had a stronger voice in their families. Erynne thought she needed to be quiet and defer to her father. As she gained knowledge and confidence in college, she started to speak up more. Unfortunately, for Kelly, her growth and development negatively affected her relationships with aunts on her mother's side of the family.

> On the opposite end of that, one of my other aunts, again my mom's sister so they are sisters. She and I have done the opposite since school, went the opposite way and we don't now communicate just because of things I'm learning here and things I've said or I'm more willing to voice my opinion because I think I've gotten more … I don't know. I think that my view on a lot of things have just changed since I've been here. Learning how to voice that and before, I didn't. Now, we don't get along as well anymore.

Kelly felt confident and willing to voice her opinions, even though that caused some tension in her family.

Different values. Some participants talked about values they have that differ from their family's values. In Sabrina's case, her values did not change, but her acceptance of them changed. She described it this way, "I think I'm more… I think I've accepted how much more liberal I am versus my family, which I think I knew that in high school, but coming here was

like, 'Oh, yeah. I definitely am.'" Similarly, Sierra explained ways in which she changed and

things she learned in college about social justice and the challenge of sharing that with her

family:

> I guess because like I like SJU is kind of social justice-y and like we have a lot of … like
> I've learned a lot about like what race is and what gender and class and religion are and
> like we have those conversations here about that and then like going home like they just
> haven't been exposed to that and like most people in my town haven't, but like just kind
> of like trying to like educate them when like they say something like probably, like here
> would not be accepted or like my peers wouldn't say, but like my sisters or my parents
> say and I'm just like, "Hey, like this is …" And I try to not be like mean because I know
> they're not like susceptible to it or they haven't been exposed to it, and so like they just
> like kind of label me as like a social justice-y, I went to school thing and that … It's like,
> I don't enjoy that cuz it's like, "Well, you don't know what it's like for me to be at
> school. You don't know what my school, like what the values are, like the people I've
> met, and the events I've attended here that like have been just like learning and like that's
> all I want to do is continue to learn so that I can … cuz I really do find it interesting."
> And they just kind of don't get it and they're like, "Oh, look at you, you went to college
> for two years and you like know this stuff." But it's like I'm going to continue to learn
> and I'm not going to be like a SJU Sierra and like then like turn that off when I go home.
> Like that's me now. And so that's kind of hard because I don't think they like understand
> that like at college I'm like continually surrounded by like learning like even just like
> talking to my peers I've never met like people from … just like have different
> backgrounds of life, you know. Like it's like college is a lot more than just sitting in a
> classroom, but like they just don't understand that and so it's kind of hard to tell them
> that.

Her values changed as she learned about social justice at SJU, but the tension arose from her

desire to correct her family and teach them what she learned. She felt like they did not

understand her college experience and why her worldview changed and struggled to determine

what to share with them when she visits.

A couple participants talked about differences in what they value and what their parents'

value when it comes to money. Many parents encouraged their child to attend college because a

four-year degree opened the door for more opportunities for jobs, especially jobs that pay well.

Amber realized she had different priorities and goals for her life, though.

> I realize that a priority in my life is not to make money, which I always thought was

something that I would want to do. One of my priorities is to make a difference in life or in one person's life. I don't have the… which is why my dad and I butt heads a lot. I don't have the drive to get a degree that's going to pay off my loans. I want to get a degree that's going to change the person that I am, and help me to help other people or just understand other people, because a lot of people just need somebody to listen to them. I feel like social work has prepared me for that…

With my boyfriend not having a lot of schooling experience, even with high school, we're just a very unconventional couple. I think it's hard for my family to adjust to that. We value people. We value quality time together. We value our faith. We don't want to just submit to the system and how everything is supposed to work. You're not "supposed to" graduate from college, and get married, and start a family, and get good jobs, because people are going to do it differently. I think that's how I've changed the most.

She did not want to "submit to the system" even though she felt her father wanted her in a better-paying career.

Kelly also felt tension in her family due to finances. She explained her family's perspective.

Jumping to my dad's side of the family, I'm still in contact with my aunts from that family, my grandparents. They are the same. I would even say a few of them are lower than low income, and that does cause a lot of conflicts there.

They are very, I would say, even more conservative, religiously as well. They see it more as I'm going and I'm doing this to have… They don't see it just that I want a better life for myself. They're almost seeing it as me being greedy and wanting just the best of everything. It's what they always say. You want the best of everything, you can't just live within your means.

So to them, this is above and beyond. And I do have a cousin on that side that has graduated from a two-year degree. And, still, that's okay, but going to the four year to them is, I don't know if they think that that's more than you should need to live with or I'm not sure exactly what they're thinking, but it's definitely something that they disagree with me in.

Despite this lack of support for college from one side of her family, Kelly persevered and kept her focus on the goal of earning a four-year degree.

The faith aspect of MCU influenced Chelsea's identity development. She described going home and how easy it was to become her old self around her family.

Sometimes I feel like I'm living… Just to be completely honest, sometimes I do feel like I'm living a double life, more in the sense that when I go home, I… I can't just blame this on my parents, and I can't just blame this on the environment, but it is a very strong, powerful thing, and I'll find myself at home, because my parents swear a lot, so I'll find myself starting to swear more, and I'll find myself in more of a negative attitude, and worrying about things that I would never worry about here.

So definitely sometimes… And I always… Sometimes I'll think about, too. I'm like, "How do I expect to like show Christ to my parents, if I'm like not really acting a lot differently at home?" I think sometimes I act differently, but then as time like time goes on when I am at home, because I don't go to church while I'm at home, too, because I don't have a home church. So the summers are always really hard. I kind of feel like I like regress in my faith. And so I do actually like sometimes feel like I'm living a double life. Not that my character is completely different. I just kind of revert back to some of my old ways with like swearing occasionally with my parents, and just like the mindset of things.

Although the growth Chelsea gained during college did not directly affect her relationship with her parents, she did avoid spending a lot of time at home because she did how she changed while at home.

Intimidation. The majority of participants described their relationships with their parents as improving or staying the same. However, a couple participants felt their enrollment in a four-year institution made at least one person in their family feel intimidated. Chelsea explained that her father often made comments such as, "Oh, you're too good for us now, because you go to MCU." He makes it sound like a joke, but she believes he truly feels that way.

I get the impression that he thinks that I'm better than him, but I've never said that. I hate when he says that though, because I hope my actions haven't given you that idea, because I don't want them to. You know what I mean? I want them to be anything but that idea.

She added that her mother does not feel that way, but her sister does because she tries to measure up to Chelsea but is not doing as well in college.

Family Influence on Identity Development

Many participants felt that their school and home environments greatly differed. For some, this transition between places developed two versions of themselves as they adapted to each environment. This difference created a sense of compartmentalization between their environments. Others did not like they way they changed depending on context and learned to integrate the two versions of themselves.

New start. A couple participants avoided visiting home because they preferred the college version of themselves. Kristin described college as offering a fresh start for her,

> I actually noticed that the last I'd gone home I was hanging out with some of my old coworkers that I had worked with… because I had worked full-time all the way through high school, and so I'd worked with them for a couple years and I was visiting them and I kind of noticed there's a Kristin at MCU and Kristin back in [hometown]. I like the Kristin at MCU better, and I think that's one of the reasons I don't like going home, but then I like this version of me better because this version of me has more opportunities. This one has more… I don't want to say more going for her, but kind of does in a way that I have those leadership roles and I have that importance aspect here whereas back home a lot of people saw me as the, you know, her mom left her, like my brother struggled with addiction through high school. I was, you know, I was a little bit more pitied, I guess, back home and I didn't like that. Yeah, they're definitely two different worlds, and they don't overlap.

She noticed a different side to herself in each environment. When she visited home, she could not erase her past or the connection to her family's struggles. In college she received a fresh start because no one knew about her family, so she felt she had more opportunities. These opportunities and leadership roles helped redefine her identity.

Prioritizing school. A few participants found it difficult to be a student and engage fully with their family. Some found it challenging to get homework done when they visited their families. Chelsea said home feels different for her. She explained, "I can't focus as much at home, for one. Like home just isn't associated with homework anymore for me and doing schoolwork and stuff, so I can't really focus on that." Erynne also found it challenging to do

homework because her family wanted her attention when she visited. Her younger sisters often

say things like, "Sissy, play with me. Color with me." She rarely visits home because of the

tension she feels between homework and time with family.

As a solution to the tension between their role as student and their role in their families,

some participants compartmentalized these areas of their lives and prioritized school. Sierra

described her response to the tension,

> So, I think to navigate that, I just need to like establish it like right now, college is kind of
> my priority, and like hopefully, I can be successful one day where like I can visit a lot
> and like that sort of things and like be there for my sisters, but right now I just want to
> do… you know, my thing is just like college is going to go by really fast, everything is
> going to go by really fast, so I just need to do as much as I can here, so it's just kind of
> like explaining that to them but then also try to still have phone calls and things like that
> cuz sometimes that just gets forgotten when I get so busy and caught up and I need to
> make sure that I'm still communicating with them.

She made a conscious decision to prioritize college because she realized the time passes quickly

and she wants to take advantage of all the opportunities afforded her through a college education.

Erynne made a similar decision and described the tension it created in her family.

> Now that I'm in college, I'm on my own so I prioritize my education over my family.
> And so that creates tension with my family because my dad is like, "Well, in high school
> you spent so much time with your sisters and blah… blah… now, you don't do any of
> that." I don't think he gets it half the time because I do have to prioritize. And when I'm
> paying for my own education, I tend to prioritize that over my family sometimes.

Despite the frustration her father felt with her choice to distance herself, Erynne believed she

needed to make a choice and prioritize one over the other.

Separate roles. Rather than prioritizing one over the other, Moua understood he had two

different roles depending on his context.

> When I'm at home, I'm the older sibling, so I have more responsibilities, so I have to be
> mature. I have to be perfect and I have to help. I have to cook a meal for my siblings if
> my parents are busy. I have to support them. When I'm here, I don't have anybody to
> support. I just support myself, and I can hang out with my friends and just be myself. It
> is different worlds and different perspectives. You do have to change accordingly…

When asked if it was hard or caused dissonance he responded,

> Not really. Sometimes because when I go home, depending on what mood my parents are in, I can just joke around with them and just be silly with my siblings, which is what I am here and with my friends, but if anybody is over, it's a whole new world. If you have somebody visiting your house, you're the perfect son. You are greeting them. You are being with them the entire time. Even if they're not there to visit you, you're there so that you can be in conversation. It could be an elder from the tribe and he could just visit us and my dad would be the one who is having the main conversation with him, but then me and my older brother would have to be there to entertain him in case anything happens, and so we just sit there and just listen to the conversation just because.

Moua appreciated the separation because he did not have to be the responsible son at school and could enjoy the time with friends. Although he worked a lot of hours each week to help his family and carried the responsibility of succeeding in school to bring higher status to his family, the separation of roles allowed him to relax and not focus on that while spending time with friends.

Integration. As they transitioned between home and college, some participants felt uncomfortable with being different people in each context. They became more confident in their identity throughout college, and eventually felt more comfortable going home and being themselves. Initially, Hannah explained that she adapted easily between school and home cultures. "Yeah, I think I adapt to places well. I feel like if I need to be a city girl, I can be. If I need to be a country girl, I can be." However, she felt like the "city girl" reflected her true self, but felt hesitant to accept that identity.

> And I think I'm becoming… I think it's like I didn't want to accept that I'm a city girl almost. Like I just, cuz like when you go back home, you're like, "oh look at you city girl," you know? Like people, country people do not like city people, so you don't, you can't act like a city person up in [hometown].

Many of the differences related to clothes.

> Ah, I kinda feel like that cuz city people they all don't dress the same. You're who you are, so I feel like down here I can wear whatever I wear. I can be like a hipster if I want and it's okay, but up there you better wear flannel and jeans and no high heels.

Eventually, Hannah gained confidence in her new sense of identity and she packed the clothes she wanted to wear rather than what she thought others expected of her.

> Um, yeah. Cuz actually, like when I like pack for home now, I'm like "I'm gonna wear what I wanna wear." Like if people notice that I've changed that's okay cuz it's who I am now and it's okay. I like who I am and I think they will, too. I haven't changed that much. It's what I wear or something.

These participants arrived at a place of confidence in their identity despite any negative reactions or assumptions about who they should be or how they should act.

Identity as a First-Generation Student

Another aspect of the participants' identity included their identity as a first-generation student, which some acknowledged as important and others were unaware of prior to this study. A few participants seemed more aware of being a first-generation student and the ways they differed from their peers. Chelsea and Moua explained that many of their friends did not understand that they worked really hard so they can send money home for their families. Moua described his role as supporter in his family.

