PATHFINDERS: IDENTIFYING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERSISTENCE

AT TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

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SAMUEL R. WHEELER, B.S., M.A.

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ABSTRACT

SAMUEL R.WHEELER

PATHFINDERS: IDENTIFYING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING FIRST-
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WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

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This study focused on successful first-generation college students enrolled at

Texas Woman's University (TWU). The purpose of this study was to identify the factors,

as perceived by first-generation university students, influencing their persistence and

progress at Texas Woman's University. Additionally, data were collected among faculty

and staff as a purposive discussion to elicit their interpretation of the common topic areas

perceived to influence first-generation student persistence and progress at Texas

Woman's University. A qualitative method was used for this study.

This study was restricted to self identified first-generation university students,

who began as first-year students at Texas Woman's University and having successfully

completed 45 or more credit hours. All participants were registered part-time or full-time

students. The three focus groups consisted of employees at Texas Woman's University,

who worked full-time and at least one-year in an instructional or staff capacity. Using a

phenomenological approach to gather data, a total of 19 students and 13 TWU employees

were interviewed. Based on the information extracted from the two research questions,

seven emergent themes were identified: parental and familial encouragement,

institutional support systems, self-expectations and external support, financial resources, institutional fit, motivation to complete degree, and cultural identity.

Implications are offered for postsecondary schools, college administrators, educators, and policymakers to cultivate persistence among first-generation students. This study also support the need for additional research conducted at community colleges. In addition, further investigation should be undertaken comparing results regarding factors that influence persistence of first-generation versus non first-generation students.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

College matters. It matters to individuals and it matters to society. Going to college and earning a degree can make a large difference in family and societal outcomes. The earnings gap between those with a high school diploma (or less) and those with a four-year college degree is significant, particularly considered over a lifetime, and it shows no sign of lessening. In addition, most labor market projections show that family wage jobs will require some level of postsecondary education well into the future.

For those who are able to graduate from high school, entrance to and persistence in postsecondary education continues to be a problem. Of high school graduates, about 66% enroll in some kind of postsecondary education institution immediately following high school, but only about 25% of them earn a degree (Education Trust, 2005). Students from various backgrounds and racial/ethnic groups enter postsecondary education and experience success at widely differing rates:

- The college-going rate for Asian students is 91.4%; for White students 79.4%; and for African-American and Latino students 69.5% and 70% respectively (Adelman, 2005).
- At four-year institutions, only about two-thirds of all entering students earn a bachelors degree within six years, and the success rates vary for different groups, with 52.1% of African-American and 45.4% of Latino undergraduates persisting to a degree compared to 67.6% of White and 67.9% of Asian students (Adelman, 2006).

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- Students from families in the top income quartile are about seven times as likely as students from families in the bottom income quartile to earn a bachelor's degree (Education Trust, 2005).

A 1975 research article by Vincent Tinto, "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," spurred more than 25 years of dialogue on student retention and persistence in higher education. Though it has been attacked by some and revised by Tinto himself, his work has remained the dominant sociological theory of how students navigate through our postsecondary system.

More than a quarter century later, the issues of student retention and persistence are as pertinent as they were when Tinto first published his student integration model. For many years, public policy focused primarily on access, with federal and state legislation aimed at reducing barriers to higher education. The discussion now has moved from access to issues of choice, affordability, and persistence. Although gaining entry to college is still a dramatic accomplishment for some, persisting to degree is what really matters in the post-college world. Unfulfilled academic goals often result in unfulfilled career realities: lower pay, less security, fewer opportunities, and dreams deferred – if not abandoned.

As we continue to progress through the beginning of the twenty-first century, the shift from restricted to almost universal access to higher education has also presented a different student from past generations of collegians. Once the domain of upper and middle-class white males, colleges and universities in the United States now enroll diverse student bodies that include more working-class, ethnic and racial minorities, older

students, and an ever-increasing number of women (American Council on Education, 2005). In addition, students enrolled in universities and colleges today bring with them more varied and often difficult life experiences. Choy (2002) notes that students are increasingly coming from single-parent homes, have experienced mental or physical abuse, have experienced substance abuse, and seek counseling for personal and family mental health issues during the college years. The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) reports that students are coming to college overwhelmed and more damaged than those in previous years.

One formidable challenge in working with today's diverse student body is to retain and graduate students who often enter higher education with varied abilities, resources, cultures, and educational and family backgrounds. Although higher education researchers and practitioners have sought to improve the retention and graduation rates of college students for decades, most student retention theories and their related studies have assumed a fairly constant background among students. Given the increased student diversity and the unique factors which may affect their success, it seems prudent that current and future studies examine one student population comprised of various racial, ethnic, social and economic backgrounds by yet having one status in common: first-generation college student.

In reviewing the literature, researchers cited several factors related to the attrition of first-generation college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Among these barriers were a lack of family support, lack of knowledge of the admissions and financial aid processes, and poor academic preparation. Data from the 1995-1996

Beginning Postsecondary Study show that first-generation students comprise 47 % of all entering college students, but are over-represented among entering students at less-than-two-year and two-year institutions, where they are 73 % and 53 % of the population respectively. First-generation students are underrepresented at four-year institutions, comprising only 34 % of the entering population (Choy, 2002). The report also indicated that even among students who expected to earn bachelor's degree and attended four-year institutions, first-generation students were much more likely to leave (29 versus 13 percent) and much more less likely to earn a degree (47 versus 78 percent) than students whose parents had a college degree. Overall, only 26 percent of first-generation students who graduated from high school and enrolled in college earned a bachelor's degree within eight years compared to 68 percent of students whose parents went to college (Chen, 2005). All of these factors inhibit degree completion.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) examined the influence of family background, including parental educational level, on college attrition between first-generation college students and their non first-generation peers. They found that first-generation students were less integrated with their institutions, a factor found to significantly influence retention. First-generation students were less likely than their non first-generation peers to live and work on-campus, have close friendships at school, and be involved in campus organizations. Moreover, first-generation students perceived differences between their values and attitudes about higher education and those held by their parents. Consequently, first-generation students received less emotional and financial support from their parents, and assumed greater work schedules than their non first-generation

peers. These factors have been demonstrated in increase the likelihood for attrition (Duggan, 2001).

Similarly, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996), in a study of 4,000 students who entered 23 institutions in the fall of 1992, sought to determine if first-generation students' pre-college characteristics differed from those of non first-generation students. In comparing the two student groups on 36 pre-college characteristics, it was found that first-generation students differed from their non first-generations peers on 14 characteristics. Among some of those characteristics, first-generation students often had lower family incomes, lower academic achievement records, lower degree aspirations, and less support for college from family members and friends. These characteristics suggested potential barriers to retention and graduation, and portrayed first-generation college students as a group "risk."

Barahona (1990) also identified high-risk attributes related to the attrition of first-generation college students. She compared first-generation students with their non first-generation peers to determine whether first-generation status represented a disadvantage. She found that first-generation students held disadvantages that made it difficult for them to both attend college and to persist once they enrolled. These disadvantages included a lack of support from significant others, lower parental income, lack of siblings in college, lower high school grades and test scores, and less frequent enrollment in college preparatory programs. Moreover, she discovered that first-generation students tended to have environmental factors that diminished their chances of finishing college: they were

less likely to live on campus, and more likely to choose public, nonselective, and two-year institutions.

The U.S. Department of Education (2006) also studied the postsecondary experiences of first-generation college students. Using longitudinal data taken from a nationally representative sample of students enrolled in various types of higher education institutions, first-generation students were found to persist in postsecondary education and attain credentials at lower rates than their non first-generation peers. This finding held for students at all types of institutions.

However, not all research findings on first-generation students show that they are disadvantaged. Grayson (1997) studied 1,849 first-year students at a Canadian university who were the first in their families to go to college. He found that first-generation students were less involved in some academic and social activities that contribute to high grade point average. However, this lower involvement did not detract from the grade point averages of first-generation students to any statistically degree. In addition, Elkins (1996) studied first-to-second semester persistence of first-generation freshmen at a 4-year public institution. She found that first-generation students were not at greater risk of attrition from the first-to-second semester when compared to their non first-generation peers.

As the research has also shown, first-generation status itself is a risk factor even after taking demographic and enrollment characteristics into account (Chen, 2005; Gold & Albert, 2006). Nationally, there is increasing interest in gathering data on student persistence in higher education in order to understand the factors that place students at

risk for dropping out and the programs and practices that work to support and retain them. These studies offer important insights and information about the challenges that students face and how these can be addressed at both the individual and systematic levels. However, there is still a need to take these to the local level; in this case, to understand the persistence of first-generation students at Texas Woman's University.

Statement of the Problem

The preponderance of evidence gained from research conducted on first-generation college students indicates that first-generation students often have family and background characteristics that are associated with attrition (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The studies cited previously illuminate factors related to first-generation college students' access to, persistence in, and graduation from higher education. Most of the research sought to understand why students' failed in their college studies; the research emphasis was on student dropouts, students pre-entry attributes associated with attrition, and the experiences that led students to withdraw. In fact, the perspective on student failure has dominated persistence studies in higher education.

However, in the 1990s, some researchers began to focus on successful students (Adelman, 1999; Bowen, 1997; Chaney, Lewis, & Farris, 1995). These researchers re-framed the question from why do students drop out of college to what factors contribute to student success. Rather than exploring student persistence from a preoccupation with attrition and the actions that students or institutions make in contributing to student withdrawal, these researchers approached the issue of student persistence from the

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perspectives of successful students. Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, and Trevino (1997) argued that learning what students do right versus what they do wrong may provide insights and possibilities for developing practical strategies to retain students.

Adelman (1999) called for the use of qualitative approaches in researching student retention. He pointed out that traditional methods of data collection using institutional records and fixed-choice questionnaires strip away the context surrounding students' decisions to leave college. Attinasi (1989) argued that naturalistic, descriptive studies provide better insight into how students describe their own persistence within the context of their lives.

Along with the call for the use of qualitative research approaches in college student retention studies, Padilla et al. (1997) suggested that individual campuses explore student retention issues by developing local models of successful students. Rather than relying on existing research and case studies, which often focus on majority students, these authors suggested that colleges and universities develop a localized understanding of what helps diverse student populations succeed on their individual campuses. Tinto (1993) exhorted researchers to examine student departure for various student populations, in different institutional settings, and at various stages in time in order to improve retention. Research that focuses on student success rather than student failure will provide insight into first-generation college students in a way that hasn't been done before.

Recent research has indicated that 43% of all first-generation undergraduates leave college without earning a degree (Adelman, 2006). First-generation students who

begin college do not always return after their first year, much less complete a bachelor's degree. Dropout rates are highest in the first year of college. This first year is most critical given the multitude of barriers faced by first-generation students as they transition into college life (Cushman, 2006). As a result, research aimed at identifying the factors that contribute to the persistence of first-generation students within these institutions is both timely and necessary.

Purpose of the Study

Universities that have a large proportion of first-generation college students need research to develop local models of successful students to both understand and support first-generation college student success. This study focused on successful first-generation college students enrolled at Texas Woman's University (TWU). The purpose of this study was to identify the factors, as perceived by first-generation university students, influencing their persistence and progress at Texas Woman's University. In addition, a focus group interview was used among faculty and staff as a purposive discussion to elicit their interpretation of the common topic areas perceived to influence first-generation student persistence and progress at Texas Woman's University.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were

1. What factors, as perceived by first-generation university undergraduates, contribute to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University?

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2. What factors, as perceived by faculty and staff, contribute to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University?

This study was conducted following qualitative research methods to fully capture, in richness and detail, the experiences of the participants (Patton, 2002). Data were collected through focus groups and in-depth individual interviews. In addition, the researcher maintained a journal reflecting upon interactions with participants. Reflexivity is an awareness of the ways in which a researcher, as an instrument in research with a particular social identity and background, has an impact on the research process (Robson, 2002). Through this methodology, the voice and personal experiences of first-generation university students and faculty/staff, which can be often lost in quantitative research, were heard and documented. Participants were selected or recruited according to the following criteria:

1. Self identified first-generation university students, who began as first-year students at Texas Woman's University and having successfully completed 45 or more credit hours. All participants were registered part-time or full-time students.

2. Employees at Texas Woman's University, who work full-time and at least one-year in an instructional or staff capacity.

The collaborative inquiry project engaged faculty and staff in a contextualized group process that allowed them to reflect on the specific topic of first-generation persistence at TWU. This process encouraged faculty and staff to share their hunches with their colleagues, talk about the topic in relation to themselves, and share what they

know and do not know about this population. The project, therefore, provided the space and a structured opportunity for faculty and staff to better understand how their personal and collective beliefs influence the success of students.

Individual interviews, along with the focus groups, allowed for exploration of emerging themes and gave the participants an opportunity to respond in a more intimate setting. Data analysis involved identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns (Roulston, 2001).

Philosophical Perspective

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and methodology. While this section introduces the philosophy of phenomenology, the phenomenological methodology is discussed in Chapter III.

The philosophical perspective of phenomenology guided this study. It is important to note that there are two broad fields of phenomenology philosophy- hermeneutic (interpretive) and transcendental (descriptive). Both branches of phenomenology study the phenomenon of human experiences as lived by humans; however, there are differences in how these lived experiences are explored. Central to descriptive phenomenology is to describe phenomena from within the perspective of the individual as it currently exists, suspending any presuppositions in order to understand the reality of others (Giorgi, 1997). Interpretative phenomenology involves interpreting and explaining the phenomena in view of one's background or context (Laverty, 2003). Giorgi questioned whether interpretation is appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, as efforts to explain and interpret a phenomenon may include external factors that account

for the phenomenon leading to a departure from a focus on the phenomenon itself. Because this study aims to identify the structure of experiences as described by research informants, descriptive framework is best suited to answer the research questions.

Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938) is closely identified with descriptive phenomenology (Spielberg, 1982). He described how the world is constructed and experience through consciousness. The purpose, therefore, is the systematic "analysis of consciousness and its objects." Thus a return to philosophical questions about subjectivity and consciousness resulted from Husserl's approach. Husserl's "back to the things themselves," was a call to refer to the present account of conscious knowing free of preconceptions (Kockelmans, 1967).

The researcher utilizing a phenomenological approach must analyze this intentional experience of consciousness in order to understand how a phenomenon is given meaning and to learn its essence, or the purest possible state. In order to do this, Husserl described the method of phenomenological reduction. This stripping away preconceptions and perceiving things in their original state was described by Husserl as *epoch,* or bracketing them considering only what is immediately present in consciousness (Cohen, 1987; Van Manen, 1997). This allows the essential elements of the phenomenon to remain while deleting those that are non-essential or accidental. The end result is a description and clarification of the phenomenon form the inside, as opposed to an outward view based on observation and measurement (Kockelmans, 1967).

In summary, there are two reasons why phenomenology was suited to this study. It is particularly useful for describing the lived experiences of research participants

through "sense perceptions - remembering, believing, and judging" (Ray, 1985).

Participants in this study reported such perceptions while describing their lived

experiences as first-generation students or working with first-generation students at

TWU. Phenomenology also fit well with this study because this was the first time that

this phenomenon had been examined, and therefore, a descriptive methodology is most

suitable (Koch, 1995).

<center>Theoretical Perspective</center>

Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975, 1987, 1993) perspective guided

the theoretical basis of the study. This perspective is a theory that specifies a longitudinal

process in which a number of background variables (e.g., finances, secondary academic

performance, parental encouragement, etc.) interact to form students' initial commitment

to the college campus and to educational attainable goals. These initial commitments are

modified, over time, as a result of students' integration into the campus community. Tinto

(1993) theorizes that successful integration yields satisfaction that enhances these

commitments and positively influences students' intentions to persist on a particular

campus.

Drawing heavily from Durkheim's (1897, 1951) foundational work on suicide, the

role that social structure is presumed to play in the persistence has been widely refined

and elaborated by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993). Using the solar system as an analogy, Tinto

makes reference to the numerous subcultures revolving around the center of institutional

life. Each of these subcultures has a unique character relative to that of the larger

institution (Newcomb & Wilson, 1966). Some are more marginal than others in terms of

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the dominant values of the institution, and some may provide a safe harbor for students with values deviant from those espoused by the institution, formally or informally. Accordingly, the Tinto (1993) model allows for differential impact of integration into these subgroups based on the relative congruence between the values of the group and the values of the larger institution. The theory provides a useful lens to view the factors that influence first-generation student persistence at TWU.

Definition of Terms

Attrition. A loss of matriculated students from institutions of higher education due to transference to other institutions or by stopping attendance at TWU.

Faculty member. Any full-time professor, teacher, or instructor, tenured or untenured, who is teaching at the undergraduate level at TWU.

First-generation college student. Those students whose parents have not attended college and/or have not earned a bachelor's degree (Billson & Terry, 1982).

Full-time (FT). For undergraduate students, enrollment of 12 or more semester credit hours during fall/spring (TWU Fact Book, 2007).

Higher education. Higher education refers to education within an accredited, degree granting, two or four-year college or university (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Junior. An undergraduate student who has completed 60-89 semester hours (TWU Fact Book, 2007).

Non first-generation. Those students whose parent(s) [either one or both] attained a four-year bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Part-time (PT). For undergraduate students, enrollment of less than 12 semester credit hours during fall/spring (TWU Fact Book, 2007).

Persistence. A student's decision to continue to attend college without any breaks in attendance (Horn & Berger, 2004).

Persisters. Having successfully accomplished 45 semester hours or more at TWU.

Postsecondary education. Formal education beyond high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Retention. A university's ability to maintain the enrollment of a student (Titus, 2006).

Senior. An undergraduate student who has completed 90 or more semester hours but has not graduated (TWU Fact Book, 2007).

Sophomore. An undergraduate student who has completed 30-59 semester hours (TWU Fact Book, 2007).

Undergraduate student. A student enrolled in a 4- or 5-year bachelor's degree program (TWU Fact Book, 2007).

University Staff. Full-time employees who maintain, develop, coordinate, and oversee various programs at TWU.

<div align="center">Significance of the Study</div>

This study's research focused on persistent students and the emphasis on developing a local model of student success to help Texas Woman's University's efforts to retain first-generation college students. Texas Woman's University's typical first year class includes over 30 percent of first-generation college students (TWU Factbook,

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2007). Moreover, many TWU students enter the University with pre-entry attributes that research literature indicates are inhibitors to persistence. Students' descriptions of local barriers to persistence and the actions they take to overcome them provided insights for expanded research to a wider audience of students and settings. In addition, faculty and university staff account of their experiences with first-generation students may help TWU with understanding and validating the needs and concerns of these students to help them transition to college and achieve their educational goals.

The use of focus groups and interviews allowed the researcher to capture the richness and depth of the stories expressed by the participants. Qualitative research is able to provide a rich description of answers to the questions of "how," "why," and "in what ways" that are often lost through quantitative methods (Hernandez, 2000). The issues first-generation students face may be brought to life through the voices of participants, which in turn may give members of administration an opportunity to learn how policies and programming within institutions of higher education may enhance a student's experience in college.

<div align="center">Assumptions</div>

The following assumptions were based on an understanding of phenomenological philosophy underpinning the framework of this research study:

1. Participants will respond to the interview questions based on their own understanding of what the persistence of first-generations students means to them according to their personal experiences; that is, social reality is constructed on the view of those living within the situation (Stubblefield & Murray, 2002).

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2. Complete objectivity of the researcher is unrealistic, as this would indicate a denial of one's life experiences. However, the technique of bracketing will assist the researcher in maintaining an open mind in data collection and analysis (Ahern, 1999).

Delimitations

Participants in this study were limited to first-generation students and faculty/staff who had worked with first-generation students at a four-year public university in north Texas. In order to utilize a phenomenological methodology, the sample size was limited to 30 to 40 participants. Qualitative phenomenological research does not focus on the number of participants, but instead seeks to locate participants who have experienced the phenomenon being studies and can provide in-depth descriptions of it. In contrast to samples for research studies with a quantitative methodology in which participants are similar to those in the general population are randomly selected, in qualitative research, participants are purposefully selected (Morse, 1999). The goal of this type of research is to learn as much as possible from each participant's unique experiences until a saturation of the phenomenon is obtained, in which no further data collection will result in new and different revelations (Laverty, 2003; Sandelowski, 1986). Thus, a rich, thick description of the phenomenon is presented.

Summary

Chapter I has identified the demographic and educational trends of first-generation students in higher education. In addition, the issue was raised of the importance of identifying the factors that contribute to the persistence of first-generation

students in an effort to increase bachelor's degree completion rates. This study proposes to do so through the collection and analysis of interview data obtained from first-generation students who attended their first year of college at Texas Woman's University. It was decided to use a second qualitative measure, focus group interviews, among faculty and staff at Texas Woman's University. The following chapter will consist of a review of the relevant literature. Chapter III will outline the methodology utilized to conduct the research for this study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Student retention is one of the most researched, talked about, and challenging issues in higher education. This study is distinctive in that it will focus on consistent rather than inconsistent first-generation college students. In doing so, this study will seek to answer the general question, "What factors influence persistence among first-generation college students?" Understanding first-generation college students' own perceptions of their persistence while also interpreting the observation of first-generation students by faculty and staff is one contribution this study will make to the field of student success.

For the purpose of this study, a focused review of the literature defined the general topic and identifies overall trends and areas of concern. Specifically, this chapter includes a comprehensive review of this population and the various persistence behaviors they face. Next, the theoretical perspectives related to persistence and retention are explained as supporting framework for this study. Finally, student's background characteristics will be discussed.

U.S. Higher Education

Higher education in the United States borrows its structure from both the British undergraduate college and German research university (American Council on Education, 2004). Its character is profoundly influenced by three major philosophical beliefs shaping

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American public life. Informed by the Jeffersonian ideals of limited government and freedom of expression, states, religious communities, and individuals established and maintain a range of higher education institutions and continue to protect these institutions from the levels of government control seen in most other countries. The second set of influences is capitalism and the belief in the rationality of markets. American colleges and universities vie for students, faculty, and funding under the assumption that diversity and high quality are best achieved through competition rather than centralized planning.

The final major philosophical influence on American higher education is widespread commitment to equal opportunity and social mobility (American Council on Education, 2004). Higher education was an elite activity for much of its history, excluding individuals based on gender, religion, race/ethnicity, and social class. However, during the 20th century, economic and social changes transformed higher education into a primary gateway to the middle-class, and women and minorities made inroads against longstanding exclusion from mainstream higher education. Americans came to view broad access to higher education as a necessary component of the nation's ideal as a "land of opportunity."

Despite widespread public faith in the value of higher education, the process of expanding to serve students from all walks of life has not been without its detractors, and progress has been slow and uneven (Education Trust, 2005). Higher education did not admit significant numbers of racial and ethnic minorities until after the civil rights movement of the 1960s forced change. Further, despite significant expenditures on financial aid, minority and low-income individuals are still less likely to attend college

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than whites or students from middle and upper income families-although these gaps have narrowed somewhat (College Board, 2006). Despite progress in narrowing the access discrepancies, large gaps remain between completion rates. Many low-income or first-generation students come to college less prepared, and must balance academic demands with work and family responsibilities.