> I've always been kind of like a supporter for my family. The reason I've worked 32 to 36 hours for the past two years was so that I could like give my paychecks to my parents because all my siblings are growing up and they need things, and then me I only need like $100, $200 a month to survive here, which is much more than what I'm making. And so any excess money, I'm just like, "Hey, like take this. You need it more than I do." I don't know. I feel like everything that I've done so far has been to support my parents so if I ever hear that they're having financial needs, I always jump on it and it's like, "Hey, I'm going to go to the bank and I'm going to take out money and give it to you." It's just kind of like what I do.

> And then also my siblings, growing up, like growing up, me and my older brother and my younger brother, we didn't get very much because my parents were, we were very close to poverty and we could never get whatever we wanted. And so now that I'm old enough to be able to support my parents, I'm also old enough to support my siblings. And so I

can just buy them things and allow them to have a childhood that we didn't have, which is what I look forward to the most I guess.

Sierra also noticed some differences between herself as a first-generation student and her peers. She explained that she had more stressors that she does not talk about with them, such as paying for tuition. Many of her friends do not work, but she needs to work to pay for college. She also noted differences due to her parents' educational attainment.

> But, I have some friends that like both their parents are like Master's degree on, and like, it's like, obviously we don't have like this competition about what our parents have, but like there's like subtle like things that I notice obviously, just like their parents like ask them a lot about their like classes and their like… I have a few friends that they like last year, I remember them like sending, they'd send their parents their papers on Google docs and their parents would like edit them and like they'd be on the phone and it's like… one of my friends, her parents are both journalists in Florida.

> Yeah. And so like just having her, just watching her have this help and I'm like, "Woah, if I ever send my mom a paper, like, no." It doesn't work that way. So it's just like interesting like they do have a little bit more help. But I think that just is like incentive for me to just like just do well and like see like what my parents can give me that maybe isn't in the academic sense or in the financial sense.

Sierra felt a lot more financial pressure than many of her friends, and also noticed the type of academic help others received from their parents. She also shared that she struggles more to communicate about college with her parents because they do not understand college the way the parents of continuing-generation students understand it. Similarly, Erynne expressed challenges with her parents' lack of familiarity with the college experience.

> I feel like it has a little bit just because my parents, like they're proud of me for going here but sometimes they don't understand how hard it is for me in college, and so they still expect so much of me. And I feel like other people might not have that kind of expectation of their life, like their parents have for them that my parents have for me because they expect me to be able to do, like watch my sisters all the time and still go to college and then do this and this and this and this and this and I just can't do it all. And so I feel like that has changed my college experience. Yeah, it's different from person to person but that's definitely something that has played a big part in it.

Unlike some of the participants, Erynne could not compartmentalize her home and school lives

because her parents still had expectations of her at home.

Similarly, Chelsea struggled to communicate with her parents because they did not

understand her college experience.

> I think more of the effects of being a first generation college student in that my parents can't relate to what I do. They really don't understand… I try to sometimes talk to my mom and dad about my classes, and my mom is like, "I'm too busy. I can't…," whatever. But I tell my dad and he's like, "Well, that's way over my head." He just doesn't understand at all, and my mom, she's… Yeah. She's like, "Why? I never had to learn those specific of things."

> … Just I think maybe the financial repercussions of it, and when we talk about families with friends, and they're like, "My parents did this and this, and they're doctors. What do your parents do?" I'm not ashamed of it, but I definitely am not excited to say it either. I don't know if that makes sense… Sometimes I feel like people will look down on me based on my parents' achievements or lack thereof.

Chelsea felt tension due to the differences between her parents' education and jobs compared to

her continuing-generation peers. She also noted that her parents' lack of college experience

affected her ability to relate to them.

Although Adriano's parents lacked understanding of the college experience, Adriano

communicated well about his experiences and the demands of college to help them better

understand.

> Since you're the first person or at least one of the very few people in your family that is going farther in education than most of your ancestors or people before you have gone. There's kind of like this- like I do know I have friends that their parents went to college and things like that so they can kind of go back to them and ask them questions or seek guidance. Or maybe their parents have higher standards for them, I don't know. For as for me, I don't feel like my parents have low standards for me. I think my parents think I'm going to do very well. They think I have a bright future. But I don't think- and I think it's a good thing sort of.

> For example, if I tell my mom "I got a B" or "it's been a tough week." Instead of saying you should just try harder. It's more like "it's okay. Just trust in the Lord, on his grace. It's okay. We're not perfect. And a B isn't that bad anyways." There's more of a relaxed environment when it comes to the expectation.

Adriano also explained the difficulty of his parents not understanding the workload he had in college, so he constantly explained that college feels like a fulltime job. As Adriano shared more about his experience with his parents, he felt like they adjusted some of the expectations of him in other areas of his life. In many ways, Adriano's experience as a first-generation student shaped his well-rounded perspective of college. He noticed that many students' lives revolved around college, but he tried to balance his life and include involvement in his church and relationships outside of college.

A few participants thanked me for the opportunity to process this topic. For some, they never realized they were first-generation students, so the interview gave them a chance to process things they experienced but never had connected to their parents not having a four-year degree. Chelsea, on the other hand, thought a lot about this recently and appreciated the opportunity to talk more about it.

> It's actually… It's been cool to talk about this. I've never been able to just express, because I've thought about it more and more, and so when I heard you were doing this I was actually really excited about it, because I've been thinking about it more and more.

A few participants in my study roomed together. For them, this study helped them make the connection with each other because they did not know their roommate was a first-generation student as well.

Summary

The findings in this chapter reveal a number of environmental influences on participants' college decisions, experiences, and identity development. In many ways, their families influenced their decisions to enroll in a private, four-year postsecondary institution. The majority of participants selected a university far enough from their home that they decided to live on campus their first year and either stayed on or near campus the rest of their time in college.

Their ability and decision to live on or near campus shifted their primary environment from their family to the university.

Findings also demonstrate many benefits of a small, private university for first-generation students. The majority of participants felt known and cared for by their professors. They also spoke about the great friendships they made in college. Many participants also developed positive working relationships with many of their classmates and spent a lot of time studying with them.

Although participants mentioned a few differences between themselves and their continuing-generation peers, the majority felt a strong sense of belonging in college. They also demonstrated many characteristics that contributed positively to their experiences, including resourcefulness, self-efficacy, ambition, resiliency, and leadership. Many findings differed from previous research about first-generation students, which might reflect the demographics of participants in this study since the majority are White, come from middle-income families, are traditional-aged, enrolled full-time, and live on or near campus. In the next chapter, I analyze the findings discussed in this chapter using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development, thriving, and self-authorship.

CHAPTER SIX
ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of first-generation college students at small, private, liberal arts universities. I focused specifically on the identity development of first-generation students and how their familial relationships and culture influenced their development. I also examined the role college environment played in students' experiences and development. In the previous chapter, I described findings related to parental influence, college choice, college experience, characteristics of participants, identity development, and identity as a first-generation student.

Previous research on the experiences of first-generation students led me to a priori assumptions about the influence of family culture on students' experiences in college. Specifically, I expected to find a greater sense of "homelessness" for participants from low-income families compared to participants from middle-income families due to differences between their home and school cultures. Many commented on differences between school and home, yet most felt a sense of belonging in each place. The challenge of transitioning between the two settings proved the most challenging aspect for some.

Participants in my study came from a variety of backgrounds, although the majority identified as White and from middle-income backgrounds. Findings did not differ significantly based on class, race/ethnicity, gender, parents' educational attainment or jobs, or whether they grew up in a rural, urban, or suburban community. In fact, many did not feel their status as a first-generation student significantly influenced their college experience. In order to understand discrepancies between previous research and my study, I analyzed findings using human ecology theory, self-authorship, and thriving. These theories also provided a framework from which to examine the culture and environment of postsecondary institutions and explore strategies to

foster inclusive communities that serve all students, including those from interdependent backgrounds.

I utilized human ecology theory, specifically Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) ecological theory of human development, to understand ways in which the interactions between participants and the environment factored into their experiences. Developmentally instigative characteristics shed light on reasons for variations in experiences. These qualities describe ways individuals interact with their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

Additionally, the four levels of influence from Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) theory served as a tool to analyze the environmental influences that shaped participants' decisions and experiences. The microsystem comprises people and circumstances students encounter daily. The next level, the mesosystem, represents the overlap between different microsystems. Although students do not directly interact with the exosystem or macrosystem, these aspects of their environment influence their experiences. The exosystem consists of settings that do not directly involve the student but may affect the student nevertheless. The macrosystem refers to the culture or subculture surrounding the student and ideologies and belief systems within those cultures.

I also used Schreiner's (2010, 2013) work on thriving to explore ways in which college environment influenced participants and their experiences. The five factors of thriving include engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2013). The most important way to help all students thrive, according to Schreiner (2013) is to create a sense of community on campus. A psychological sense of community includes four key elements: membership, ownership, relationship, and partnership.

As I examined participants' identity development, I employed self-authorship to analyze ways in which participants defined their own beliefs, identities, and social relations. The journey from uncritically following external formulas to moving their internal voices to the foreground consists of four phases: following formulas, crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, and internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2001). The "crossroads" faced by participants significantly influenced their identity development. As Baxter Magolda (2014) described, crossroads are "filled with tension between external influence and the growing internal voice as young adults work to make their own way in the world" (p. 28). Baxter Magolda (2008) also identified three elements of self-authorship: trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

Beliefs and Attitudes About Education

The beliefs and attitudes participants had about education reflected their environmental influences. Their families, and specifically their parents, strongly influenced their value of education through their support and encouragement. Participants also learned a lot through other aspects of their environment, such as media, peers, and high school counselors. These influences reflect the changing role of higher education in U.S. society. All participants talked about college as an assumed reality.

> Yeah. I always knew that I wanted to go to college just because I wanted to pursue a higher education and get out of … I'm from a really small town. I wanted to get out of that town and I knew going farther away and I just loved the city feel. I knew I wanted to go to a college and stay somewhere. (Emma)

The majority assumed they would attend college from as far back as they could remember, though many did not start seriously thinking about it until high school. Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) ecology of human development theory helps understand factors that influenced participants' beliefs and attitudes about education, including parental influence and perceptions about the role

of higher education in U.S. society.

Parental Influence

Participants' families represented one of their primary microsystems during their K-12 education. Although none of their parents earned a four-year degree, and some never enrolled in college, they proved influential in participants' beliefs about education because of their proximity to students. The support and encouragement participants felt from their families in their academics and their decision to attend college emerged as a common theme. Additionally, the success or challenges parents faced in their jobs affected their perspective on the necessity of college.

Similar to previous research, participants noted their parents did not have the knowledge to help them navigate the application process or college setting. Yet, their families provided a lot of encouragement and emotional support throughout their lives, including during their time in college ("The Relationship," 2015). Participants clearly felt supported by their families in their educational pursuits. Family support took on many forms, including encouragement, financial support for postsecondary education, involvement in the K-12 classroom, accountability for grades and homework, and emotional support during college.

In addition to their support and encouragement, family ideology about education and four-year degrees shaped participants' perspectives. The majority of parents encouraged their student to attend college. Some parents insisted on college as an important next step because they did not want their student to make their same mistakes they did and struggle to find steady work throughout their lives.

> Yes, it was always very almost seen as something that was expected in my family even though none of them have been to college. They all would always tell me and my cousins that it's something that's important to better yourself, and they're just very focused on like, "Don't do what I did. Don't make the mistakes I did." I think it was

very much pushed by not only directly my mom and my aunt but, I mean, even to this day, my grandfather still says, "Make sure you're studying. Get through it. Don't drop out. Keep going." It's very much a thing that they pushed for. (Kelly)

College represented opportunities for steady work and stable income, which some parents did not experience in their lives.

Although the majority of participants in my study identified as White, Guiffrida's (2005) study of African American students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) reflected similar findings. High achieving first-generation students mentioned receiving a lot of emotional and academic support from their families. Their families experienced the disadvantages of life without a college degree and wanted better for their child. Participants felt their families had clear expectations that they would attend college.

Despite the emphasis on college for the majority of participants in my study, a few participants felt their parents viewed college as optional. Emma's father completed his GED and did not complete any postsecondary education. However, he successfully started his own company. His success, despite lacking a four-year degree, may influence his belief that not everyone needs to attend college. As Emma explored postsecondary options, her father told her, "Well, you don't have to go to college." Her parents encouraged Emma and her siblings to work hard. They also encouraged them in their academics, but did not pressure them to attend college.

Chelsea followed in her mother's footsteps and decided to study nursing. Her mother suggested she earn at a two-year degree, work for a while, and then pursue a four-year degree. However, Chelsea feared she, like her mother, would start working and never end up enrolling in college again. Her mother supported Chelsea in her education and encouraged her to attend college. Nonetheless, since she had steady work as a nurse with her two-year degree, she viewed a two-year college as a viable option.