Finding ways to increase the enrollment rates of low-income or first-generation students and encourage their success once enrolled are two of the most important problems facing American higher education (Harvey, 2003). One of the challenges to meeting these goals is that they can conflict with the other central tenets of higher education: market competition and resistance to government control. For example, institutional competition for the most academically talented students is likely to foster increased use of tuition discounting for students without financial need, which could divert resources away from need-based financial aid for low-income and/or first-generation students. A primary role of government in the United States is to mediate the potentially negative effects of competition by insisting that institutions adhere to their missions, providing need-based financial assistance to students, and holding institutions accountable for their performance (American Council on Education, 2005).

Institutional resistance to government control provides a useful check on the ambitions of government, pushing policy makers to focus on ends rather than means and to leave core academic decisions largely in the hands of institutions (Carey, 2005). Nonetheless, a constant preoccupation of American higher education is this tension between the competitive, ambitious nature of institutions and the interests of government

in promoting important public goals, primary among them broad access and widespread success for all students.

U.S. College Enrollment

According to the National Center for Education statistics (2006), enrollment in degree-granting institutions increased by 17 percent between 1984 and 1994. Between 1994 and 2004, enrollment increased at a faster rate (21%), from 14.3 million to 17.3 million. Much of the growth between 1994 and 2004 was female enrollment; the number of men enrolled rose 16%, while the number of women increased by 25 %. During the same time period, part-time enrollment rose by 8% compared to an increase of 30% in full-time enrollment. In addition to enrollment in accredited 2-year colleges and universities, about 429,000 students attended non-degree granting, postsecondary institutions in fall 2003.

The number of young students has been growing more rapidly than the number of older students, but this pattern is expected to shift (Education Trust, 2005). Between 1990 and 2004, the enrollment of students under age 25 increased by 31 percent. Enrollment of persons 25 and over rose 17 percent during the same period. From 2004 to 2014, researchers project a rise of 11 percent in enrollments of persons under 25, and an increase of 15 percent in the number 25 and over (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

Enrollment trends have differed at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Undergraduate enrollment generally increased during the 1970s, but dipped slightly between 1983 and 1985 (Education Trust, 2005). From 1985 to 1992, undergraduate

enrollment increased each year, rising 18 percent before declining slightly and stabilizing between 1993 and 1996. Undergraduate enrollment rose 20 percent between 1996 and 2004. Graduate enrollment had been steady at about 1.3 million in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but rose about 57 percent between 1985 and 2004.

The proportion of American college students who are minorities has been increasing (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In 1976, some 15 percent were minorities, compared with 30 percent in 2004. Much of the change can be attributed to rising numbers of Hispanic and Asian or Pacific Islander students. The proportion of Asian or Pacific Islander students rose from 1 percent to 6 percent, and the Hispanic proportion rose from 4 percent to 10 percent during that time period. The proportion of African American students fluctuated during most of the early part of the period, before rising to 13 percent in 2004 from 9 percent in 1976. Nonresident aliens for whom race/ethnicity is not reported comprised 3 percent of the total enrollment in 2004.

The Millennial Students

Most scholars define a generation by a specific time period (e.g., 1943-1960) and shared experiences (e.g., Vietnam War). Possessing a common history, members of a generation are influenced by people, places, or events that become enduring social referents. As a result, members of a generation often develop shared values and behaviors (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Curiously, generations do not evolve linearly as extensions of preceding cohorts, but rather develop in a cyclical fashion-both complementing the dominant generation and filling the cultural vacuum left by their predecessors (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Further, as they develop, youthful members of a generation will explore

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the values of their elders-accepting some ideas, tweaking others, and rejecting those with which they cannot identify (Coomes & DeBard, 2004).

According to Howe and Strauss (2000), members of five generations comprise the vast majority of the current U.S. population (with birth dates listed): the G.I.s or Veterans Generation (born 1901-1924), the Silent generation (born 1925-1942), the Boomers generation (born 1943-1960), 13ers or Generation X (born 1961-1981), and the Millennials, Netsters, Generation Y generation (born 1982-2002). This newest cohort, the Millennials, builds upon the values instilled by the Baby Boomers while also filling the cultural void left by the departing G.I. generation.

Most students enrolled in colleges and universities today are members of the Generation X and Millennial groups, with the latter being the most recent enrollees. As youths, Millennial students were influenced by a unique set of forces. They watched the unfolding of Desert Storm in Iraq including the continual, real time media coverage it generated. As a result of school shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado and other locations, they experienced school lock-downs and increased security. Through all of this, many felt the steady support of protective parents concerned about their safety, their schooling, and their academic and extracurricular success (Coomes & Debard, 2004; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Growing up in this cultural environment has instilled in Millennial students a number of positive qualities. They are hardworking and have engaged in numerous academic, extracurricular, and service pursuits; in helping others and addressing social problems, they are thought to be both generous and practical (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

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Their hectic lives have accustomed them to structuring time, working from schedules, and following rules (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). As students, they will be required to complete some form of standardized testing to demonstrate appropriate educational achievement. As a result, they are used to being assessed, receiving focused feedback, and being goal-directed (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). Last, given their access to and use of computers and cell phones, they have keenly mastered the ability to multitask (Zemke, 2005).

Despite these positive qualities, some researchers fear that Millennial students, are over-reliant on communications technology and will have stunted interpersonal (face-to-face) skills. Another concern is that the ease with which Millennial students routinely engage in multitasking behaviors, enabled in part through the use of technology, has shortened their collective attention span (Coomes & Debard, 2004). In addition, having completed primary and secondary curricula that may unintentionally encouraged rote learning, these students may lack the skills necessary to be critical thinkers or demonstrate introspection and self-reflection (Murray, 1997).

First-Generation College Students

For many first-generation college students, entering college means beginning an alien physical and social environment that neither their family nor their peers have ever experienced (Adelman, 2006; Choy, 2002). Entering college can be an overwhelming experience, but for first-generation college students, this experience is magnified by factors that may be foreign to those whose parents have college experience. First-generation college students do not have the same benefit of parents' guidance, either in

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preparing for college or in helping them understand what will be expected of them after they enroll (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Carey, 2005).

The First-Generation College Student Defined

Prior research demonstrates unequivocally that college enrollment and retention rates vary based on parents' educational level (Cushman, 2006; Ishitani, 2003; Mortenson, 2001; Terenzin, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), 82% of students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree or higher had enrolled in college immediately after completing high school in 2003. In comparison, only 54% of students whose parents had completed high school but not college, and just 36% of students whose parents had less than a high school diploma matriculated directly to college. Choy (2002) also reported that the disadvantage of a family background without a postsecondary history is so pervasive that it persists in its negative relationship to college success even after controlling for family income, educational expectations, academic preparation, and support from parents and educators in planning and preparing for college.

First-generation college students are educational pioneers (London, 1992); they are the first, or one of the first, in their families to pursue postsecondary education (Borrego, 2003). Some scholars depict them simply as students whose parents did not go to college (Billson & Terry, 1982). Other researchers have broadened the definition in their work to include students whose parents may have attended college, but did not earn a degree (Ishitani, 2003), and others have narrowed the definition in their research to include only students who were the first in their families to go to college (London, 1996).

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Finally, some researchers have studied empirical differences among students whose parents had only a high school degree or less versus students whose parents attended some college but did not receive a degree, and students whose parents earned bachelor's degrees or beyond and found variations among the groups (Pascarella, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2004; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). This study defines first-generation college students as those whose parents or guardians have not attended college and/or have not earned a college degree. This definition appears to be the most consistent with contemporary research.

Literature on First-Generation College Students

As the popular axiom decrees, college degrees serve as "sheepskins" that grant students automatic social status, more opportunities for upward mobility, and access to the "American Dream" (Bui, 2002). Greater numbers of students from non-college educated families are realizing that in order to gain equal footing with their peers, a college degree is a must (Fallon, 1997; London, 1996; Titus, 2006). These first-generation students are a growing population in higher education; McCarron and Inkelas (2006) reported that 47% of new students enrolling in college for the 2004-2005 school year were first-generation students. As the numbers of first-generation students in the college environment become more significant, so do concerns about their educational aspirations and attainments within their environment.

Researchers have noted and lamented the inequalities in educational experiences and outcomes for first-generations students (Pascarella, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2004). The transition to college for first-generation students is particularly challenging, both

academically and culturally (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), and first-generation students are at-risk for early departure from college, especially before the second year (Duggan, 2001). Even though the number of studies focusing on or including analysis of first-generation status has become more plentiful, many of these studies are devoted to either cultural or social adjustment issues surrounding being the first in the family to attend college (Adelman, 2005; Hertel, 2002; St. John, 2000) or they focus on first-generation students as high risk college-goers (American Council on Education, 2004; Carey, 2005).

First-generation college students are also studied in connection with academic, counseling, and residential support programs (Chase, 2000; Hicks, 2002) as well as early intervention and other outreach programs (Koehler & Burke, 1996) targeted as assisting disadvantaged and high-risk students to attend and persist in college, like the federal TRIO programs (Swail, 2000). When Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964, it authorized the launching of 18 pilot Upward Bound programs. The Student Support Services and Talent Search initiatives soon followed, thus giving rise to the "TRIO" appellation. Despite increasing interest in studying first-generation college students, studies focusing on the persistence behaviors of first-generation students are limited in number.

Persistence

Persistence is a broad construct that has been used in many variations in the higher education literature. Some studies have focused on within-year persistence (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). For example, after the fall

semester, does the student return for the following spring semester? Other studies have focused on year-to-year persistence (Cabrera & Cantaneda, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1986; St. John, 1989). For example, does a student return to college for the second year after completing the first year? Finally, there are studies of persistence to degree, also known as degree attainment, where the concern is completing a credential like a bachelor's degree (Adelman, 2004; Horn & Berger, 2004).

While research that has examined these various persistent behaviors (within-year, year-to-year, persistence to degree) inform this study, this study will focus on year-to-year persistence because more students leave postsecondary education in the first year than subsequent years (Adelman, 2006). Additionally, it has been suggested that the first year can have lasting influences on long-term persistence and students' eventual persistence until degree completion (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Studies of first-to-second year persistence can provide ideas for institutional actions that are front-loaded in an effort to reduce the high rate of early departure (Tinto, 1997).

Previous studies that examine first-to-second year persistence of college students provide important theoretical and empirical guidance for this study (Attinasi, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1986). For instance, Pascarella and Terenzini used Tinto's model and measures of academic and social integration to see if the model could determine differences between first-year persisters and voluntary dropouts. Using a longitudinal design and 763 subjects at one institution, Terenzini and Pascarella found that results generally supported the predictive validity of the major dimensions of the Tinto model.

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Attinasi (1989) examined Mexican American students' decisions to persist or not to persist in college during and prior to their freshmen year in an effort to develop concepts of the college-going process. He identified two stages of college-behavior: getting ready and getting in. The parents' expectations for the students to go to college exerted a strong influence on students' decisions to attend college. Attinasi also examined the basic knowledge that students have about college and the ways in which students gain basic knowledge. The students reported that they received information about college from significant others such as relatives, teachers and peers who were able to provide them with information, such as how one went to college and how one negotiated the college environment.

Finally, as important as persistence in the overall system of higher education is, what individual institutions are most concerned about-especially in this age of privatization, performance indicators, and funding based on numbers of enrolled students and graduation rates-is retention, especially from the first to second years, when dropout rates are highest. Hence, this study of first-generation students remains distinct from other first-to-second year persistence studies of first-generation students (Duggan, 2002) by emphasizing institutional retention and the relevance and importance of the in-college factors as critical for exploring first-to-second year institutional retention.