Thus, parents' workplaces influenced their perspective on education and the value of a four-year degree. Bronfenbrenner (1979) encouraged the examination of exosystems, such as parents' workplaces because "environmental events and conditions outside any immediate setting containing the person can have a profound influence on behavior and development within that setting" (p. 18). As the examples of Kelly, Emma, and Chelsea demonstrated, participants' parents' workplaces influenced parents' attitudes toward college and the way they spoke about college with their child(ren).

Similarly, cultural expectations, a macrosystem, influenced participants' views on education. Moua recognized the value his parents placed on education because of its ability to increase family status in Hmong culture. For him, college carried meaning for his whole family, so he viewed a four-year degree as more than a way to create job opportunities that would benefit him alone.

Some participants explained their parents' expectations differed between themselves and their siblings. Ecological theory helps explain this by looking at the interaction between participants and their context. When asked about her family's view on education, Sabrina explained,

> I mean I think it's really important to them, but at the same time my older brother, the one who's 11 years older than me, he didn't go to college right away. He just graduated last year… My two siblings that are younger than me both haven't graduated high school, even though they're like, 19 and 20. And then… But I mean the brother who just graduated high school, Christopher, he is going to a tech school, so I mean that's good, but… Yeah. I don't know. To me, it was very expected that I was going to go to college, whether or not I wanted to.

When I asked why her parents had different expectations for her and her siblings, she believed it connected to her good grades.

Developmentally instigative characteristics may help explain why many participants mentioned a difference in academics between themselves and their siblings. Sabrina's actions as a student drew different responses from her parents than her siblings' actions. As she demonstrated more engagement in school, her parents developed different expectations for her compared to her siblings.

Societal Influence

The majority of participants had at least one parent with some college education, which might explain findings about the meaning and value of education. The meaning many families placed on a four-year degree reflected the changing role of higher education in society. As college attendance becomes more prevalent in the U.S., first-generation students frequently hear about college from many sources, including peers, school, and media. Consequently, societal influences can negate or lessen the impact of parents' lack of college knowledge.

A few participants shared they did not think much about their status as a first-generation college student until they heard about this study. Although most recognized the significance of being first in their family to attend college or work towards a four-year degree, many did not feel it greatly affected their experience. A few believed expectations changed regarding college. They thought many people viewed college as optional when their parents were young. However, the majority of adults pursue postsecondary education now, so it no longer feels optional for many young adults. One participant mentioned her surprise at the number of peers whose parents earned four-year degrees.

> My socioeconomic status didn't change the way my parents talked about college. When I found out that you were doing a study on this, I thought to myself, "How did I get the idea of going to a four-year school if both my parents never went to one?" I guess it assimilated with my friends and my friend group, I guess … and I was in the National Honor Society and in honors classes, so everybody in my classes in high school was going to a four-year, so it wasn't really like a yes or no. It was a yes (laughs) that you're

> going. To me, I guess the whole, the general thing was I guess I never really noticed how many other people's parents went to four-year schools because I thought it was the up-and-coming trend, like, "Oh, four years." Yeah. I guess I'm surprised that people are surprised that my parents didn't go to a four-year school because that never fazed me here. (Grace)

Her comment exemplifies changes in society regarding the role of higher education and the influence of this macrosystem on her beliefs and attitudes about college.

Examining larger societal changes regarding the role of higher education helps understand factors shaping participants' perspectives about college. As Bronfenbrenner (1995) explained, "the individual's own developmental life course is seen as embedded in and powerfully shaped by conditions and events occurring during the historical period through which the person lives" (p. 641). Today, a higher percentage of high school graduates attend college than in the past. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), undergraduate enrollment increased by 24 percent between 2000 and 2008 (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). In Minnesota (the location of MCU and SJU), the college participation rate increased from 56 percent of recent high school graduates in 1996 to 67 percent of graduates in 2013 (Djurovich, et al., 2015). The majority of participants talked about college as an assumed next step, reflecting growing emphasis on college participation.

In 2013, Minnesota ranked second nationally in the percent of adults (aged 25-64) with an associate degree or higher (Djurovich, et al., 2015). As college participation increases, so does the percent of adults with postsecondary degrees. General knowledge about college also becomes more prevalent as more people attain college degrees.

In addition, growing undergraduate enrollment reflects a strong correlation between postsecondary education and employment and wages. Employment varies based on educational attainment for Minnesotans (aged 25 to 64). The 59 percent employment rate for Minnesotans

with less than a high school diploma is significantly lower than the 87 percent employment rate

for those with a bachelor's degree or higher (Djurovich et al., 2015). Wages also differ based on

educational attainment. In Minnesota, the average annual wage in 2013 for those with a high

school diploma or equivalent was $30,359, compared to $50,975 for those with bachelor's

degrees (Djurovich et al., 2015). Therefore, participants grew up hearing messages about the

connection between college and higher employment and wages.

> They never really talked to me about why it would be important for me to get a four-year degree. It's more just like you should go to college to get work, and to get money. It wasn't more like to better your education or anything like that. It was like you should do this because you need to get work or else you're going to end up like your mom bouncing from job to job. At least that's what my dad says. It was more just going to get a job and not so much education, stuff like that. (Erynne)

These societal messages and her parents' workplaces affected Erynne's understanding of college

as primarily a way to attain a job and earn money.

Similarly, Kelly believed a four-year degree had the ability to open doors to jobs outside

of one's major. "I am going for nursing right now, that could completely change what I want to

do in five years – and I still have the opportunity because I have more education – to switch to

something completely different if I choose" (Kelly). For her, a degree equaled power and

opportunity. Though she studied nursing, a college degree could lead to opportunities outside of

nursing as well.

Conversely, a few participants recognized the growing reality that a four-year degree is

often insufficient. When Nicole's mother questioned what she could do with a degree in exercise

science, Nicole acknowledged, "sometimes a four-year degree doesn't … get you everywhere."

Therefore, Nicole considered pursuing a graduate degree in the near future. Amber's father

placed high value on graduate school. He told Amber, "You're going to regret it, and you're

going to financially struggle if you don't get your master's degree." Due to these increasing

expectations, more than half of the participants mentioned plans to attend graduate school.

These societal messages reveal the impact of what Bronfenbrenner called the

macrosystem. Societal influences can negate or lessen the impact of parents' lack of college

knowledge. As more high school graduates go on to earn four-year degrees, college becomes

more prevalent and students have access to more information about it. This greater accessibility

to information about college assisted participants in their college choice.

College Choice

Changing messages and values in society about postsecondary education influenced

participants' college choice and their decision process. Although the majority of first-generation

students enroll in public institutions of higher education, participants' environment and available

resources set them up to view private, four-year colleges as a viable option. These resources

helped them consider institutional fit in their decision and provided information about financial

aid and discrepancies between college sticker prices and net prices.

Resources

First-generation students are more likely to enroll in two-year colleges than their

continuing-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Rine & Eliason, 2015). Only 17 percent of

first-generation students enroll at smaller private colleges, compared to the 27 percent that enroll

at public non-doctoral institutions (Rine & Eliason, 2015). The resources participants mentioned

that assisted them in the college decision process reflected societal changes regarding the role of

higher education. Many participants utilized resources such as college counselors and college

fairs in their high schools. The majority also toured college campuses. One participant looked at

national rankings for the institutions he considered attending to help with his decision.

In the analysis, I found that the degree to which participants took advantage of the resources available to them did not depend on their demographics based on the sample in this study. However, privilege associated with their race or socioeconomic status might explain their access to and interaction with resources. Additionally, selective responsivity, one of the developmentally instigative characteristics of Bronfenbrenner's (1993) theory may explain variations in their interactions with their environment. This characteristic describes an individual's "reaction to, attraction by, and exploration of" aspects of the environment. Some participants more intentionally explored their college options and had specific factors in mind that guided their process.

For example, Sierra used many resources to determine the best fit, including looking up a current student's Instagram account. On the other hand, Sabrina regretted not visiting more campuses and exploring more options. She shared her decision and application process.

> Oh, it was a mess! I mean, I didn't know what I was doing at all. And like, I asked my mom and she was like, "Oh, I trust you." Which was not helpful. But, yeah, I didn't do the research I feel like I should have done and actually look into schools that would have been at the right level for me or whatever.

Sabrina did not receive much assistance from her mother in the college decision process, but her frustrations show that she most likely did not feel she had access to other resources. Conversely, some participants did not feel as affected by their parents' lack of college experience because they received advice from a college counselor, older friends, or the parents of their friends.

As college participation increases, resources and information about college also increase. Although many first-generation college students do not receive a lot of guidance from their parents in the decision process, as demonstrated by participants in this study, they have many other resources available. Many participants mentioned talking about college with their peers in school, in general conversations, and through extracurricular activities such as National Honor

Society. These conversations helped students understand the different institutional types and factors they might consider in their decision, such as location, programs, size, and financial aid.

Fit

Fit emerged as one of the most important factors in participants' choice of institution. Many pursued private universities because of the small size, their specific academic programs, and, for MCU, the Christian environment. However, fit became the deciding factor for many participants. They used language such as "I'm home," "the right vibe," and "it felt right" to explain the reason they selected their institution.

Two elements of a psychological sense of community described in research on thriving help explain why participants connected with their institution: membership and relationship (Schreiner, 2013). Membership encompasses a sense of belonging and feeling at home. Emma exemplified this concept when she described her process and her initial plan not to enroll at MCU where her sister attended. However, she said, "Then nothing felt like home after I thought about it and looked at my other options that I was really leaning towards. I'm home, it's MCU." As Schreiner (2013) explained, membership matters for those feeling marginalized or those new to a community.

Another element of community is relationship (Schreiner, 2013). The premise of this element is that positive relationships with others on campus create strong emotional connections. Though participants based their decision on a campus visit and did not know others from the university yet, many chose the school because they felt they would connect well with other students' interests and passions. Some participants wanted a Christian university because they wanted to share that connection with others. Lindsey shared her preference for a Christian institution because she struggled to connect with people in high school. "I just did not like it and

I struggled through it just because it was hard to find people who, especially going to a small school, it was hard finding people who were into their faith."

SJU provides opportunities for new students to connect prior to the start of college through their orientation program. Through this program, all new students stay on campus for a few days during the summer. Students have the opportunity to explore and become familiar with campus during the program, but they also meet their peers and build relationships with each other. Early familiarity with peers and campus creates a sense of community for new students before they begin their first year.

Although the majority of participants in my study described an immediate sense of belonging, their experiences do not reflect the majority of literature about first-generation college students. Previous studies found many first-generation students experience feelings of alienation or "homelessness" (Guiffrida, 2005; Jehangir, 2010b; Stuber, 2011; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Race and class might explain the discrepancies between my study and previous research. The participants in Guiffrida (2005), Jehangir (2010b), and Winkle-Wagner's (2009) studies identified as students of color. Stuber's (2011) study focused on working-class, White first-generation students. The majority of participants in my study identified as White and from middle-income households. Therefore, their race or class could function as assets and may explain why the majority of participants thought the university they selected fit well and "felt right." Walton and Cohen (2007) suggested, "in academic and professional settings, members of socially stigmatized groups are more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to issues of social belonging" (p. 82). Therefore, though Schreiner (2013) described membership and relationship as important factors for thriving, those who are White, especially at

a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), may feel more certain of their membership and relationships.

Financial Aid

The majority of participants mentioned the importance of financial aid in their final decision. This represents another example of the significant impact of indirect contexts. The federal financial aid policies and institutional policies regarding financial aid, part of the exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, greatly influenced students' college choice. These policies also affected participants' access to various institutional types. Despite the "sticker price," many participants heard private institutions often provide more financial aid, which encouraged them to apply.

> So it was more of a I applied believing something could happen, but it was like the price tag of a private university was a huge just, not a scare, but it was a little bit of a hesitation. So I had to say, I really want to go there but I'm not sure if it will work. So I was hesitant to try but I tried anyways hoping that something could happen and thankfully I applied to MCU and I got some good packages and financial aid and it was worth it. So I decided to take that leap of faith and come here. (Adriano)

Adriano's attitude also reflected the positive perspective that Schreiner (2013) described as one of five factors of thriving. He applied, hoping good things would happen.

Environmental contexts shaped participants' understanding of institutional types; their confidence in viewing a private, four-year institution as a viable option; and access to their chosen university. The financial aid offered to many participants allowed them the opportunity to attend the college of their choice. The ability to choose the institution that fit them best greatly influenced their sense of membership from the start and affected their college experience.

College Experience

Overwhelmingly, participants described a positive college experience and a sense of belonging on their campus. In her work on student thriving, Schreiner (2013) argued, "creating a

sense of community on campus is the single best way to help all students thrive" (p. 46). This sense of community comprises four elements: membership, ownership, relationship, and partnership (Schreiner, 2013). Interestingly, these four elements reflect many of the reasons participants said the institution "felt right."