Studies of First-Generation College Student Persistence

There has been recognition that first-generation college students are at a disadvantage when it comes to persisting in college (Duggan, 2002; Ishitani, 2003; Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004). For instance, a national report found that first-

generation students persisted and attained credentials at lower rates in both four-year and two-year public institutions and were less likely than other students to still be enrolled or to have completed their education after five years (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Researchers interested in understanding the problematic persistence rates of first-generation students have conducted both qualitative and quantitative inquiries to begin to identify and understand the persistence behaviors of first-generation college students.

Billson and Terry (1982) were among the first to concentrate attention on the attrition behaviors of first-generation students. They suggested that first-generation students who dropped out of college had less commitment to the role of student and thus engaged less in socialization and did not work as hard academically. Hence, the authors posited that first-generation students dropped out because, rather than embracing the role of student, these students distanced themselves from that role. The authors attributed the lack of role embracement of first-generation students to the students' connections with external roles (e.g., work). Hence, despite first-generation students' realizations about the importance of education, external connections constrained them from fully taking on the role of the student. In sum, Billson and Terry found that first-generation students were more likely than continuing-generation students to leave school before completing their education seemed sensible given students' lack of role embracement.

Pratt and Skaggs (1989) sought to determine whether first-generation college students were at greater risk for attrition than continuing-generation students. In a single institution sample at a four-year university, they studied first-time, full-time freshmen to determine whether there were differences in attrition between first-generation students

and continuing-generation students along variables related to goal commitment, institutional commitment, academic integration, and social integration. Overall, they concluded that first-generation students were not at greater risk of leaving college prematurely than continuing-generation students.

Other researchers examined the effects of being a first-generation student on educational outcomes including persistence. For instance, Suarez (1997) considered the effects of being a first-generation college student on three educational outcomes: (a) freshmen aspirations to complete a graduate/professional degree, (b) college persistence and (c) aspirations to complete a graduate/professional degree four years later. Suarez's study compared first-generation college student with children of college graduates, leaving out those students whose parents had some postsecondary experience, an interesting difference from other studies involving first-generation students. Using blocked, step-wise multiple regression on the collected data, Suarez found that the first-generation variable was not significantly related to persistence. Rather, Suarez concluded that the relationship between first-generation and retention was mediated mostly by entering aspirations and family income. Hence, being first-generation did not directly impact persistence, but interacted with other factors to influence persistence.

In a single institution study, Ishitani (2003) investigated the longitudinal effects of being a first-generation student on attrition by examining whether the effects of independent variables hypothesized to influence student departure behaviors varied at different points during a student's academic career. Using an event history model, Ishitani attempted to bring a temporal dimension to the investigation of attrition behavior

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among first-generation students. The findings supported previous cross-sectional analyses where first-generation students, in this case students whose parents did not graduate from college, were more likely to depart than their counterparts over time. The conclusion was that first-generation students did indeed have higher rates of attrition over time. An interesting finding from Ishitani's model was the negative effect of being a first-generation student on retention during the first year. That is, the negative effect of being a first-generation student on retention was largest in the first year with the risk of departure 71% higher for first-generation students than for students with two college-educated parents.

Ishitani's (2003) finding regarding first-generation students increased propensity toward departure during the first year comes as no great surprise given the well-documented nature of the high rate of departure associated with the first year of college for all students (Horn, 1998) as well as research that suggests that first-generation students are over represented among students who leave college in their first year (Brooks-Terry, 1988). Hence, given the magnitude of the negative effect found by Ishitani, it seems important to continue to investigate the factors associated with first-to-second year persistence for first-generation college students.

Theoretical Perspectives on Persistence and Retention

Several models of student persistence have emerged within the higher education literature to guide research on persistence. Taken together, these models have been influential in studies of persistence and retention and, likewise, inform this particular

study of first-to-second year persistence for first-generation and continuing-generation college students who begin at four-year colleges.

Spady's Model of Dropouts from Higher Education

In a review of literature on dropouts from higher education, William Spady (1970) offered a theoretical model to explain the undergraduate dropout process. Basically, the model regards the decision to leave a particular social system as the result of a complex social process that includes family and previous educational background, academic potential, normative congruence, friendship support, intellectual development, grade performance, social integration, satisfaction and institutional commitment (Spady, 1971). Spady (1970) posited an interaction between individual students and their college environments during which students' attributes became exposed to influences, expectations, and demands from a variety of institutional and environmental sources. When the interactions provided opportunities that allowed students to assimilate into the academic and social systems and reward them for such, staying was most likely. When interactions and rewards were insufficient, the student might withdraw or dropout (Spady, 1970, 1971).

Spady's work moved the emphasis away from psychological models of dropping out by emphasizing the academic and social systems at work in higher education institutions. In an academic sense, Spady (1971) recognized the importance of grades and opportunities for intellectual development as key external and internal operatives that shape a student's decision to leave. In a social sense, having attitudes and interests that

were compatible with the attributes and influences of the environment (normative congruence) as well as friendship support were key determinants in the dropout process.

While Spady focused on understanding withdrawal and developing a model of the dropout process (arguably a different phenomenon than staying engaged), his work remains at the foundation of persistence and retention studies that have spanned more than four decades. Perhaps the most important result of Spady's work has been the notion that successful integration of students into the academic and social life of their campus is not a given. Rather, students come to college with an established array of traits, beliefs, values, and motivations that have been formed through the student's experiences with family, friends, the community, work, and school that interact with behaviors, motivations and interests of the people students interact with on campus. When the student's traits fit with those that predominate on campus there is normative congruence. Furthermore, when there is a high normative congruence, a student becomes more integrated and is less likely to dropout. Conversely, when normative congruence is lower, a student feels less integrated and is more likely to dropout. While these ideas were based on students at one highly selective university, they have become the springboard for persistence and retention studies that have spanned four decades and continue in this capacity in current persistence research.

Tinto's Student Integration Model

The dominant perspective underlying persistence research has been the work of Vincent Tinto (1975, 1982, 1987, 1993). Tinto's model posits that students enter into higher education institutions with a variety of attributes such as family and community

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backgrounds, educational experiences and achievements, and skills and value orientations. These characteristics develop educational expectations and commitments, which the individual brings with him/her into the universities and colleges. As a member of the community, students interact with the academic and social systems of the college. The central concept of the Tinto model is the level of a student's integration into the social and academic systems of the college, which determines persistence. The higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college system, the greater will be the commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion leading to persistence.

Drawn from the work of Arnold Van Gennep (1909), Tinto's theory (Figure 1) argues that colleges and universities are like other human communities; that student departure, like departure in human communities generally, necessarily reflects both the attributes and actions of the individuals and those of the other members of the community in which that person resides.

| Background | Initial Goals & Commitments | Institutional Experiences | Academic & Social Integration | Later Goals & Commitments | Decision: Depart/Persist |
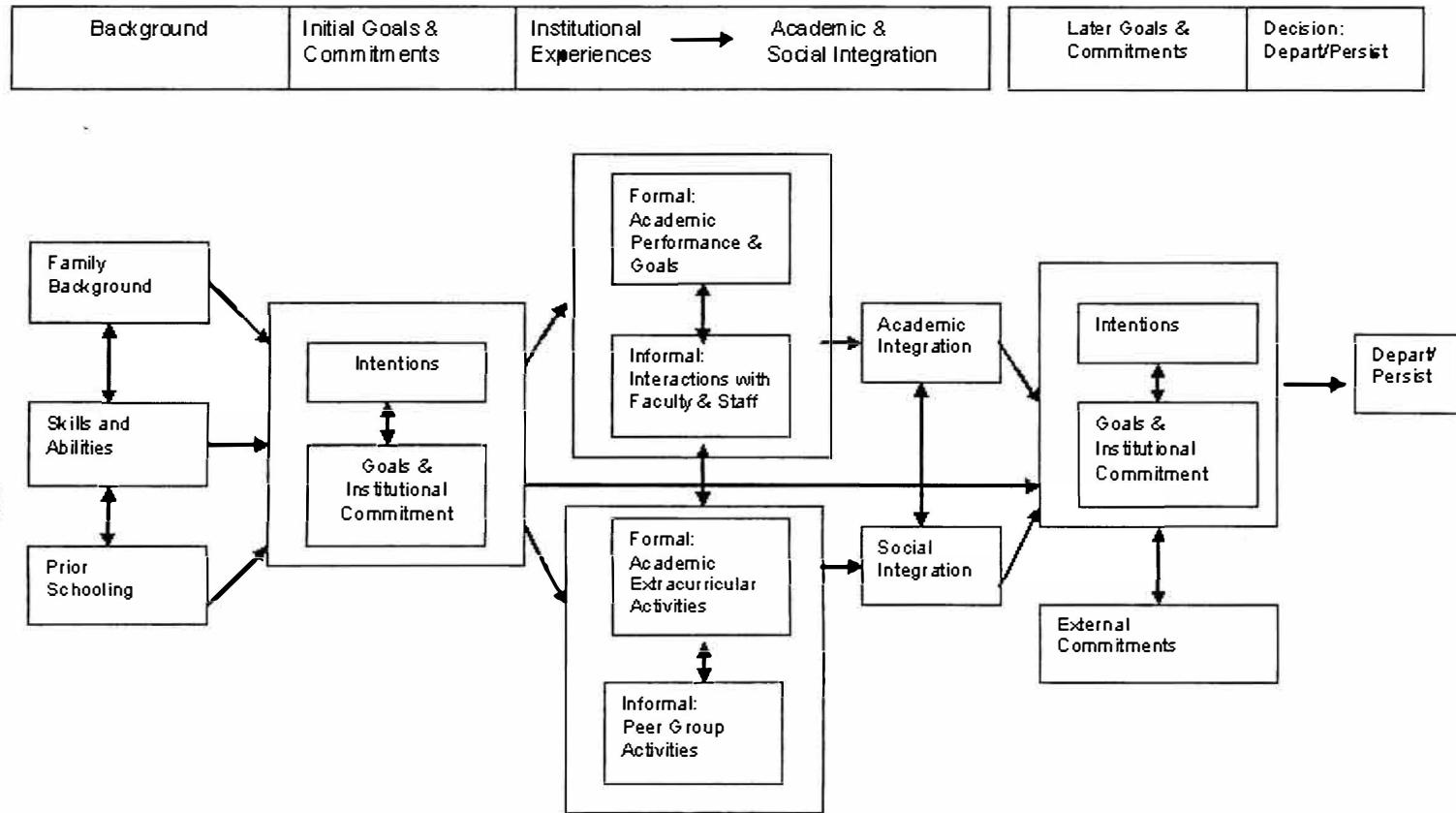
Figure 1. Path model of Tinto's (1975, 1993) Theory of College Student Attrition.

Decisions to depart are more a function of what occurs after entry than of what precedes it. They are reflections of the dynamic nature of the social and intellectual life of the communities that are housed in the institution, in particular of the daily interaction that occurs among its members.

In addition, Tinto (1975) applied Van Gennep's (1909) theory of rites of passage in tribal societies to his theory of student departure. Van Gennep's theory, as interpreted by Tinto, posits that life is comprised of a series of milestones or passages that lead individuals from membership in one group to another. Van Gennep suggested that individuals pass through three stages as they hit each milestone: (a) separation (removal from old group associations), (b) transition (increased involvement with the new group), and (c) incorporation (acceptance by the new group as a full and active member).

Tinto (1975) underscored the importance of Van Gennep's (1909) theory of rites of passage for thinking about student departure because Tinto believed that it captured the complex nature of participation in higher education and its requirements for changing relationships over time. As Tinto applied Van Gennep's theory, a student-particularly one who resides on campus-separates or severs ties from his or her past. Next, a student must try to first fit into the new campus environment (transition) and finally, a student's incorporation takes place (or does not take place) based on the type and extent of interactions with the various communities and sub-communities on the campus.

The predictive validity of the Tinto model has been tested in various institutional settings. Based on their studies in single institutions, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) showed that the model appeared to be appropriate for exploring the complex interactions

of factors that are affecting student persistence or dropout and also for predicting those students who are at risk. Pascarella (1986) and Bers and Smith (1989) in their studies of community college students observed that both social and academic integration measures were significantly related to persistence.

Tinto (1982) further added that forces that influence students' persistence during the early stages of an academic career could be quite different from those that influence persistence during the subsequent years. A study covering four succeeding years of a group of college students by Terenzini and Wright (1987) confirmed the results of an earlier study (Terenzini, Theophilides, & Lorang, 1984) that students' level of academic and social integration in the first year are expected to have a positive influence on the level of integration in the second year, junior and senior years. The level of academic and social integration varies during the undergraduate career due to the varying degrees of influence by the measures of integration variables, which in turn contribute at varying degrees to the persistence of students. Hence, other theories and models supplement Tinto's model to enhance ways of thinking about persistence in this study.

Astin's Model of Student Involvement

Coincident with Tinto's work on student departure and as a result of a longitudinal study of college dropouts, Alexander Astin (1975) postulated that educators must focus on student behaviors and what students are actually doing (student involvement) in order to improve educational outcomes. Astin's theory of student involvement (1975, 1977, 1984, 1999) postulated that educational outcomes are related to

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the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic experience.

By involvement, Astin (1975, 1977, 1984, 1999) referred to the importance of the behavioral component of students' college experiences and emphasized the active participation of the student in the learning process. Furthermore, the theory of student involvement regards a student's success as a direct function of the time and effort the student applies to being engaged with his or her academic experience. Astin posited that colleges and universities compete with other interests for students' time and energy. Therefore, educational practitioners must have policies and programs that compel students to physically and psychologically invest their time and energy to provide the greatest opportunity for student learning and personal development. Although independently developed, Astin's involvement construct has some similarities with and parallels to Tinto's integration construct.

Bean's Industrial Model of Student Attrition

The work of John Bean (1983) and subsequent work by Bean and his associates (1985) has resulted in a model intended to serve as a complement to the work of Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), and others. Bean (1983) relied on the literature on turnover in work organizations to propose an industrial model of student attrition. This industrial model of attrition, so called because it is formulated on the basis of studies of work organizations rather than educational organizations, regards a student leaving college as akin to an employee leaving a work organization. The focus is on a student's enrollment and

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interactions within a particular institution and stresses the importance of behavior intentions as predictors of whether a student stays in college or leaves.

Bean's model (1983) offered a unique contribution to the study of dropouts in several ways. First, background characteristics were not included in his model and were viewed as not contributing significantly to the explanation of dropout behaviors. Second, the measurement of a student's intent to leave was featured as an independent variable and was consistently found to be the variable that best predicted dropping out. Third, the model specified a one-way causal ordering of the variables. Fourth, Bean added external factors such as family and work responsibilities. Finally, Bean's model identified specific student organization interactions as determinants of satisfaction.

The overall contribution of Bean's (1983) work to persistence research has been the use of employee turnover behavior in work organizations as a meaningful framework for thinking about student dropout behavior in colleges and universities. Bean's model presumes that the intention to stay or leave college is influenced by a process whereby beliefs shape attitudes, and attitudes, in turn, shape behaviors (leaving or staying).

Additionally, it is presumed that these beliefs are affected by a student's experiences with different components of an institution. Importantly, Bean's model recognized that factors external to institutions can affect both attitudes and behaviors. The strength of Bean's model is that it recognizes that the way educational institutions are organized (their formal structures and resources) impact student retention. However, Bean suggested that the industrial model alone lacks sufficient explanatory power. Rather, the industrial model can be an additional and complementary tool for studying

persistence behavior because colleges and universities can benefit from studying other types of organizations.

St. John's Financial Impact Model

Early models of student departure (i.e., Spady, Tinto, and Bean) largely failed to consider the impact of financial aid on student persistence behaviors. The work of St. John (1992, 1999) has influenced persistence studies by examining the impact of financial aid factors on persistence behaviors. The financial impact model suggested that persistence was a function of social background, ability/achievement, high school experience, aspirations, college experiences, and student aid packages (St. John, 1992).

The major contribution of St. John's (1999) work has been the suggestion that, rather than any single approach, multiple approaches for measuring the influences of student aid provide the best insight into the ways that student aid influences persistence. Specifically, the financial impact model of persistence has findings with implications for future persistence studies. First, all forms of student aid have been found to have a positive influence on year-to-year persistence (St. John, 1999). Additionally, tuition has a substantial direct influence on within-year persistence and finally, the amount and type of financial aid awarded has an influence on within-year persistence (St. John, 1992, 1999). In sum, St. John provided evidence of an important link between student aid and predictions of persistence.

Commitment and Self Expectations

A student who is committed to obtaining an education in the midst of a myriad of barriers is more likely to persist than one who is not (Adelman, 2005). In fact, a student's personal commitment to an academic or occupational goal has been identified as one of the single most important determinants of college persistence (McGarron & Inkelas, 2006). Persistence is influenced by a person's sense of self, specific expectations, and a sense of responsibility for one's successes and failures (Olenchak & Hebert, 2002). Likewise, family has an impact on student commitment to complete college, which was found to be far more important than financial resources to fund college (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004).

Terenzini et al. (1996) noted the importance of new students' need for self-esteem to include variables such as self-confidence, a sense of being in control, pride in oneself and what one does, respecting oneself and being respected by others, and valuing oneself and being valued by others. Pike and Kuh (2005) concluded, in reference to incoming freshmen, that the important role of self-perceptions is apparent in such themes as the academic, social, and cultural character of the transition process for nontraditional students; in the need for early validation from faculty and peers (whether the validation is of an academic or interpersonal nature); in the need for connectedness and a sense of belonging at the institution; in the move to interpersonal independence and autonomy; and in proving oneself capable of success, however the individual defines that concept.

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1986) explained self-efficacy as the personal confidence of an individual in the ability to perform a particular task. The theory of self-efficacy is an offshoot of Bandura's Social Learning theory and therefore has some behavioral aspects to it. Bandura's definition includes the ability to "organize and execute courses of action" which points to the behavioral actions or cognitive skills to perform a task. In other words, in an individual assessment of his or her ability to perform a task, judgments of the skills for performing that task will be taken into account. Self-efficacy is also related to specific goals, either self-selected or environmental. Self-efficacy can influence an individual's choice of tasks, as well as effort and persistence toward that task.

Research has shown that self-efficacy is important in student motivation. Pajares and Schunk (2001) found that self-efficacy can predict task attempts. If individuals perceive they are capable, they will attempt a task and if they do not believe in their ability they will be less likely to do so. Pajares and Schunk also found that students perceptions of their cognitive ability are usually based on how they compare themselves to others.

Self-efficacy can be applied to a variety of settings, particularly academics, and it is in this domain that self-efficacy is highly correlated to the outcomes an individual expects. Achieving academically requires that students have personal confidence in their ability to succeed. In fact, an individual's self-efficacy in accomplishing a task is directly related to motivation. Self-efficacy is domain specific; high self-efficacy in one area of a student's life does not necessarily lead to high self-efficacy in another (Campillo & Pool,

1999). General academic self-efficacy has been shown to be a predictor of success, however. Larose and Roy (1991) conducted studies that indicated that positive self-efficacy concerning academic ability is perhaps more predictive than other variables in the persistence of students. Research also indicates that a student's level of self-efficacy is an important factor in determining motivation (Blumfield. 1992).

Bandura (1977) hypothesized that perceived self-efficacy affects how learners choose activities, how much effort is put forth, and how persistent they become. Schunk (1995) is one of the leading theorists of self-esteem and academic achievement. According to findings from research by Schunk and Zimmerman (1994), self-efficacy influences the choice and direction of behavior. It has also been shown that students with high self-efficacy use more cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies to accomplish a task, in addition to persisting longer (Titus, 2006). Bandura (1986) also found that the more perceived self-efficacy, the higher the cognized goals students set.

Studies have also shown that students with high self-efficacy tend to expend more effort and more readily tackle challenges (Bandura, 1986; Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990). In a research study with 64 Canadian college students, Bouffard-Bouchard studied the self-efficacy of college students and gave them positive feedback on cognitive tasks. Students who had a high perception of self-efficacy completed more problems and were better at problem-solving strategies.

Self-efficacy training has been shown to improve student academic achievement as well. In a study by Campillo and Pool (1999), twenty-three pre-freshmen students took part in a five-week intervention to improve writing proficiency through self-efficacy

training. Students had whole-class instruction as well as individual meetings. At the meetings, students looked at their self-efficacy estimates in comparison to their writing scores to become more accurate in monitoring their writing. Students who took part in the self-efficacy training outperformed students who did not participate.

Academic Preparedness

Academic preparedness plays a critical role in predicting college student persistence. Rothstein (2004) demonstrated a linear relationship between a student's entering ability to meet the demands of college and freshman year attrition. Institutions admitting students with the highest test scores (ACT of 26 or above, SAT of 1100 or above) experience the smallest attrition rate after the freshmen year: 10 percent. In contrast, institutions admitting students with ACT scores below 15 and SATs below 700, experience an average attrition rate of 41%.

In regards to students' high school grade point average, Brurton and Ramist (2001) included this factor as an element for detecting academically at-risk students. Astin (2004) also identified high school grades and SAT scores (along with ethnicity and gender) as variables that represent significant predictors for student retention in most higher education environments.

Parental Education and Income

The influence of parental education and income on the college experience of students has been examined by several researchers (Adelman, 2006; Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn; Oliverez & Tierney, 2005; Wine, Wheeless, Francis, & Dudley, 2002; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Adelman (2006) found that parental possession of a

college degree led to higher family incomes, higher educational attainments, and the choice of more selective colleges by their children.

Oliverez and Tierney (2005) and Haoachlander, Sikora, and Horn (2003) concurred with the finding on the long-term influence of parental education, but pointed to academic preparation and degree aspirations as having greater influence on the retention of students in the first year of college. Oliverez and Tierney found that first-year performance was influenced more strongly by family and friends. Haoachlander, Sikora, and Horn found that intent to get a degree in four years was negatively related to first-year retention, while broad intent to get a degree was a positive influence, together with family and friends, on persistence to graduation.

In looking at socioeconomic status by quartiles, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2006) reported that students at four-year institutions who leave their first year tend to be from the lowest socioeconomic quartile. These students are followed by students in the middle quartile (NCES, 2005). Delaying entry into college, which tends to decrease persistence, is more common among lower socioeconomic students than higher socioeconomic students (NCES, 2004).

Cunningham and O'Brien (1999) explored the effects of ability to pay on persistence in college and concluded that the ability to pay is best understood as an external factor that directly affects decisions to persist, while it simultaneously moderates the effect of goal commitment and institutional commitment. Similarly, St. John (1989) emphasized the importance of financial variables and the ability to pay, while Horn and Berger (2004) indicated that the impact of financial burden is different for different

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groups. Accordingly, some indicators such as unmet need and award amounts are related to persistence.

Research literature demonstrates the relationship between students from low-income families and the low percentage of students pursuing and completing bachelor's degree (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Pike & Kuh, 2005). However, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) note that a parent's possession of a college degree supercedes the effects of family income, family size, and the student's intelligence, and has a positive impact on the student's educational attainment.