Therefore, I contend that the degree to which students felt the institution fit them well affected their college experience and their interaction with the college environment. This aligns with Renn and Arnold's (2003) description of the potential benefits and challenges of special mission institutions for students' experiences.

> Special mission institutions (military academies, single-sex colleges, religiously affiliated institutions) attract and support relatively homogeneous student bodies (Kuh, 1990). These institutions could be seen as ecological niches that are especially favorable to students whose attitudes are congruent with institutional philosophies and especially unfavorable to students whose attitudes are incongruent. (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 271)

Private institutions may attract students who connect with their values and culture. However, it may be unfavorable to students who do not relate to the institutional culture. The same correlation might exist for race/ethnicity. White students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) may feel a greater sense of belonging than students of color.

The first day of classes left an impression on Sierra and confirmed her sense of belonging at SJU. She appreciated the celebration honoring the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, which reflected the university's values of diversity and social justice. This connection to the university gave her a strong sense of membership, and eventually ownership. By her sophomore year, she already served as a new student mentor and held a leadership position within student activities. She also participated in a Students Today, Leaders Forever (STLF) spring break trip through SJU. Her strong sense of fit positively influenced her engagement on campus.

Although Rachel felt a sense of belonging at MCU, she connected well with a subculture on campus and did not identify with her perception of the student culture, which revolved around social class.

> I feel like MCU has this rich kid persona, and they talk about like the typical MCU girl and like the typical MCU kid. And I'm not that whatsoever. I wear sweatpants everyday. So I'm like the poor kid of MCU, I would say.

She appreciated the culture of faith at MCU and the values. However, she felt like her social class separated her from the student culture. Therefore, her college experience and the way she interacted with the college environment reflected her sense of fit and connection to the university. She explained the tension between her sense of belonging and not fitting MCU norms.

> I mean my softball friends and all my other like athlete buddies, like they always make fun of me. They're like, "Rachel you literally know everybody here." I'm like, "what are you guys talking about?" They're like, "We can't take you anywhere without like knowing everybody." And I was like, "What? I don't get what that means." They're like, "You're going to turn into the typical MCU person." I'm like, "No. There's no way." So it's like I … would … I feel like the athletic culture, and then like the typical MCU culture, they do like intermix obviously, but they are separate. So I think that's what differentiates that. But. I don't know.

Rachel connected well with students at MCU, but she viewed them as different from the athletes on campus, whom she considered her closest friends. Her connection and sense of membership revolved around athletics, which her involvement on campus reflected. She worked on campus for the athletic department and played softball.

An important facet of ecological theory is examination of multiple contexts and the relationship between them, yet "seldom is attention paid to the person's behavior in more than one setting or to the way in which relations between settings can affect what happens within them" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 18). Mission-based institutions create an environment with consistent messages around its culture and values, influencing the ways in which students

interact with the campus setting, and creating clarity around the sense of community. The primary microsystems for college students include roommates, classes, extracurricular activities, jobs, and friends. In this section, I describe various factors that influenced participants' experiences.

Timing of Enrollment

The timing of enrollment shaped participants' college experiences. All but one participant enrolled in college immediately after high school. An important aspect of Bronfrenbrenner's (1979, 1995) theory is the inclusion of the chronosystem. As Bronfenbrenner (1995) explained, "A major factor influencing the course and outcome of human development is the timing of biological and social transitions as they relate to the culturally defined age, role expectations, and opportunities occurring throughout the life course" (p. 641). High school graduates who immediately enroll in college tend to have different roles and obligations than those who delay enrollment and begin after working fulltime, marrying or partnering, or having children (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Therefore, the experiences of participants must be considered in light of the fact that the majority of them entered college immediately after high school.

Housing

The majority of participants chose a university located at least an hour away from their hometown. Two participants moved from another region of the country. Therefore, distance motivated housing decisions for most participants. All participants lived on or near campus with the exception of one participant who moved home her senior year. Everyone lived on campus at least one year. Those who moved off campus continued to room with friends from their university. Participants' socioeconomic status or family culture might explain their ability and

decision to move away from home. Their new housing became an important ecological niche as many participants named their roommates as some of their closest friends.

I interviewed a couple sets of roommates, and interestingly, they each mentioned not knowing their roommate was also a first-generation student until they heard about this study and talked about it together. This demonstrates they had a sense of community in which they based their membership and relationships on a connection other than their first-generation status. All participants primarily connected with their roommates through similar interests or shared experiences, which shaped their interactions and their sense of belonging.

Involvement

Participants' living arrangements provided opportunity for greater involvement on campus due to proximity. Additionally, physical distance from family limited their family role and expectations, allowing more time for jobs and involvement on campus. The majority of participants worked during the academic year, and approximately half of them worked on campus. All but one participant joined extracurricular activities, including clubs and organizations, sports, choir, intramurals, student activities, and orientation leadership. Involvement helped participants feel a sense of membership, relationship, ownership, and partnership; the four elements of a psychological sense of community (Schreiner, 2013).

A strong correlation between fit and involvement emerged from data. Some participants clearly described factors they looked for when choosing a college. Kelly only considered schools with nursing programs. The deciding factor, however, was the faith aspect of MCU. Interestingly, when describing her most positive experiences, her answer reflected the faith aspect that drew her to MCU.

> Most positive, I think one of the biggest things that I love about being here is we have chapel in the middle of the day, Monday, Wednesday, Friday. And, I think, walking out

of class and following your professor into [the great hall] is one of the coolest things, and just knowing that you not only are around them in the academic setting but then you can go, you know, worship with your professors and amongst them. I just think that has always been a really positive thing for me to just see them more as a person living their life too, not just as your professor. (Kelly)

Kelly later talked about her confidence that MCU was a good fit for her because of the nursing program and the Christian environment. She also felt a sense of belonging due to great people she met and friendships she formed. Her connection with the university reflects two aspects of the elements of community that positively contribute to thriving: membership and relationship (Schreiner, 2013). For her, chapel represented a ritual that created a shared emotional connection and opportunities for positive interactions with faculty and peers.

Sierra's experience also reflects the correlation between fit and engagement. Initially, she searched for schools with two criteria; she wanted to find a liberal arts institution within a specific urban area. She did not apply to many colleges or visit many campuses. Instead, she spent a lot of time online looking at various schools. Sierra valued learning about the university from a student's perspective, so she looked up a current student's Instagram account and used pictures to determine if the student and her friends had fun in college and what they did together.

Later in her decision process, Sierra also recognized she liked SJU's values, specifically the focus on social justice. She grew up in a predominately White, male, community and appreciated the way SJU helped her think about different issues more than before. Her connection to the school's values and culture appeared in her comments about her transition to college. She reflected on the event SJU held to honor the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's March on Washington.

And it was like really like good for me to have that on the first day. Because it's like always the thing I keep in the back of my mind like "Why do I go here? Why do I do well?" because like this is what happened on my first day and it's been like a really good structure for me. (Sierra)

This event became a symbol for Sierra that represented her membership in SJU's community.

Although involvement looked different for all participants, it played a significant role in their sense of belonging. Schreiner (2013) argued that a sense of community is one of the best ways to help students thrive and addresses the disparity in success rates across socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Involvement increased some of the participants' sense of ownership. Although Tim did not make the varsity hockey team, he decided to start a club hockey team. When talking about his leadership role within the club, he explained his desire to create a sustainable club team.

> I'm talking to him about the hockey stuff and going over some details because I had to write up some stuff on it. I'm like, "Yeah, the whole goal is to be able to vote someone else into my position maybe not next year but my senior year." He goes, "What do you mean?" I go, "I'm not going to be president every year." He goes, "No. You're supposed to be president till you're a senior and then you leave. You let the program crash and burn and it looks like it wasn't your fault." And I go, "It's not how it works, man. I want to be able to, in my senior year, let someone else take it. I show him the ropes and then when I leave it's sustainable so it shows that I've actually developed a program that can last.

His desire to set the club up for success after he graduates demonstrates Tim's ownership and the contribution he made to the university.

Emma offered a great example of the sense of community on campus and its influence on her experience.

> I was a part of MCU student activities and those were definitely my highlights. I made a good group of friends through that and we were all super close. I loved planning the events with everyone and going to them and dressing up crazy in some of them. It was a lot of fun.

As she planned events with others in student activities, Emma felt she contributed something to her peers and the university. She also developed a sense of membership, relationship, and partnership through student activities. She and her peers worked interdependently toward a

shared goal, and they had opportunities for positive interactions and shared emotional connections with others through their involvement.

Although the majority of participants in this study joined extracurricular activities, Stuber (2009) identified extracurricular activities as an aspect of college that stratifies students based on class. Stuber's study involved 61 White students at a large, public university and at a small, private, liberal arts college. Stuber (2009) noted that upper-middle-class students possessed cultural and social resources that motivated and enabled their involvement. Conversely, many working-class students entered college with cultural resources that limited their involvement in extracurricular activities, and they often did not have social networks to inspire their participation or connect them to extracurricular activities (Stuber, 2009). Socioeconomic class might explain some of the unique findings from my study since I used self-reporting methods to collect information about family income and only a few identified as coming from low-income backgrounds.

Congruent Messages

The microsystems of most participants centered on campus. For many, this created a mesosystem with congruent messages. Some of the messages related to the values and culture of these institutions, specifically faith at MCU and diversity and social justice at SJU. Participants also received a lot of positive messages about graduate school. Additionally, the high value most of their families placed on education complimented messages they received from faculty and peers about education and graduate school.

Most Positive Experiences

Participants' positive experiences in college related to the five factors of thriving and the elements of a psychological sense of community (Schreiner, 2013). Through their experiences,

they demonstrated engaged learning, academic determination, diverse citizenship, social connectedness, membership, relationship, ownership, and partnership. I also examine their experiences through a lens of self-authorship.

Academics. Some participants named an academic experience or accomplishment as one of their most positive experiences. They mentioned selecting their major, making the Dean's list, gaining acceptance into the nursing program, and taking ownership for their learning. One reason these experiences positively influenced participants' experiences may be their connection to two factors of thriving: engaged learning and academic determination.

Adriano's academic experiences represented the meaning of engaged learning, which Schreiner and Louis (2011) defined as "a positive energy invested in one's own learning, evidenced by meaningful processing, attention to what is happening in the moment, and involvement in learning activities" (p. 6). He demonstrated this factor of thriving through his desire to learn on his own, including reading books not assigned through a class.

> So the most positive I think has been being able to learn on my own. I go to class and it's wonderful. I take lectures. I take it in and I read the assignments. But when I can actually see a book, "Oh, I want to read that." It could be for the class or maybe it's not for the class. But I can look at that and I can evaluate, I can read it, I can come up with my own ideas. Or I can, like the professor is not- I think one thing that's a validation for me in college has been sort of like the professor could or could not hold my views. That's okay. I won't view the professor differently. But I feel like the classes don't influence me directly as it was in high school. Cuz in high school you take everything your teacher tells you for what it is. In college it's like they tell you and you can take that or there's other views that are available because it's more academic.

His classes also provided him with space to begin examining his own beliefs rather than uncritically following the thoughts and beliefs of professors as he did in high school. Although he will continue to develop his internal foundation, his experience demonstrates a step towards developing self-authorship.

Many participants decided their major before they started college. The majority of those with an undecided major mentioned the decision about their major as a significant part of their college experience. Nicole initially considered studying psychology. However, during her first-year seminar about Health Sciences, she realized she wanted to become a physical therapist.

In some ways, her decision still reflects her reliance on external formulas. She explained that her first-year seminar advisor suggested she study physical therapy because he believed she would enjoy it.

> And I was like, "Okay, but don't push it on me. I don't know," you know? And I thought, "Well, you know, maybe I want to do athletic training or something like that. I like exercise. I like nutrition and sciences, and stuff like that, but … oh, and I like massage therapy. So I was talking to him about that and then, of course, he brings up the money thing and happiness. That made me mad. That made me really mad cuz I was like, "Well, if I'm going to be happy and I want to be happy, then, this will do it" kind of thing.

He talked to her about the financial implications of working as a physical therapist compared to working as a massage therapist. Although his comments frustrated her, she decided to pursue physical therapy. Interestingly, Nicole mentioned her decision about a major as one of the most positive experiences in college because it gave her a plan for her life after college.

> I mean, it's satisfying to know that I have a plan and a track that, you know, if I become a physical therapist and I don't enjoy working 40 hours a week all the time, I mean, you can change it up. And if I want to decide to go back to school or do something else, I'm not going to be afraid to do that, but just like right now, to know that once I get that under my belt, I'll have a starting point kind of thing.

One of the most positive experiences for Erynne included the opportunity to incorporate her faith in her academics.

> Obviously I love learning in general. And so the positive experiences would be going to classes that I've never taken like Intro to Bible and CWC like these are just classes that I've never been able to take before because I went to a public school. I mean there's a lot of people who went to private Christian schools in high school or in elementary school and middle school and I mean, I never got that. So being able to now learn more about my faith while bettering my education like that is a really awesome experience. I'm

really thankful that I get that because I don't know, it gives me a better perspective on who I am and why I'm doing it.

For Erynne, integrating an important aspect of her identity into her education helped her grow in her understanding of herself. This integration provided the environment for her to engage in her learning in a different way than she did in high school. When talking about her college choice, Erynne mentioned faith as an important factor.

> I wanted there to be a good education program. And I wanted it to be a private Christian because I had started my faith like in 11th grade and so I wanted to strengthen that by being surrounded by Christian people in that environment, so I wanted it to be a private Christian.

As mentioned with involvement, Erynne's reflection demonstrates the influence of fit on students' experiences in college. The integration of faith and academics increased her sense of membership at MCU.

These findings differ from Soria and Stebleton's (2012) study comparing the academic engagement of first-generation students to continuing-generation students at a large, public research university. They found first-generation students had lower academic engagement as measured by their contributions to class discussions, asking insightful questions in class, bringing up ideas from different courses during class discussions, and interacting with faculty during class (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). The variation in findings between Soria and Stebleton's (2012) study and my study might point to the possible advantages of small, private institutions of higher education. In their recommendations, Soria and Stebleton (2012) suggested faculty enhance students' sense of belonging on campus by providing access to communities of belonging. This might take on the form or first-year seminars, learning communities, study abroad opportunities, or new student initiatives specifically targeting first-generation students. Many of these suggestions reflect opportunities that participants in my study mentioned as

positive experiences. However, socioeconomic class or race/ethnicity might also explain why participants in my study felt comfortable interacting with faculty.

Experiences that stretched or challenged participants. When discussing their most positive experiences, many participants mentioned experiences that stretched or challenged them, such as meeting new people, studying abroad, and gaining leadership experience. These experiences significantly influenced participants' identity development and demonstrated evidence of thriving. These experiences served as crossroads for participants because they caused participants to reflect on their true beliefs, identity, and social relations. Baxter Magolda (2014) described crossroads as "filled with tension between external influence and the growing internal voice as young adults work to make their own way in the world" (p. 28). These experiences also showed the way participation in increasingly complex activities benefits students' development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993).

Many of these experiences reflect diverse citizenship, which Schreiner described as "a complex combination of an openness and valuing of differences in others, an interest in relating to others from diverse backgrounds, a desire to make a contribution in the world and the confidence to do so" (Schreiner, 2010, p. 5). Stephanie mentioned meeting new people at her university as one of her most positive experiences.

> I think just meeting new people. Branching out. It's definitely been a culture change, too. There's a lot of different types of people here, different ethnicities, different sexual orientations and everything. It's been quite an experience. I find it interesting just to learn about it and meet people and see how they grew up, compared to how I grew up.

Stephanie valued the differences she saw in others and appreciated learning from those around her.

Similarly, Grace spent a semester in Italy and talked about the value of meeting new people and experiencing a new culture. "Italy itself is so much different and their values that it

really changed how I looked at my time and how … For them, education is really important … I

learned a lot of things from it, learned about myself. It actually helped shape my faith as well

too." Learning about the values of another country helped her examine her own values, moving

her further in her journey towards self-authorship.

Finally, participants discussed their leadership opportunities as positive experiences.

Carly and Sierra valued their experiences through orientation and their first-year seminar, so they

applied for and became orientation leaders their sophomore years.

> Actually my sophomore year I applied to be an orientation new student mentor and I got
> it, so that was nice. That was probably my highlight cuz I was an orientation leader so
> being involved in all the things I was going through my first year and being that leader it
> was a different … What's the word? It was like seeing it a different way and being on
> the other side of things and that was interesting just to see like all the first years super
> nervous and then me like trying to be like "it's okay it's fun." And being peppy and
> upbeat all the time, oh that was a lot of work but it fun. And then I got close to a group
> of, you know, like eighteen first years. One of them is like my good friend now. That
> was definitely a positive experience for sure. (Carly)

This experience showed their participation in increasingly complex activities, as they shifted

from a first-year student to mentoring first-year students. Serving as orientation leaders also

gave them ownership in their community, as they contributed to the transition of new students

and helped them gain a sense of belonging on campus.

However, their involvement in leadership differs from the experiences of other first-

generation students. Soria, Hussein, and Vue (2014) examined the association between students'

first-generation status and family income and their involvement in positional leadership at six

large, public research universities. They found that first-generation students and students from

low-income backgrounds are less likely to participate in leadership positions. Socioeconomic

background or race/ethnicity might explain this variation, even though Soria, Huesein, and Vue

(2014) controlled for these factors. The majority of participants in my study identified as White

and middle-class, which may provide more cultural and social capital that motivated their

involvement in leadership and encouraged their perception that they belong in leadership.

Additionally, institutional type might explain the differences between these studies due to the

number of opportunities for involvement in leadership at a small, private university. For the

participants in my study, leadership provided a sense of ownership and belonging in the campus

community.

Sense of belonging. When describing their most positive experiences in college, the

majority of participants discussed aspects that increased their sense of belonging. Feeling known

and cared for emerged as important themes. Many shared their appreciation for professors and

the significance of them knowing students' names. For example, Hannah explained, "I feel

comfortable here, too, like the professors, like they know me by my first name. And I can call

them by their first name. They actually, like they truly care how well you do." Others expressed

the significance of knowing professors cared about their lives beyond academics.

> I think one of the things that I and from talking to other friends at other universities, I am very lucky where I'm at for the professors. Looking back at some of the issues I've had or just having a bad day and happening to see a professor and they can tell. They are a great resource for you, not only academically but your personal life. They're willing to listen, to talk to you, to help you.

> I've had professors just considering my family situation. Like I said, I don't even see my family on Thanksgiving even, I've had a professor invite me to her house for their Thanksgiving dinner. I think that that is by far what I have used as the biggest resource for myself. It's just really getting to know my professors on more than just an academic level. (Kelly)

Small class sizes provided students with opportunities to positively interact with and know their

professors. Feeling known by professors helped many feel a sense of belonging.

Others felt a sense of belonging through their friendships. Many of Amber's significant

friendships developed through her participation in choir.

> I've grown a lot and developed lifelong friendships that have been really significant, because I didn't see that happening freshman year. I was starting to second-guess my decision. When I was able to get into that choir and be around people who were passionate about similar things that I was, that was super cool for me.

Through choir, she had the opportunity for positive interactions with peers and a shared emotional connection through a passion of hers. These friendships also contributed to her sense of belonging on campus and validation of her decision to attend MCU.

One of the values of participants' campus-centric microsystems is that many of them received messages through multiple microsystems saying they belonging in the campus community. For some, the message of belonging came through classes and their professors. Others received this message through their extracurricular involvement. Some participants shared how much they appreciated their friendships, another microsystem that provided a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging contributed to participants' thriving in college.

> When students experience the campus community as a safe place where they belong and are valued, where they experience positive emotional connections and matter to others, and where they believe they have something to contribute and their needs will be met, they are highly likely to thrive—socially, emotionally, and academically. (Schreiner, 2013, p. 49).

Despite their first-generation status, participants found community at these small, private institutions and showed signs of thriving in that environment.

Unfortunately, not all first-generation students experience a sense of belonging on campus. Jehangir (2010b) explained that "on campus, first-generation students must try to make sense of the explicit and implicit expectations, rituals, and norms of the higher education culture—a process which can be simultaneously exhilarating, overwhelming, and alienating," (p. 536). The majority of participants in Jehangir's study are students of color. Guiffrida (2005) and Winkle-Wagner (2009) examined the experiences of African American students and noted that most participants experienced a sense of homelessness, in which they felt they did not

belong at college or at home anymore. Therefore, students' sense of belonging in college may correlate more with their race/ethnicity than parental education, especially at PWIs.

Additionally, experiences of belonging or marginality vary for White students as well. Stuber's (2011) study focused on the experiences of White, first-generation students at a large, public research university and a small, private, liberal arts college. Results indicated a little more than half of the participants adjusted well socially and academically. Approximately one quarter experienced feelings of marginality and alienation, which persisted into their second or third year in college. One quarter demonstrated resiliency as they initially felt marginalized but confronted those feelings and eventually adjusted well socially and academically.

As Stuber (2011) noted, class may be a primary factor influencing participants' adjustment to college. Many who adjusted well to college grew up in stable blue-collar households within stable communities compared to other participants who arrived on campus with fewer economic resources. For these "integrated persisters," Whiteness served as an asset to their adjustment. However, for participants who experienced marginality, Stuber (2011) explained, "their Whiteness may have functioned as an asset by allowing them to blend in with the majority of their peers, [but] it concealed important underlying economic differences" (p. 128). Although the experiences of participants in my study did not significantly differ based on class, my use of self-reporting methods to collect information about participants' socioeconomic status depended on students' perceptions. Unlike Stuber's (2011) study focused on first-generation students from working-class backgrounds, the majority of my participants came from middle-income households, which may explain the similarity between my participants' experiences and the experiences of the "integrated persisters" in Stuber's study. Although

participants did not discuss race, their Whiteness likely functioned as an asset and helped them fit in with their peers, concealing their first-generation status and any economic differences.

Challenge and Support

As participants navigated their college experience, they encountered a number of challenges and utilized a variety of resources for support. I used Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) ecological theory to understand how obstacles affected participants and the way participants responded to them. Although many participants described similar challenges and had access to some of the same resources, their experiences also depended on how they interacted with their environment. Bronfenbrenner (1993) called these developmentally instigative characteristics and described them as the attributes "that induce or inhibit dynamic dispositions toward the environment" (p. 11). These attributes contribute to an individual's development. However, these characteristics

> do not *determine* the course of development; rather, they may be thought of as 'putting a spin' on a body in motion. The effect of that spin depends on the other forces, and resources, in the total ecological system. The effect of that spin depends on the other forces, and resources, in the total ecological system. (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 14)

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, participants' development depended on their developmentally instigative characteristics as well as the challenges and support in their environment.

The connections and overlap between microsystems led to many of the challenges mentioned by participants. For some, the interaction between their classes, jobs, and their extracurricular activities created a need for time management and stress management. Many of these challenges also arose because of the increasingly complex activities in which participants engaged.

Many participants turned to their families for support. However, they also acknowledged that though their families provided emotional support and encouragement, they could not help with homework or other aspects of college. Instead, participants found support in their peers and older students they knew through extracurricular activities and on-campus jobs. They also received support from their professors. Many participants had access to resources and support on campus because the small campus provided a psychological sense of community (Schreiner, 2013). Erynne's description of the reciprocal relationship she had with classmates demonstrates the sense of ownership and membership she felt in college.

> It's really helpful to have … to work with people in your class on homework and studying for tests because then, I mean, just last week I was studying with one of my friends for a chem test and she told me a bunch of things that I didn't know. I was like, "Oh, really? Okay, great." And then there are things that I helped her with and it was a good resource to have people in your class studying together, doing homework together.

The connection she had with classmates and her ability to spend time studying with them became an important support system for her as well as her classmates. By studying together, Erynne received the help she needed with academics, but also gained confidence through helping others. These mutually beneficial relationships significantly supported participants' thriving in college.

Characteristics of Participants

One of the most significant factors in participants' college experience is the set of characteristics they possessed. A lot of research about first-generation students discussed the achievement gap and viewed students through a deficit perspective. However, Schreiner (2010) noted, "Interestingly, differences in students' backgrounds before entering college were not as important to understanding their success as was their level of thriving" (p. 6). However, students' backgrounds influence the characteristics they develop, therefore privilege may still play a role in students' characteristics.

Self-efficacy, ambition, and resiliency reflect Schreiner's description of a positive perspective, one of the factors of thriving. She emphasized the importance of students' outlook, including a positive perspective on life. "Rather than an unrealistically positive view of the world, this perspective actually enables a person to come to grips with difficult situations more readily" (Schreiner, 2010, p. 6). Participants remained positive through their challenges, which contributed to their development and ability to thrive in college.

Participants demonstrated resourcefulness as they navigated the college decision and application process. A few participants also utilized their resourcefulness to attain jobs prior to arriving on campus. A few participants encountered significant disappointments and challenges, such as Lindsey's broken femur and Tim not making the hockey team. However, these situations revealed their resiliency. Students with a positive perspective keep trying in the face of challenges and difficult circumstances and have the ability to create long-term goals and develop steps to achieve their goals (Schreiner, 2010). Due to their positive emotions, they "are more resilient—they bounce back from adversity and recover faster from illness and stressful events" (Schreiner, 2010, p. 7).