Goal Establishment

As evidenced throughout research literature, many factors affect students' college degree completion. However, in relation to students' goal establishment, research suggests that the higher one's occupational or educational goals, the greater the likelihood of degree completion (Carnevale & Derochers, 2001; Greene, 2003; Tinto, 1987). The recurring theme in research literature is that students who have specific intentions or long-term goals are more likely to persist than those students who do not. For example, it is argued that students who aspire to professions in law and medicine are most likely to persist.

However, some researchers (Stark, Shaw, & Lowther, 1989) claim that the professionally oriented student does not necessarily possess and advantage over the career undecided student. Professionally oriented students may possess clear long range goals, but the career undecided student is likely to have short-range goals that serve as motivation for persistence. The problem in student persistence may be more with students

who have neither long nor short-range goals that can help regulate their learning behavior. Alfonso, Bailey, and Scott (2005) suggested that the more uncertain students are about their career choices over an extended period of time, the more likely their departure from school. Thus, at some critical point, which may be different for each individual student, the establishment of goals is necessary for success.

Day and Newburger (2002) found that goal commitment was important for students both young and old. Mutter (1992) concluded that commitment to goals, along with academic integration and the encouragement of others, were essential to persistence. Once a student has formulated attainable goals, further integration into the institution is enhanced.

Pre-College and Family Support

Encouragement from students' parents and significant others has been found to be related to college plans of students (McGarron & Inkelas, 2006; Speirs-Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) demonstrated that students who perceived more family support for their college attendance had more accurate information about college as compared to their peers who perceived less parental support. Furthermore, York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) held that second-generation students perceived stronger family support for attending college than their first-generation peers.

Once matriculated in college, students' commitment to degree completion is also intensified by strong parental values and attitudes towards higher education. Students who receive parental support and who have family expectations to succeed are more likely to persist even in difficult times. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) demonstrated that

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parental values and support are particularly strong determinants for student persistence in the first critical year of college.

Whether a student is the first in the family to attend college or not, all college students need reassurance from parents and significant others. A healthy student-parent relationship is positively related to student adjustment, academic achievement, and emotional well-being (Greene, 2003). Unfortunately, Terenzini et al. (1996) showed that first-generation college students receive less parental encouragement than those students whose parents attended college. Given the other high risk attributes often associated with first-generation college students, parental support can mean the difference between success and failure.

Ishitani (2003) described some students' lack of parental support as evidenced by factors ranging from not having a special place to study at home to openly criticizing students' time commitment to coursework at the expense of family responsibilities. In addition, Cushman (2006) described a lack of support for first-generation college students by peers who didn't attend college. As first-generation college students develop new beliefs, interests, and activities, they may experience resistance or resentment by friends and others. According to Ishitani, this lack of peer support requires first-generation college students to renegotiate relationships with friends and relatives or face a separation from the familiar.

The influence of family support and encouragement on college student success is not surprising. Bean and Eaton (2000) have put forth the dependence theory, which confirms that the dependence of students on previous support groups is a necessary stage

in surviving the initial challenges of college. This is particularly true for first-year students and first-generation collegians. In sum, there are differences between first-generation and continuing-generation college students with respect to their basic knowledge of college, personal commitment, and level of family support, with first-generation students being at a disadvantage in most cases (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005).

Gender Differences

The effect of gender on attrition has been addressed in numerous studies (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1991; Riehl, 1994). Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) discovered that female students were more likely to persist than male students. Spady (1971) found that female students had a higher dropout rate than male students in the first year of college. Inconclusive evidence exists about the effect of gender on college student persistence.

However, Tinto (1975) in an early retention study, asserted that females were more likely to drop out of college voluntarily while males were more likely to stay in college until forced out for academic reasons. More recently, Rendon (1994) cited that although there is no difference in the dropout rates between men and women, poor grades act as a stronger force in women's decision to withdraw. Research conducted on gender differences by Dweck and Licht (1980) suggested that women are more prone to internalizing failure while men are more likely to externalize their failures and blame others. Consequently, females who are not performing as well academically as they would have hoped, become discouraged and leave for reasons other than academic dismissal.

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In one longitudinal study, Pascarella, Ethington, and Smart (1988) examined the degree persistence of 825 students from 85 different colleges over a nine year period. They found that academic and social integration were significant predictors of persistence for males and females; socioeconomic status was an important factor for females; and institutional commitment or satisfaction was significant for males.

Summary

The transition to college for first-generation students is particularly challenging, both academically and culturally (Choy, 2001; McGarron & Inkelas, 2006; Spiers-Neumeister & Rinker, 2006), and first-generation students are at-risk for early departure from college, especially before the second year (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Nationally, there is increasing interest in gathering data on student persistence in higher education in order to understand the factors that place students at risk for dropping out and the programs and practices that work to support and retain them. These studies offer important insights and information about the challenges that students face and how these can be addressed at both the individual and systematic levels. However, there is still a need to take these to the local level; in this case, to understand the persistence of first-generation students at Texas Woman's University. A better understanding could lead to targeted programs and policies to promote the success of first-generation students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors, as perceived by first-generation university students, influencing their persistence at Texas Woman's University (TWU). In addition, a focus group interview was used amongst full-time faculty and staff as a purposive discussion of the common topic areas perceived to influence first-generation students' persistence and progress at Texas Woman's University. An explanation of the research design is presented, followed by a description of the participants. This includes the process by which participants were selected. The procedures for gathering data are discussed as well as the process through which data was analyzed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the methodology.

Research Design

A qualitative research method, via a phenomenological approach, was used to explore the participants' subjective experiences and how they made sense of those experiences. In an attempt to gain further insight of the experiences of those individuals who were first-generation university students or who worked with first-generation students at TWU, retrospective, in-depth individual interviews and focus groups were conducted. Phenomenological research often involves the use of in-depth interviews, which allows individuals to describe their experiences (Creswell, 1998). The phenomenological approach of this study utilized both individual and focus group, audio

taped interview methods to collect data. Upon completion of the interviews, the data were

analyzed and interpreted for recurring patterns and themes.

Phenomenological Methodology

This study was conducted following the phenomenological methods of qualitative

inquiry. In a phenomenological study, the researcher explores the meaning a lived

experiences of a group of people that share a common phenomenon. For this study, the

phenomenon was that of the persistence of first-generation students at Texas Woman's

University.

The phenomenological method consists of four characteristics as described by

Giorgi (1985). First, it is descriptive in nature, precluding scientific analysis or

explanation to allow meanings as described by participants. The second characteristic of

the phenomenological method is reduction. Reduction is reporting data solely as it is

presented, without prejudgment. Reduction involves the process of bracketing the

question of the existence of the natural world around us. This involves a temporary

suspension by the researcher of any external beliefs, placing one's focus solely on the

"raw" experience itself (Giorgi, 1986, pg. 6). The goal is to ignore empirical data—along

with intuitions and judgments—and simply describe your experience in detail. The third

characteristic of phenomenology as a methodology is the search for essence. The search

for essence requires the researcher to search for the actual lived experiences in relation to

the meanings that emerge. The final characteristic is intentionally, described as the

observation that each act of consciousness is a consciousness of something, that is,

intentional, or directed toward something (Giorgi, pg. 43). In other words, behavior is

intentional, directed toward a situation, and is best understood in relation to a phenomenon.

Phenomenological Data Analysis

Using Giorgi's (1985) phenomenological analysis, the researcher followed these steps:

1. Read all the material to obtain an overall impression, and bracketed preconceptions.

2. Reread with the specific focus of identifying units of meaning representing the phenomenon under study, and coding for these meanings.

3. Condensed and abstracted the meaning within each of the coded groups.

4. Summarized the contents of each coded group to generalize descriptions and concepts reflecting perceived important experiences of persistence among first-generations students at TWU.

<div align="center">Researcher's Viewpoint</div>

The role of the researcher as the primary instrument in data collection makes it essential that personal biases, values, and assumptions be recognized and stated at the outset of the study. It was therefore important for me, in acknowledging that I was a first-generation college student, to be aware at each stage of the process and how my interest and motivation in pursuing this research topic emerged from my own personal, as well as professional, experiences. Because of my role as a recruiter and advisor within the institution in which I carried out the study, I needed to be aware of the participants' perceptions of my role and to help them understand that I would have a different role and

purpose in conducting this research. I therefore sought to identify and avoid potential role conflicts. In addition, the duty of the researcher as an instrument becomes crucial to the credibility of the student. As a result, the researcher kept a journal throughout the course of the study.

It is important to examine and explain to readers how my perspectives and experiences may influence my interpretations of the data (Labaree, 2002). My own status as a first-generation college student has shaped my views on this topic. Based on my own experience, higher education can sometimes be an intimidating place, with a culture of its own. My own experience as a college student, my ongoing work with students, as well as my readings, all strongly suggest that new students experience feelings of being an outsider-the other in a foreign culture. But during my twenty plus years of working closely with college students, I have also encountered the uniqueness first-generation students bring with them to the academic world. Among the qualities that have served to endear them to me are determination, resilience, self-reliance, ambition, and idealism.

It is the complexity of this population that drives my interest and motivated me to undertake this study. Through my own experience, both professional and personal, I have encountered problems that are addressed in the literature: self-doubt, uncertainty, confusion, and isolation. However, there is so much more to first-generation students than this type of at-risk designation might suggest. They are individuals of tremendous potential and of very real importance, to higher education and to society at large. I believe that their access to and overall success in negotiating the academic arena will be a crucial test for our institutions of higher education in the years and decades to come.

Indicators of institutional success must include how well those who enter differently prepared are able to develop, learn and grow while they are among the larger university community.

My combined experiences, both professional and personal, and their impact on my point of view as researcher was considered and monitored throughout. At the same time, I believe my background and experience have served as a source of inspiration and motivation. I am hopeful that my own background enabled me to better relate with students as I attempted to gain access to and understanding of their world.

University Setting

The university selected for this study was Texas Woman's University (TWU), which was established in 1901. TWU was created by an act of the 27th Legislature of Texas. As the Girls Industrial College, it began classes in 1903 with a dual mission that continues to guide the University today: to provide a liberal education and to prepare young women "for the practical industries of the age" with a specialized education (Institutional Research Fact Book, 2007).

In 1905 the Legislature changed the name to the College of Industrial Arts. The college grew in academic excellence, in size and scope, and in reputation. In 1934 the name of the institution was changed to the Texas State College for Women to describe more accurately the scope of the school. Since 1957 the name has been Texas Woman's University, reflecting its status as a major institution of higher learning.

As indicated by the name, Texas Woman's University was historically a single-gender institution. In 1972, in compliance with the Public Health Service Act of that year,

qualified men became eligible for admission on the same basis as qualified women. A similar modification of policy pursuant to provision of Title IX of the Higher Education Act Amendments, also of 1972, granted qualified men admission to all programs offered at the graduate level. TWU is a public university and offers baccalaureate, Master's, and doctoral degree programs. A teaching and research institution, TWU emphasizes the health sciences, education, and the liberal arts.

Academically, the University includes three major divisions: the University General Divisions, the Institute of Health Sciences, and the Graduate School. Included in the University General Divisions are the College of Arts and Sciences, College of Professional Education, and School of Library and Information Studies. The Institute of Health Sciences includes the College of Health Sciences, College of Nursing, School of Occupational Therapy, and the School of Physical Therapy. The Graduate School coordinates advanced degree programs across the University. TWU has been one of the state's fastest growing public universities over the past five years. TWU's enrollment grew 31.9 percent from 2002 to 2006, the fourth-highest enrollment growth percentage among universities in Texas (Institutional Research Fact Book, 2007).