All participants exhibited self-efficacy and ambition as they described plans to attend graduate school, their determination to succeed, their positive outlook, and accomplishing goals through hard work. Terenzini and his colleagues (1996) noted that first-generation students are more likely to have lower degree aspirations than their continuing-generation peers, however, this did not reflect the experiences of participants in my study. Many of them discussed plans to attend graduate school in their future. They demonstrated ambition and a belief in their abilities to succeed. Many also aspired to be leaders on campus and challenged themselves by applying for leadership positions. These leadership positions especially contributed to thriving because it

enhanced students' sense of community. Opportunities for leadership gave them ownership, membership, relationship, and partnership on campus.

Although some students may arrive on their college campus with many of these attributes, Schreiner (2010) noted that these positive emotions can be learned, so environment matters for students. They can learn to have a positive perspective through their family or college environment, which affects their ability to thrive. However, though institutions can create environments that support student success and thriving, students' experiences on campus depend more on students' perceptions of the campus community than on the objective reality of campus. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained, "what matters for behavior and development is the environment as it is perceived rather than as it may exist in "objective" reality" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 4). For this reason, characteristics shown by participants may explain why the majority felt a strong sense of belonging on campus. Their resourcefulness, self-efficacy and ambition, resiliency, and leadership influenced their perception of the campus community, which affected their college choice and interaction with the college environment.

Identity Development

Since first-generation students usually do not receive the same type of support and assistance from their parents for various aspects of college, many develop characteristics such as resourcefulness, resiliency, and self-efficacy. Researchers often view first-generation students in light of their deficits or weaknesses, rather than their strengths (Gorski, 2011). Most young adults do not shift toward self-authorship during college. However, those who experience marginalization may move toward self-authorship during college (Baxter Magolda, 2014). As evidenced by the experiences of participants, first-generation students may move towards self-

authorship quicker than their continuing-generation peers, depending on the way they interact with their environment.

Additionally, environment significantly influences student development. Since all participants lived on or near campus, physical distance from their families allowed them to explore their beliefs, identity, and social relations in a different way than if they lived with their families during college.

> I think I've changed a lot … That's one thing that I've realized is in the past year and a half, I've developed my own views. Not necessarily in contrast of my parents but they're like my own. They're sort of like, They're … I'm entitled … They're originated in me. My convictions, my theological views, the way I see the church. A lot of that has its roots in my parents. It has some of its roots in my parents. But it's like if the views I took which roots are my parents, the views I got from my parents and some views I got from other sources, I've grown upon that and I've gone deeper than my parents have gone. (Adriano)

As Sabrina spent time away from her family and at SJU, she realized some of her values differed from her parents'. "I think I'm more … I think I've accepted how much more liberal I am versus my family, which I think I knew that in high school, but coming here was like, 'Oh, yeah, I definitely am.'" As she spent time in various microsystems at college, she became more comfortable owning her own values.

For many, their development and changes they noticed in themselves related to reasons they resonated with the school culture. Many at MCU described growing in their faith. Lindsey expressed her appreciation for the impact college environment had on her faith.

> So being able to now learn more about my faith while bettering my education like that is a really awesome experience. I'm really thankful that I get that because I don't know, it gives me a better perspective on who I am and why I'm doing it.

Some participants from SJU changed in the way they understood diversity. For example, Stephanie explained, "I think I'm definitely more open to experiences and to people. Seeing and talking to all kinds of different people and different backgrounds. It's really broadened my

perspective on things." For those who chose their university due to institutional fit, campus

environment influenced students' sense of community, increased their likelihood of thriving, and

shaped their identity development.

The College Experience as an Ecological Transition

When participants started college, they experienced an ecological transition, which

"occurs whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a

change in role, setting, or both" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). This ecological transition

instigates developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

> The developmental importance of ecological transitions derives from the fact that they almost invariably involve a change in *role*, that is, in the expectations for behavior associated with particular positions in society. Roles have a magiclike power to alter how a person is treated, how she acts, what she does, and thereby even what she thinks and feels. The principle applies not only to the developing person but to the others in her world. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 6)

Since all participants moved to campus their first year, they each experienced a change in their

setting as well as their role.

Their role as student became their primary role, in addition to their roles as employee,

roommate, classmate, and teammate. Bronfenbrenner (1979) described a role as "a set of

activities and relations expected of a person occupying a particular position in society, and of

others in relation to that person" (p. 85). The expectations that came with their role as college

students changed the expectations of participants within their families. Erynne noticed a

significant shift in her family responsibilities when she transitioned to college.

> I was just so ready to be on my own and for all through high school and like part of middle school, I had been the mom of my sisters because my mom would work nights and so I had played the mom role and did schooling at the same time. So it was a bunch of stress in high school. Then having that final relief in college of "I'm finally on my own." I still had school but it was on my own time and I didn't have to have any more things I had to worry about like at home. So that, it was definitely a transition from being

so busy with schooling and my sisters and then being on my own time and not my parents' time.

She no longer felt responsible for raising her sisters. However, her family felt those changes in a different way than Erynne experienced them.

> Now that I'm in college, I'm on my own so I prioritize my education over my family. And so that creates tension with my family because my dad is like, "Well, in high school you spent so much time with your sisters and blah … blah … now, you don't do any of that." I don't think he gets it half the time because I do have to prioritize. And when I'm paying for my own education, I tend to prioritize that over my family sometimes.

Since Erynne lived on campus and had physical distance from her family, she prioritized her student role over her sister and daughter roles, which created tension with her family.

For the majority of participants, the student role was more salient than their family roles because they lived on or near campus and most of their microsystems related to their college experience. Some participants needed physical separation from family in order to focus on the student role without the expectations and obligations of their family role. Erynne talked about the challenge of fulfilling her student obligations while at home, and therefore, tried to limit the frequency with which she visited her family.

> Lately, it's been every weekend because I've had medical things and family issues to deal with. But last year I went home maybe once a month maybe, and that's really what I aim for because my family life isn't the best and so like I love my sisters, I love my family. Don't get me wrong, I love them but it seems like every time I'm home there's something not right. There's always a tension in my house. A lot of the times on the weekends I have tons of homework and I can't get it done at home because my sisters are like "Sissy, play with me. Color with me." And I'm like, "I can't, I can't." I don't go home because of the tension and the homework that I have. I go home … This year I've been, this month, I'm thinking I went home like every weekend because I had things going on at home that I just needed to get done. (Erynne)

A few participants described the challenge of working on homework when visiting their families because their families did not understand their school obligations and wanted them to step back into their role as child or sibling. However, not all first-generation students have the ability to

move away from home or prioritize their student role above their family role, so this finding

might reflect the class and racial privilege of the majority of participants in this study.

The addition of new roles in college helped participants develop a more complex identity

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Yet, a few participants struggled with the transition between home and

school.

> I think just like the moving back and forth a lot. Like, I mean J-term. We have the
> month of January off, and then summers off, right? So I think going back home for like
> the full month of January, I don't know, was just weird. Because you feel at home when
> you're here and you feel at home when you're home. Then for awhile you don't. I don't
> know. It was weird. (Sabrina)

Although transitioning between roles proved challenging at times, the addition of multiple roles

in college influenced participants' identity development as they navigated the different

expectations of each role and how others treated them in each role.

Family Influences on Identity Development

The addition of new roles and physical distance caused changes in students' roles within

their families. Ecological theory offers an important reminder that students' experiences vary

due to the way they interact with their environment and the multiple settings and people that

environment includes. Participants responded in three different ways to this ecological

transition, influenced, in part, by their family relationships and cultures.

First, some participants pulled away and prioritized their role as student. Kristin avoided

visiting home and created separation because she wanted to distance herself from her family

story. In her hometown, everyone knew her mother left her and her brother struggled with

addiction. However, college offered her a fresh start, which she gladly accepted. Some

participants created distance between themselves and their families in order to prioritize their

education. They felt unable to fulfill family expectations and college expectations such as

homework while visiting their families, so they chose to limit their visits. One of the challenges

for Chelsea and Erynne is that their roles as daughter and sister did not change after they started

college. They still felt their families had the same expectations of them, which made it

challenging to visit family with the added expectations that came with college.

Second, a few participants maintained separate roles and switched between them when

they transitioned between home and school. Moua viewed earning a degree through the lens of

the increased status it would bring his family. Thus, he had two distinct but interconnected roles

as student and as son. Although Moua engaged in many extracurricular activities in high school,

he focused more on academics and work during college. This change in priorities may reflect his

family's view of college as greatly affecting family "stability, security, [and] status." Though he

appreciated his ability to relax with friends, he also placed high value on his role as son.

> When I'm at home, I'm the older sibling, so I have more responsibilities, so I have to be
> like mature. I have to be perfect and I have to help. I have to cook a meal for my siblings
> if my parents are busy. I have to support them. And so like when I'm here, I don't have
> anybody to support. I just support myself, and I can kind of like hang out with my friends
> and just be myself. And so it is different worlds and different perspectives. So you do
> have to like change accordingly.

Moua worked a lot in order to support his family, but he valued the ability to spend time with his

friends in a way he could not with family because of his responsibilities.

Moua also explained some of the background on his education. His parents sent him and

his siblings to a predominantly White private high school. His extended family also placed a lot

of emphasis on his success in school because it could affect his entire family. Moua's cousins

joined gangs, so his parents did not allow them to spend much time together. Additionally, his

uncle placed a lot of pressure on Moua and his siblings to succeed in school because, as Moua

explained,

It's gotten to the point where they expect us to succeed because their kids couldn't succeed and so they put a lot of pressure on us to succeed for our whole family's sake to be successful. And it is a lot of pressure because whenever we go to wider family … Okay, our family gatherings are much different from American culture gatherings. And so we have our immediate family and then our immediate cousins and then we have our relatives. And when it's a family gathering, it's all of the relatives. And so then our family consists of my immediate family and my immediate cousins who are under the branch of my grandpa. My grandpa, even though he's passed away, is still the head branch of our family, and it's like multiple branches at that generation that have the family gathering together, so it's really weird.

And so then our branch, the most successful family is the head of that branch, and so that's our family. So then me and my older brother are pretty much the representatives of successfulness for our family. And so if we ever choke or fail, then we are known as failures to the entire relatives. And so it's a lot of pressure to be successful at this point. And then when you go to our family gatherings, my uncle is just like "Hey, he's going to become a doctor," but technically he's going to becomes a PA, but they don't know the difference. And then he's like, "Oh yeah, he works with computers" and it's like, "Well, I'm not a computer engineer, I'm a computer scientist." It's kind of different. Like I can't fix computers because I work with the inside and not the outside kind of stuff, but they don't understand that. It is difficult because they don't understand and all of them started their families at a very young age and so it's different, very much so.

Moua's family culture and relationships influenced the way he viewed his education. He worked towards earning a degree to benefit his entire family rather than focusing on how it would affect his life individually.

Finally, some participants integrated their identities. A few participants noticed they acted differently at home and at school. Rather than change based on their specific role and responsibilities in each setting, they noticed changes in the way they dressed or spoke. Hannah adapted to living in the city and realized she preferred "city clothes." However, her friends from her hometown expected her to dress as a "country girl." After some self-reflection, she sorted out the external influences versus her own preferences.

Cuz actually, like when I like pack for home now, I'm like "I'm gonna wear what I wanna wear." Like if people notice that I've changed that's okay cuz it's who I am now and it's okay. I like who I am and I think they will, too. I haven't changed that much. It's what I wear or something.

She learned to trust her internal voice and made a commitment to stay true to her identity, even if it conflicted with expectations others had of her. Chelsea noticed two versions of herself.

> Sometimes I feel like I'm living … Just to be completely honest, sometimes I do feel like I'm living a double life, more in the sense that when I go home, I … I can't just blame this on my parents, and I can't just blame this on the environment, but it is a very strong, powerful thing, and I'll find myself at home, because my parents swear a lot, so I'll find myself starting to swear more, and I'll find myself in more of a negative attitude, and worrying about things that I would never worry about here.

Although she struggled with this "double life," Chelsea had yet to figure out if one of these versions reflected what she believed to be her true identity and if so, how to present that version of herself in both settings.

Regardless of ways in which participants navigated their various roles and transitions between home and school, the majority mentioned their parents as a primary source of support.

> I have my parents for support. I have my mom for support. I always talk to her and vent like she doesn't always know how help and lead me in the right way to go but she's good to vent to. (Carly)

Although many participants did not visit their families often, the majority mentioned communicating with their families on a regular basis. Tim, for example, mentioned calling his mother almost every day. "I tend to walk back home by myself and it's usually only about a seven-minute walk but the way I look at it is it's, call my mom." Despite the physical distance, many parents played an important role in supporting and encouraging participants throughout their time in college.