TWU serves the citizens of Texas in a number of important ways, including producing more new nurses and health care professionals than any other university in Texas; helping to ease the teacher shortage by placing highly qualified professionals where they're needed most-in the classroom; offering a liberal arts-based curriculum that prepares students for success in an increasingly global society; and conducting research

into the prevention and treatment of childhood obesity, osteoporosis, stroke, diabetes, and other areas.

TWU is comprised of four campuses. The 270-acre main campus is located in Denton (35 miles north of Dallas-Fort Worth). This study involves the main campus, the site where undergraduate enrollment is based. With about 100,000 residents, Denton provides the benefits of a medium-sized city. The surrounding Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area (the nations' ninth-largest) offers rich cultural, entertainment, and recreational opportunities. Major centers for health science study are in Dallas (in the Parkland and Presbyterian Hospital complexes) and in Houston (in the Texas Medical Center). TWU is fully accredited by appropriate state, regional, and national agencies, including the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Together, TWU has a total enrollment population of a little more than 12,000 students. More specifically, an undergraduate population of 56.4% was enrolled at the Denton campus as of fall 2006. In 2006, the cohort base of freshmen students was 851 students (Texas Woman's University Fact Book, 2006-2007). In 2005, the retention rate for freshmen, returning for a second year at TWU, was 68.1%. The university provides access and opportunity for a large number of historically underserved students. *U.S. News and World Report* magazine ranks TWU third in the state and 21st in the nation among national universities with the most diverse student populations (Best Colleges issue). Minority students (excluding international students) comprise 40 percent of enrollment at TWU (Fall 2007). An additional 4 percent are international students. Many of these students are first-generation and are members of an underrepresented group in higher

education. Table 1 through 3 provides more detailed demographic information (Texas

Woman's University Fact Book, 2006-2007).

Table 1

Student Enrollment by Gender and Level at Texas Woman's University–Fall Semester,

2006

ENROLLMENT	NUMBER	PERCENT OF TOTAL
Total Headcount	11,832	
Undergraduates	6,675	56.4%
Masters	4,408	37.3%
Doctoral	749	6.3%
Female	10,783	91.1%
Male	1,049	8.9%

Source: TWU, Office of Institutional Effectiveness & Research, Fact Book 2007.

Table 2

Undergraduate Student Enrollment by Ethnicity–Fall Semester, 2006

ENROLLMENT	Number	Percent of Total
White	3,626	54.3%
African-American	1,374	20.6%
Hispanic	1,009	15.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	412	6.2%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	65	1.0%
International	168	2.5%
Other	21	0.3%

Source: TWU, Office of Institutional Effectiveness & Research, Fact Book 2007

Table 3

Retention of FTIC Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Freshmen–Fall 2004 Cohort

Fall 2004 Retention	Cohort Base	After 1 year #	After 1 year %	After 2 years #	After 2 years %
White	281	208	74.0	169	60.1
African-American	163	122	74.8	96	58.9
Hispanic	128	99	77.3	92	71.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	48	40	83.3	35	72.9
American Indian/Alaskan Native	4	2	50.0	2	50.0
International	9	8	88.9	9	100.0
Total	633	479	75.7	405	64.0

Source: TWU, Office of Institutional Effectiveness & Research, Fact Book 2007

Table 4

Retention of FTIC Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Freshmen–Fall 2005 Cohort

Fall 2005 Retention	Cohort Base	After 1 year #	%
White	295	202	68.5
African-American	198	131	66.2
Hispanic	134	92	68.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	43	31	72.1
American Indian/Alaskan Native	8	4	50.0
International	9	7	77.8
Other	2	2	100.0
Total	689	469	68.1

Note: FTIC denotes first-time-in-college.

Source: TWU, Office of Institutional Research, Fact Book 2007.

Participants

Students

The individual interview purposive sample consisted of self-identified first-generation students who persisted through their first year of college. Participants (n = 19) were self identified first-generation university students, who began as first-year students at Texas Woman's University and having successfully completed 45 or more credit hours. All participants will be registered part-time or full-time students. The participants were interviewed on-campus at TWU.

Participants were selected through a non-random sampling. There are no rules for sample size in qualitative research and the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from it have more depth to do with the information richness than with the sample size. Criterion sampling, selecting participants based on a set of criteria, was used

as a strategy in selecting participants (Silverman, 2000). Participants were selected according to the following criteria:

1. Self-identified first-generation university students

2. Began as first-year students at TWU and having successfully completed 45 or more credit hours.

3. Registered part-time or full-time students

Recruiting was done thru core curriculum or 2000 level courses within various academic colleges and departments at TWU. This method was chosen because students generally will have completed 45 credits or more before enrolling at this level of course work. For student recruitment, the researcher contacted faculty members of several uppers level courses to request permission to have a second researcher attend their classes and announce project and hand out recruitment flyers (Appendix A) to their students. The flyers included a description of the research study, criteria for participation, and contact information. In addition, several professors were asked and agreed to make classroom announcements and hand out recruitment flyers. Also, a flyer calling for participants was posted in high traffic areas in various locations at the university.

Faculty and Staff

The focus group participants (n = 13) were solicited based on their commonality of having experiences with first-generations students at TWU. All were recruited for participation in this study via an e-mail message from the researcher (Appendix B). All faculty and staff met the following criteria to participate in the focus groups:

1. Employees at Texas Woman's University

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2. Employed full-time and at least one-year in an instructional or staff capacity.

3. Experienced with first-generation students at TWU.

Protection of Human Participants

The study was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Institutional Review Board at Texas Woman's University. Participants' rights were protected by providing them with information about the study (Appendix B & C), maintaining confidentiality of data collected, and informing them of their rights to voluntarily participate and voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time. Respondents were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix D) for their information to be used in the study and to have their interviews audio taped.

Instrument Design

A researcher-generated interview protocol was used for the study (Appendix E & F). The specific demographic data collected for the individual interviews were ethnicity, gender, participant's current classification level, and age of the participant at the time of the interview. The specific demographic data collected for the focus groups were ethnicity, gender, and university position. An open-ended interview protocol included questions that sought to examine a participant's perception and experiences regarding the persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Open-ended questions allowed for the respondents to respond freely, providing insight into what the individuals were thinking and how they understood their experiences (Cozby, 1993).

The interview and focus group protocol was based on two research questions that guided the research. In qualitative studies, the research questions serve as guidelines for

topics to be explored during the interview process (Creswell, 2003). The following research questions were addressed:

1. What factors, as perceived by first-generation university undergraduates, contribute to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University?

2. What factors, as perceived by faculty and staff, contribute to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University?

Data Collection

Data collection and analysis are iterative processes. Data collection does not conclude at a specific point in time, nor does analysis begin at the conclusion of data collection (Polkinghorne, 2005). Rather, analysis occurs throughout the collection of data and prompts the collection of new data until such a time that the description of the case is comprehensive, or has reached saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, my responsibility as the researcher was to select from a wide array of data sources that would render a refined and rich description of the experience under study. To accomplish this, I utilized faculty and staff focus groups, individual interviews, and a reflexive journal. Table 5 provides a summary outlining the frequency of each method and the timeline of completion.

Table 5

Data Collection Method Used

Method	Frequency	Timeline
Focus Group (n = 13)	Three focus groups, 50-60 minutes each	January - February 2008
Interviews (n = 19)	One interview per student, 45 – 60 minutes each	January – March, 2008

Focus Groups

A focus group is an interview with a small group of people with similar backgrounds (Flick, 2002). Focus groups have many advantages such as the ability to capture the voices of many in a limited amount of time. Also, data quality can be enhanced by the interaction of participants, which allows for the assessment of shared and/or opposing views (Corbetta, 2003).

Prior to the focus group, each participant received a letter explaining the purpose of the research (Appendix B). Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions before deciding whether or not to volunteer in the study. The participants were interviewed only one time and each focus group lasted between 50 and 60 minutes.

This population included faculty and staff who had experience working with first-generation students at Texas Woman's University. Three focus groups were conducted involving a total of thirteen faculty and staff. Participants were contacted through e-mail and, in some cases, with follow-up through telephone calls as well in order to recruit focus groups members. All focus groups were scheduled over the mid-day lunch hour.

The focus group sessions took place in a comfortable meeting room within the university's Administrative Center.

At the beginning of the focus group, the researcher provided a consent form for each participant to read and sign (Appendix D). This allowed for an opportunity for the participants to ask clarifying questions before signing the consent form. Two copies of the consent form were signed by the participant and the researcher, with one copy provided to the participant. The informed consent form assured participant confidentiality, as well as allowing the investigator to assign each signed consent form with an identification number. If participants were interested in receiving a summary of the results from the study, they were asked to provide a contact address or email.

The researcher used a semi-structured interview process to elicit information to address the research questions. If participants demonstrated reluctance in answering the questions or did not provide enough information, appropriate probing/pausing techniques were used to stimulate additional comments. Prompts included

1. Tell me more.

2. Please give me some examples.

3. Would you like to add anything else?

The researcher took interview notes and audio taped the focus group sessions. The researcher used a semi-structured interview process to address the research questions.

Individual Interviews

The interview enables the researcher to understand the setting from the participant's perspective. Interviews are an intentional way of learning about people's

feelings, thoughts, and experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In other words, it encourages people to describe their worlds in their own terms.

Potential participants were contacted by telephone or electronic mail to discuss the study and inquire about participating in the study. Prior to the interview, each participant received a letter explaining the purpose of the research (Appendix C). Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions before deciding whether or not to volunteer in the study. For those who agreed to participate in the individual interviews, the researcher arranged a time and place desired by the participant for the in-depth interview.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher provided a consent form for each participant to read and sign (Appendix D). This allowed for an opportunity for the participants to ask clarifying questions before signing the consent form. Two copies of the consent form were signed by the participant and the researcher, with one copy provided to the participant. The informed consent form assured participant confidentiality, as well as allowing the investigator to assign each signed consent form with an identification number. If participants were interested in receiving a summary of the results from the study, they were asked to provide a contact address or email. The participants were interviewed only one time and each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

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questions or did not provide enough information, appropriate probing/pausing techniques were used to stimulate additional comments. Prompts included

1. Tell me more.

2. Please give me some examples.

3. Would you like to add anything else?

The researcher took interview notes and audio taped the in-depth interviews. The researcher used a semi-structured interview process to address the research questions.

Data Analysis

The researcher took notes, audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim each interview. Upon completion of the interviews, data were recorded and compiled by the researcher. Data were transferred onto a chart format revealing all responses of the participants. To avoid potential researcher bias, two additional peer debriefers were utilized to verify the data results. The first peer debriefer is an individual who has a Ph.D. in English Studies. The second peer debriefer holds a Master's degree in Counseling and Development. Coding of the results was examined by the debriefers. The use of peer debriefers enhanced the trustworthiness of the study by confirming themes that had been extracted by the researcher. Following concurrence with the debriefers, the data were examined and checked for coding and categorization of responses. Finally, data were reviewed and subcategorized according to the common themes.

Confidentiality and anonymity were protected during this research study by assigning a code to each participant's record. All written and audio materials were kept in a secure place, and computer files were kept on a storage device available only to the

researcher. All materials will be destroyed within one year of completion of the study. The consent form completed prior to participation in the study informed the participants of their rights and explained the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study.

Following the data collection, or interviewing, the researcher reviewed each interview to extract common descriptions, themes, and statements that related to the research questions. Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained that the goals of qualitative data analysis are to reflect the complexity of human interaction by portraying it in the words of the interviewees and through actual events and to make that complexity understandable to others. In order to accomplish these goals, the researcher transcribed the recorded interviews, then read and reread each interview carefully to determine what important themes, concepts, and events emerged. After refining the themes and concepts, the researcher coded, or labeled, each theme throughout the interview text. Finally, these themes were compared with those found in the related literature. A discussion of how the themes and concepts relate to the research questions and further implications are found in Chapter V.