The connection through technology allows their family to remain a microsystem even though they are not physically together on a regular basis. This may benefit students' identity development because their families see their incremental changes. Adriano is an example of someone who not only kept in contact with his family, but also shared what he was learning with them in a way that shared knowledge rather than making him seem like he thought he was

superior to them. "My mom is very fascinated when I talk to her about these things. Instead of having that, 'you know more than me.' It's more like, 'walk me through that. What's that about?'" A few participants mentioned intentionally connecting with their families and sharing about their college experiences. Some also processed big decisions with their parents. Although it may not directly correlate, these participants did not struggle with the transition between home and school and did not express feeling like they had two versions of themselves. As participants worked towards self-authorship, their families influenced their development through their support or resistance to changes they saw in students.

Identity as a First-Generation Student

A few participants acknowledged differences they noticed between themselves and their continuing generation peers. Primarily, they felt their peers had an advantage with academics because they could ask their parents for help with homework, including editing papers. A couple participants mentioned working longer hours than their peers in order to pay for school and help their families.

However, a couple participants did not realize they were first-generation college students until they received information about a luncheon for first-generation students or the email about this study.

> I didn't know I was until um I got an email my freshman year about first-generation. I'm like "I don't know what … why am I getting this? I don't get it." I was like, "oh." And then I thought about it and I was like, "oh, I am." I had no idea, so then I thought about it and was like, "wow, I really just threw myself into this without even knowing that my parents have no idea what I'm doing." (Hannah)

I anticipated first-generation student status would have a greater impact on participants' college experience. However, they found more similarities than differences with their peers, which positively influenced their college experience. The majority also connected to the university

culture and values, creating a sense of being an "insider" on campus. Since the majority of participants identified as White, their race might explain why their status as first-generation did not significantly influence their college experience or their sense of belonging.

Summary

In this chapter, I analyzed the experiences of participants using the ecological theory of human development, thriving, and self-authorship. Parents played an influential role in participants' K-12 education and encouraged their decision to attend college. Although they encouraged college enrollment, most parents lacked knowledge about college or the decision and application process. However, the changes in the societal view of the role of higher education lessened or negated their parents' lack of college knowledge. Next, institutional fit emerged as an important factor in participants' interaction with the college environment, which in turn, influenced their likelihood of thriving and their journey towards self-authorship. I also discussed characteristics of participants and the way their characteristics affected their interaction with the environment. Finally, I analyzed how families influenced the identity development of participants as they navigated their multiple roles and expectations. In the final chapter, I review core findings of this study, explain limitations, and discuss implications for future research and practice.

CHAPTER SEVEN
SUMMARY and CONCLUSION

Through this qualitative study, I examined the lived experience of 18 first-generation college students at two private, four-year universities. I gathered data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and focused on whether and how family relationships and culture influenced participants' identity development. I also explored their experiences of navigating their home and school cultures. Additionally, I examined the influence of college environment on participants' experiences and development. The findings revealed the positive influence of family support and institutional fit on students' experience and identity development. In this chapter, I summarize the general findings. I also discuss limitations of the study and implications for future research and student affairs practice.

Summary of Findings

Although the majority of first-generation students enroll at public two-year and four-year institutions, 17 percent enroll at smaller private colleges (Rine & Eliason, 2015). First-generation students, as a whole, make up a small percentage of the student body at private, four-year institutions. Their college choice alone separates participants in my study from the majority of first-generation college students. However, findings revealed differences throughout their experiences. Although participants did not connect race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status to their experiences, these factors might explain some of the differences in these findings compared to the findings in other studies about first-generation students.

Parental Influence and College Choice

First, participants described college as an assumed reality. Although their parents did not have four-year degrees, participants did not view college as optional. This assumption aligns with the changing role of higher education in society today. A higher percentage of high school

graduates attend college now than in the past. In Minnesota, the college participation rate increased from 56 percent of recent high school graduates in 1996 to 67 percent of graduates in 2013 (Djurovich, et al., 2015). As college participation increases, general knowledge about college becomes more common. Participants grew up hearing about college in school and in conversations with friends and always envisioned college as their next step after high school. Therefore, for many students, parents no longer function as the primary source of information about college.

In addition to societal influences, parental encouragement and support emerged as a significant factor in influencing participants' view of education. Participants described support and encouragement they received from their families in their academic endeavors throughout their lives. Family support took on many forms, including encouragement, financial support for postsecondary education, involvement in the K-12 classroom, accountability for grades and homework, and emotional support during college. The majority of participants also discussed their family's role in encouraging them to enroll in higher education. The meaning participants attributed to education and a four-year degree typically reflected the values of their families. Many grew up hearing messages about the connection between college and stable employment and higher wages based on their family's experiences with work.

In their college decision process, participants' ecological settings set them up to view private, four-year institutions as a viable option. In some cases, family members influenced students' college choice. Some participants mentioned their parents strongly encouraged them to choose a four-year institution of higher education. A few specifically suggested they consider private colleges due to their belief that these institutions would provide better education or more financial aid. Although some participants navigated the college decision process on their own,

other participants visited colleges with one or both of their parents and discussed their decision with family.

The majority of participants had access to a variety of resources to help them make decisions about college, including high school counselors, parents of their peers, school activities such as National Honor Society, college fairs, and brochures from colleges and universities. Most participants considered at least a few different institutions, often visiting and applying to each of them. They also accessed materials online, including college websites, national rankings, and students' social media accounts. Due to changes in society and the increase in general knowledge about college, participants did not depend on their families as their primary source of information about college. However, privilege associated with their race or socioeconomic status might explain their access to and interaction with resources.

Institutional fit and financial aid emerged as the primary factors influencing participants' college choice. The majority of participants selected the university that "felt right." Many of them based their decision on the sense of community they experienced during their campus visit, which reflected the values and culture of the university. Additionally, the majority of participants identified as White, which might explain their comfort and sense of belonging at PWIs. For many, their early connection to the campus community gave them a sense of belonging, which positively influenced their college experience including their decisions about involvement.

College Experience

Overall, participants described a positive college experience and a sense of belonging on their campus, affirming they chose a college that fit them well. Many participants engaged academically through connections with faculty and internship or research opportunities. They

also participated in extracurricular activities and made connections with staff and peers through on-campus jobs. They all lived on campus at least one year, and all but one participant remained on campus or close to campus with college friends. For the majority of participants, their experiences on campus fostered a sense of community, a key component of thriving.

Many of the positive experiences participants shared related to the five factors of thriving: engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2013). Some participants named an academic experience or accomplishment as one of their most positive experiences, including selecting their major, making the Dean's list, gaining acceptance into the nursing program, and taking ownership for their learning. Other participants mentioned experiences that stretched or challenged them, such as meeting new people, studying abroad, and gaining leadership experience. Many of their positive experiences also centered on community and relationships, reflecting the elements of a psychological sense of community: membership, relationship, ownership, and partnership (Schreiner, 2013). As they discussed their experiences, feeling known and cared for emerged as common themes, affirming Schreiner's (2013) suggestion that fostering a sense of community is the best way to increase student thriving.

Additionally, participants experienced a variety of challenges. Many discussed the challenge of managing their time and stress as they balanced classes, jobs, extracurricular activities, and relationships. A few participants struggled to connect socially, and others found it challenging to leave home and live independently. A couple participants dealt with specific situations that caused a lot of stress, such as Lindsey's broken femur and Tim learning he did not make the hockey team. They all mentioned resources and sources of support they accessed

during challenging times. However, the way they interacted with their environment affected whether or not these experiences moved them towards self-authorship and thriving.

Characteristics of Participants

Bronfenbrenner (1993) referred to characteristics that influence the way people interact with their environment as developmentally instigative characteristics. Although environment mattered, the characteristics possessed by students also influenced their development. Schreiner (2013) similarly emphasized the importance of students' levels of thriving, which influenced their success more than their backgrounds before entering college. However, characteristics do not develop apart from environment, therefore, participants' characteristics may reflect privilege. In this study, participants demonstrated resourcefulness, self-efficacy and ambition, resiliency, and leadership. These characteristics helped them navigate the unfamiliar terrain of college.

Identity Development

Similar to experiences of many first-generation students, participants in my study did not receive the same type of support and assistance from their parents for various aspects of college as their continuing-generation peers. However, many of them developed characteristics such as resourcefulness and self-efficacy, which could move them towards self-authorship more quickly than their peers. Participants demonstrated growth in many ways, including leadership development, faith development, personality and lifestyle changes, changes in perspective, and confidence and self-authorship.

The college experience as an ecological transition. College represented a significant change for students. This transition involved a change in role and setting, which Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to as an ecological transition, and instigated developmental processes. When participants moved to campus, their role as student became their primary role, in addition to their

roles as employee, roommate, classmate, and teammate. These roles became more salient for the majority of participants because most of their microsystems centered on their college experience. The expectations that came with their role as college student changed expectations of most participants within their families. Although some participants struggled with the transition between roles, the additional roles fostered a more complex identity development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Family influences on identity development. The addition of new roles and physical distance caused changes in students' roles within their families. Some participants chose to pull away from their family and prioritized their role as student. Others maintained separate roles and switched between roles depending on their context. A third group of participants felt unsettled about differences they noticed in themselves between their college and home environments, and chose to integrate their identities. Their family relationships and culture influenced their various responses.

Regular communication with families also influenced participants' experiences and identity development. Many felt supported by their families despite physical distance and often turned to their families first when they needed support or encouragement. Several participants discussed important decisions with their families and kept them informed about their lives.

Identity as a First-Generation Student

Although some participants thought more about being a first-generation student than others, this aspect of their identity was not salient for any of them. Some participants mentioned differences they noticed between themselves and their continuing-generation peers. However, most of their comments revolved around the academic support their peers received from their parents. A few also noted they work more hours than their peers. On the other hand, several

participants did not realize their status as first-generation students until they received an invitation to a luncheon for first-generation students or heard about this study. In general, participants recognized more similarities with their peers than differences, possibly due to the fact that the majority identified as White and attended PWIs.

Limitations

This study represents a snapshot of the experiences of 18 first-generation college students. Although demographics of participants closely align with demographics of the institutions and geographic region, they do not represent first-generation college students nationally. First-generation college students are more likely to be students of color and more likely to come from low-income families (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). My study included participants from a range of income levels, the majority were White students, and they grew up in rural, urban, and suburban areas. None of their parents or guardians had a four-year degree, but some of the participants' parents earned a two-year degree or completed some college. Since findings reflect the specific experiences of 18 individuals, they do not necessarily represent the experiences of all first-generation students.

I intentionally selected two private universities in order to examine commonalities between participants' experiences at multiple sites. However, the universities are of similar size and located in the same geographic area, which limits the generalizability of findings. The findings might greatly differ in another geographic region, especially since this area has a large number of institutions of higher education.

Based on the design of this study, I relied on convenience sampling and snowball sampling. This method of recruitment might limit diversity within the sample. It most likely

drew more students who lived on campus and participated in extracurricular activities and limited access to first-generation students who commuted or attended part-time.

Additionally, I limited the sample to those in their third or fourth year of college or recent graduates, with one exception. Since I interviewed college students and one recent graduate, they remembered their college experiences clearly. On the other hand, this limited the data because of the challenges of describing experiences related to development while in the midst of them. Also, the way participants view their identities and navigate their family relationships may look different a few years after they graduate. In this study, I found the university environment influenced students' identity development. However, the impact of the university culture on their identity may decrease once they move away from that setting.

Implications

In this study I examined the experiences of first-generation students at private, four-year universities. Through my examination of the experiences of first-generation students, I hoped to focus on strategies for institutions rather than addressing perceived deficits within students. Despite limitations in generalizability, lessons gleaned from this study offer insight for research and practice.

Theory

Literature about thriving developed from an assessment called The Thriving Quotient. Therefore, most researchers studying student thriving utilize quantitative methods. In this study, I used thriving as a framework for analyzing participants' college experiences. This theory revealed the significance of the sense of community fostered in college, and specifically the potential impact of community based on values of a mission-based institution. I recommend

further research using qualitative methods to examine student thriving in college and to understand better how institutions can create more inclusive campus cultures.

Future Research

Future research could add to the findings of this study in several ways. First, I recommend a longitudinal study that includes interviews with participants during the college decision process, during college, and at least a few years after graduation. This range would offer more insights into how families influence students' college decisions and ways students navigate their relationships after graduation. I recommend exploring choices they make about their career, where to live, and how they interact with their families.

I also recommend replicating this study with a more diverse sample, specifically including more students of color, students who commute from home, students who enroll part-time, and non-traditional students. Since I primarily interviewed White students, White privilege likely influenced their experiences and allowed them to assimilate more easily in the college setting because both universities in this study are PWIs. Perhaps they found more similarities than differences between themselves and their continuing-generation peers because most participants looked like the majority of students at these universities.

Findings pointed to advantages that small, private, four-year institutions might have in fostering a sense of belonging. I recommend replicating this study at different institutional types. Since the majority of first-generation students enroll at public two-year or four-year institutions, I suggest future research explore the experiences of first-generation students at these types of institutions with a similar focus on the influence of family relationships and culture and the college environment. This research would help answer questions about family influence on

college choice, experiences, and identity development as well as questions about the influence of the college environment.

Finally, I recommend a case study approach that includes first-generation students and some of their family members. Interviews could take place during college; however, a longitudinal approach would create a more complete picture of their experiences. Interviews could take place during high school and the college search process, during college, and at least a few years after college. This type of study would also provide more depth of data regarding family dynamics.

Student Affairs Practice

Based on the findings and analysis of this study, one might imply that a sense of community in college significantly influences first-generation students' sense of belonging, ability to thrive, and persistence. One might also imply that other resources, changes within society regarding postsecondary participation, and college environment potentially mitigate or lessen the impact of having parents without four-year college degrees. If this is true, the following recommendations may benefit student affairs practice.

As many participants mentioned, first-generation students often do not receive the same help from their parents with college applications and academics as their continuing-generation peers. However, as college enrollment increases and a greater percentage of the adult population hold baccalaureate degrees, knowledge about college becomes more widespread, which increases the number and availability of resources. This increased knowledge and availability of resources benefit first-generation students. Nevertheless, first-generation students represent a diverse group and their life circumstances affect college access and their experiences in college. For example, as this study demonstrated, first-generation students who enroll full-time immediately

after high school and live on or near campus may have advantages over other first-generation students. Similarly, students' race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status influence their college experiences. Student affairs staff must keep this diversity in demographics and circumstances in mind when working to support first-generation students.

For many participants, challenges played an important role in their development during college. They often accessed resources, but their navigation of the challenge contributed to their growth. This serves as a helpful reminder for student affairs staff to provide resources but avoid rushing to solve situations for students. For some participants, the negative challenges they faced, such as breaking a femur or not making the hockey team, became their most significant and transformational experiences.

Additionally, this study revealed the potential benefits of small, private, values-based institutions of higher education for first-generation students. However, other institutions could create similar environments for students. Schreiner (2013) discussed the importance of creating a psychological sense of community, and suggested larger institutions do this by "keeping the university 'psychologically small'" (p. 48). This can happen through initiatives that create small communities such as living-learning communities or small living units, small class sizes or study groups, and on-campus jobs and extracurricular involvement. Additionally, any opportunity colleges have to focus on a specific vision or project provides something with which students can identify and fosters a sense of belonging and ownership.

A small campus environment also benefits students because it creates a sense of feeling known. For many participants, the sense of being known on campus felt significant and contributed to their sense of belonging. Many felt known because their faculty knew their names and expressed their care about their lives beyond the classroom. Staff can foster an environment

in which students feel known on campus by addressing students by name and talking with them about their lives outside of the classroom. This can also happen through the community developed in extracurricular activities and on-campus jobs.

Involvement in extracurricular activities and on-campus jobs equally influenced participants' sense of belonging and ownership on campus. They also provided opportunities for students' development. A few participants mentioned the benefit of meeting older students through their on-campus jobs and benefiting from their friendship and mentoring relationship. Since some students choose not to participant in extracurricular activities or cannot afford the time for those activities, on-campus jobs should be viewed as similar opportunities for community and student development. On-campus jobs offer ways to connect students to the campus and give them a sense of partnership and ownership as well as meaningful relationships with staff and peers.

Finally, as colleges compete for prospective students, staff, specifically in admissions, should consider the connection between institutional fit and persistence. The majority of participants chose the college that "felt right," which influenced their sense of membership from the start. Therefore, during the admissions process, staff should focus on helping prospective students connect with the institution in a way that offers a sense of ownership and belonging. Participants' sense of fit also influenced their likelihood of engaging on campus through academic and extracurricular opportunities. Those who entered with a positive perspective of the university interacted more positively with their environment, which increased their likelihood of thriving in college. Due to the positive influence of institutional fit and belonging, staff should also consider which students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and which students are

more likely to feel marginalized. This information should inform strategies to create a more inclusive campus environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reflected the complexity of first-generation students experiences in college. Families influenced participants in many ways, and environment fostered thriving, but characteristics and strengths evident in participants also had a significant impact on their college experiences. We will benefit from the diversity of students in higher education if we cultivate communities that provide all students with a sense of membership and ownership and help nurture the strengths and positive characteristics that students bring with them.

Through this study, I examined the influence of environment in order to keep the focus on how institutions of higher education can change to serve all students better, specifically those from interdependent backgrounds. A lot of research about first-generation students focused on strategies to help first-generation students persist, but they focused on students rather than institutions. "And this is the surest sign of deficit ideology: the suggestion that we fix inequalities by fixing disenfranchised communities rather than that which disenfranchises them" (Gorski, 2011, p. 156). As we improve access to college, we must also ensure institutions of higher education foster inclusive communities that eliminate rather than reproduce social inequalities.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email

Dear (insert name of potential participant),

Would you be interested in receiving $15 for participating in a 60-90 minute interview?

I am conducting a study about the identity development of first-generation college students (students whose parents have not earned 4-year college degrees). I invite you to participate in this research. Through this study I hope to explore the influence of family relationships and culture on the identity development of first-generation college students.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Fill out a background questionnaire to provide general information about yourself and your family.
2. Participate in a digitally-recorded, 60-90 minute interview.
3. Optional: You may be asked to respond to questions via email or participate in a 30-60 minute follow-up interview to gather more information about themes that emerge during the initial interviews.

If you are a first-generation college student and would be interested in participating in this study, please contact me. I've attached the consent form in case you'd like more information, or you may contact me with any questions you have about the study.

Sincerely,

Emily Allen

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

The Influence of Familial Relationships and Culture on the Identity Development of First-Generation College Students
624576-1

I am conducting a study about the identity development of first-generation college students. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a first-generation college student who is at least in your third year of college and is at least 18 years old. This research is for a dissertation. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Emily Allen under the supervision of Kathleen (Kate) Boyle, Ph.D. (dissertation advisor); Department of Leadership, Policy, and Administration

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of familial relationships and culture on the identity development of first-generation college students. I plan to use interviews to collect data. My hope is that the results of this study will inform my work with college students as well as the field of student affairs.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: (1) Fill out a brief background questionnaire to provide general information about yourself and your family. (2) Participate in a digitally-recorded, 60-90 minute interview. (3) I may also follow up with you to gather more information about themes that emerge in the initial interviews. This will be an optional part of the study, so you may decline my request to either respond to questions via email or participate in a 30-60 minute follow-up interview.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has a couple of risks. (1) The topic could be sensitive for you. I plan to reduce the risk by giving you the option to stop the interview at any point if you feel uncomfortable. You also have my permission to skip a question if you would rather not answer it. (2) So as to reduce any risk associated with your name being connected to this study, I will use pseudonyms for you and your school.

The direct benefits you will receive for participating are: None

Compensation:

You will receive payment: You will receive $15 in cash upon the completion of the initial 60-90 minute interview.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way.   The types of records I will create include digital audio recordings, transcripts, and a master list of participants. The interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder and transferred to a password-protected computer within 24 hours of the interview and erased from the digital recorder. The interviews will be transcribed and saved on a password-protected computer as well as a password-protected network folder. The recordings will be erased after the interviews have been transcribed. The only copy of the master list of participants will be a paper copy stored in a locked file cabinet to which only I have access. It will be shredded after the study is completed. I will scan consent forms and the background questionnaires and save them in the password-protected network folder and shred the paper copies.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until *May 1, 2015*. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will be used. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Emily Allen. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 651-635-2100 or my advisor, Kate Boyle, at 651-962-4393. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6038 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give my permission to audio record my interview.

_____   _____
Signature of Study Participant   **Date**

_____
Print Name of Study Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher   **Date**

APPENDIX C

Background Questionnaire

1. Gender: _____

2. Age: _____

3. Race/ ethnicity: _____

4. What type of work does your family do? / How would you describe your family's socioeconomic status?
   _____

5. Please indicate your parents' or guardian's highest educational attainment?
   (Did not complete high school, high school diploma, technical certificate, some college coursework but does not have a degree, Associate's degree, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree or higher, or unknown.)

   Mother: _____
   Father: _____
   Guardian(s): _____

6. Do you have any siblings? If so, what is your birth order?
   _____

7. Did/ Do any of your siblings attend college?
   _____

8. What is your academic class standing? And how many years have you attended college?
   _____

9. Do you have a preferred pseudonym for this study? If so, what is it?

   _____

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interviews comprised questions from the following themes, including the initial questions listed below.

Introduction

- Tell me a little about yourself and your family.

- Can you talk about your parents' work history?

Educational Background

- What are your family's views on education?

- What does a 4-year degree mean to your family?

- Describe your earliest thoughts about college.

- What are your parents' views on the level of their education? Have they given reasons why they stopped when they did?

- Do you know of any relatives (other than siblings) who went to college? Did they share anything with you about their experience?

- Do you have any siblings who attended college or are planning to attend college? How do your experiences compare with theirs?

College Decision Process

- What was the decision process about college like for you?

- How did your family feel about your decision to attend college? How did your family feel about the school you selected? How does your family feel now about you attending college?

- Did you go to college immediately after high school? If not, why not and what did you do in the interim?

- What did you do to prepare for college once you were accepted?

The College Experience

- What were your first days and weeks like in college?

- What are some of your most positive experiences in college?

- Describe the most challenging aspects of college for you.

- What resources (including people) do you have to help succeed in college?

- What are some things that could have made your college experience better?

- Are there things you know now about college that you wish you would have know before you started college?

- Tell me about your activities and involvement outside of the classroom.

- Are you working while going to college? If so, where? How many hours do you work per week?

- Describe some of your closest relationships in college. How does your experience compare to theirs?

Identity Development

- How have you changed during your time in college?

- How would you answer the question "Who am I"?

- How have you handled obstacles and challenges during college?

- Have any of your values or priorities changed while you've been in college? Tell me about that.

- How would you describe your sense of belonging in college?

Educational Goals

- What does a 4-year degree mean to you? What does it represent?

- What do you hope to achieve by attending college?

- What are your plans for the future?

Family

- Tell me what it's like to visit your family while you've been in college.

- Has your relationship with family members changed while you've been in college? If so, how have those relationships changed?

- Have your relationships with friends back home changed since you started college? In what ways?

Closing

- Is there anything you'd like me to know that I didn't ask?

- Do you have any questions for me?

- Can you think of anyone else who might be interested in participating in this study?

APPENDIX E

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Institutional Review Board
UNIVERSITY of ST. THOMAS

TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.
Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Project Name	The Influence of Familial Relationships and Culture on the Identity Development of First-Generation College Students	IRB Tracking Number	624576-1

Agreement	
I agree to transcribe data for this study. I agree that I will:	
1	Keep all research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the information in any form or format (e.g. disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the researcher who is the primary investigator of this study.
2	Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while in my possession. This includes: • using closed headphones when transcribing audio taped interviews • keeping all transcript documents and digitized interviews in computer password-protected files • closing any transcription programs and documents when temporarily away from the computer • keeping any printed transcripts in a secure location such as a locked file cabinet • permanently deleting any e-mail communication containing the data
3	Give all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the primary investigator when I have completed the research tasks.
4	Erase or destroy all research information in any form or format that is not returnable to the primary investigator (e.g., information stored on my computer hard drive) upon completion of the research tasks.

Statement of Consent	By checking the electronic signature box, I am stating that I understand what is being asked of me and I agree to the terms listed above.		
Signature of Transcriber ☒ *Check to sign electronically*		Date	
Print Name of Transcriber	Cheryl Brown 10/08/14		
Signature of Researcher ☒ *Check to sign electronically**		Date	
Print Name of Researcher	Emily Allen 10/06/14		

*Electronic signatures certify that::

Institutional Review Board

UNIVERSITY of St. THOMAS

The signatory agrees that he or she is aware of the polities on research involving participants of the University of St. Thomas and will safeguard the rights, dignity and privacy of all participants.

· The information provided in this form is true and accurate.
· The principal investigator will seek and obtain prior approval from the UST IRB office for any substantive modification in the proposal, including but not limited to changes in cooperating investigators/agencies as well as changes in procedures.
· Unexpected or otherwise significant adverse events in the course of this study which may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the UST IRB office and to the subjects.
· The research will not be initiated and subjects cannot be recruited until final approval is granted.

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