Rigor and Verification

The basic nature of a qualitative study is evaluated in the rigor, or strength, of its findings (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Verification of the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings can be determined through evaluation of its trustworthiness, authenticity, and goodness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Snape & Spencer, 2003).

Trustworthiness

The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is quite different from the conventional experimental precedent of attempting to show validity, soundness, and significance. In any qualitative research project, four issues of trustworthiness demand attention: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a "credible" conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the participants' original data (Flick, 2002).

Transferability is the degree to which the findings of this inquiry can apply or transfer beyond the bounds of the project. Dependability is an assessment of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation. Confirmability is a measure of how well the inquiry's findings are supported by the data collected. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this inquiry, trustworthiness was enhanced through the individual one-on-one interviews and the focus groups. This rich descriptions by the participants in this study provided information that can be used in a variety of settings, thereby contributing to the component of transferability.

The concept of dependability in scientific research is often compared to reliability, in that it refers to how consistently the same findings would be obtained if the study were repeated with similar participants in similar environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability in qualitative research, however, may differ in that it refers to the dependability that the findings may be subject to change due to the very nature of

naturalistic inquiry (Creswell, 1998). The effort to achieve dependability in the current study was made by keeping careful records of the research process and consulting with colleagues with qualitative research knowledge and experience for feedback.

Authenticity

Authenticity is another aspect of rigor and verification in qualitative research (Taylor, 1992). The findings must be real and believable. In order to be authentic, the extent to which respondents' different constructions of concerns and issues and their underlying values are solicited and represented in a balanced, evenhanded way by the inquirer. This is what Guba and Lincoln (1985) refer to as fairness. The researcher in the current study worked diligently to accurately report all perspectives.

Another type of authenticity that may be related to this study is ontological authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), referring to the extent to which respondents' own constructions are enhanced or made more informed and sophisticated as a result of their having participated in this study. It is possible that the participants in this study may have achieved a deeper understanding of the persistence of first-generation students through the process of participating in the interviews.

Goodness

Goodness is another aspect of rigor and verification that is expressed in the written report of the research study (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It addresses trustworthiness, authenticity, and goodness of fit between all components of the research process. Goodness is demonstrated through a strong framework that serves as a foundation of the study. The current study provides a strong

framework in terms of theory, philosophy and methodology throughout the written report.

A study that demonstrates goodness represents all voices of the participants and notes the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). As previously stated, the researcher attempted to be aware of all voices by being open to all perspectives and viewpoints and through careful and accurate data collection. The self-reflective accounts of the researcher to acknowledge his own ideas and perspectives and separate those from the ideas and perceptions of the participants.

Summary

This chapter reviewed methodology utilized for this study. The chapter began by restating the purpose of the study. The research design was then presented followed by a description of the sample population and means by which the university and students were selected as participants of this study. Last, the procedures for conducting the research and the process through which data was collected and analyzed were discussed. The next chapter will review the results of the study.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of the study was to identify the factors influencing the persistence of first-generation students at Texas Woman's University. The researcher collected data using open-ended questions in individual interviews with students and focus group interviews with faculty and staff. The individual interviews consisted of nineteen students. The three focus groups included four faculty/staff members in two of the groups and five members in one focus group. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, reviewed, summarized, and analyzed by the researcher. Significant statements from the participants were examined closely, and from these statements, meanings were derived. Analysis continued with the formation of themes and patterns.

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from this research process, addressing the purpose and research questions. A description of the sample is given, and the findings of the study are provided in response to each research question. Also included are the reflective accounts of the researcher, which allowed the reader to understand his position as well as the perspective through which he viewed the contributions of participants. Finally, a summary of the findings is given.

Description of the Sample

Nineteen students participated in the individual interviews (N = 19). The specific demographic data collected for the individual interviews were ethnicity, gender,

participant's current classification level, and age of the participant at the time of the interview.

The majority of the sample was Hispanic and female. Males represented 26% of the sample (n = 5) and approximately 74% were females (n = 14). The ethnicities represented included approximately 63% Hispanic, 26% Black, and 11% White.

The age range of the students at the time of the interview was age 21 to age 25, and the median age was 22 years old; the mean was 22.1 years old, and the mode was 22 years old. The majority of the respondents were classified as seniors. Participant's self-reported classification included fourteen seniors, four juniors, and one sophomore. Descriptive data about the sample are provided in Table 6.

Table 6

Description of the Student Sample (N = 19)

	Frequency	Percent	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Gender					
Female	14	73.7			
Male	5	26.3			
Ethnicity					
Hispanic	12	63.1			
Black	5	26.3			
White	2	10.6			
Classification					
Senior	12	63.4			
Junior	6	31.5			
Sophomore	1	5.1			
Age of participant at time of interview			4	21	25

Thirteen faculty/staff members participated in the three focus groups (N = 13). The specific demographic data collected for the focus groups were ethnicity, gender, and university position. The majority of the sample was staff and female. Males represented 15% of the sample (N = 2) and approximately 85% were females (N = 11). The ethnicities included approximately 62% White, 31% Hispanic, and 7% Black. Descriptive data about the sample are provided in Table 7.

Table 7

Description of the Faculty/Staff Sample (N = 13)

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	11	84.6
Male	2	15.4
Ethnicity		
White	8	62.1
Hispanic	4	31.4
Black	1	6.5
Participants		
Staff	11	84.7
Faculty	2	15.3

Findings

The qualitative methods of this study followed an in-depth interview methodology

(Cresswell, 1998). Specifically, interview protocols as pioneered by Perry (1970) and

conducted by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarules (1986) and, more recently, Lau

(2003) were followed. These studies share the quest for student voices in order to deepen

an understanding of adult development that might improve the practice of higher

education.

The research questions were non-structured and conducted with participants to gather data about their backgrounds as first-generation college students or their experiences and/or observations of working with first-generation college students. To increase reliability, each individual interview and focus group followed the same structured protocol, but clarifying questions were sometimes asked. Immediately following each interview, the researcher wrote a reflexive journal entry (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), noting emerging themes and highlights of each interview. Comparing researcher field notes and tape recordings increased consistency and accuracy of interpretation.

The investigator followed the data analysis process as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2005). The data analysis included an analysis of words (key-words-in-context). This technique included the investigator reading and rereading the participant responses to develop an understanding. The researcher identified key words and then systematically searched the collection of text to find all instances of the word or phrase. Next, the researcher organized the responses according to keywords or phrases from the transcripts using a combination of cut-and-paste method of a word processing and marking up hard copy texts with different colored highlighter pens. This strategy provided an organized method of analyzing the material by linking codes with significant statements. The researcher used this information as clues for identifying themes and patterns. To further strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, responses also were read by and feedback was provided by two outside peer reviewers. The investigator compared his analysis with the feedback from the reviewers.

Findings of the research study are reported as they relate to the two research questions. Seven themes emerging from the data were identified for each interview question. Each theme is listed below followed by its description. The themes arose from both the focus groups and the individual interviews, many of which were concurring with the findings of the literature. Following Table 8, each research question and supportive data is presented separately.

Table 8

Themes

Themes	Description
1. Parental and Familial Encouragement	Participants indicated that parents and family were the most important reason for first-generation student persistence at TWU.
2. Institutional Support Systems	Participants indicated the many ways first-generation students received institutional assistance at TWU.
3. Self-expectations and External Support	Respondents described the expectations that are placed on first-generation students to do well academically and earn a college education. Participants described support received from friends, mentors and role models.
4. Financial Resources	Participants stated the many ways financial aid and financial support assisted in the persistence of first-generation students.
5. Institutional Fit	Participants indicated how the climate at TWU played an important role in the success of first-generation students. They described the university programs and services as welcoming and the people as helpful and friendly.
6. Motivation to Complete Degree	Participants described what inspires first-generation students at TWU to continue their education and complete a degree.
7. Cultural Identity	Participants shared experiences and observations of how a positive attitude toward one's own ethnic group, a sense of ethnic pride and ethnic belonging, as well as a strong sense of group membership is meaningful.

The following sections of this chapter describe these major themes that emerged in the analysis of the data. The voices of participants are presented in the form of excerpts from the individual interviews and focus groups to illustrate the significance of each theme.

Research Question 1

The first research question was "What factors, as perceived by first-generation university undergraduates, contribute to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University?" Major areas addressed by the ongoing questions included student persistence, institutional support, and campus climate. The following questions were asked during the interview:

1. Tell me about your experience as a first or second year student at TWU.

2. What were the most important reasons for your persistence at TWU?

3. Which institutional support did you find supportive or non-supportive as a first generation student at TWU?

4. Apart from institutional support systems, what other factors do you perceive contributed to your success and persistence here at TWU?

5. What was your financial situation like during your first few years of college? What type of financial support was most important to your persistence at TWU?

6. What influence did campus climate and/or culture have on your persistence as a first generation student at TWU?

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7. What goals do you have for yourself? What motivates you to continue with your education?

Research Question 2

The second research question was "What factors, as perceived by faculty and staff, contribute to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University?" In order to invite participants to share their college experiences or observations, the focus groups protocol attempted to address many aspects of student life. Major areas addressed by the continuous questions included student persistence, institutional support, and campus climate. The following questions were asked during the interview:

1. Tell me about your experiences with first generation students here at TWU.

2. What are some of the most important reasons why first generation students have persisted at TWU?

3. What institutional assistance and/or resources do you feel first-generation students find supportive or non-supportive?

4 Apart from institutional support systems, what other factors do you perceive contribute to first generation student success and persistence here at TWU?

5. To what extent do you feel campus climate and/or culture plays a role on the persistence of first generation students at TWU?

6. In your experience, what role do you perceive financial support plays in the persistence of first-generation students at TWU?

7. As a faculty or staff member, what do you feel motivates first generation students to continue with their education?

Themes, description of the data, and, if relevant, direct quotations from the data follow. In the following quotes, the letter "S" followed by a number indicates direct knowledge from each student participant. In other excerpts, the letter "F" followed by a number reflects observations and/or direct interaction of faculty or staff member working with first-generation students at TWU. The "S" and "F" quotations were mixed together to assemble the data in a meaningful or comprehensible fashion. The aim of this process was to look for patterns and relationships within the collection, and to make general discoveries about the research.

Theme 1: Parental and Familial Encouragement

Participants reported that an important reason why first-generation students prevail at TWU was because parents serve as a key source of encouragement. Family factors often contributed to the participants' persistence in college. Several stressed that students are motivated to do better than their parents while others shared positive stories of parental influence. Participants indicated that parents simply expect students to attend college. For some, attending college was not even a choice. They had to go to college. Others indicated that while growing up, parents in many cases emphasized the importance of education. While for others, parents simply told students to do their best. These students bring strong support from family to keep going.

The first interview question posed to the participants asked about the most important reasons for student persistence at TWU. Respondents articulated that parental

(n = 13) and familial encouragement (n = 9) was the most important foundation and/or reason for student persistence. The following comments are examples of this viewpoint:

Parental encouragement.

S1: My parents actually decided for me that I would go to college. Ever since I was a little kid, they told me that graduating from college would provide more opportunities for a better future. This still inspires me to this day.

F2: I think in many cases parents instill in their children the value of going to college to do well early on.

S3: If I don't succeed, I am going to end up like some of my family. I talk about this often with my parents. And that is something that I really don't want to do. I want to be different, you know.

S5: Although I feel some pressure to succeed at college, I see the happiness in my parent's eyes when they look at me. They're just so proud of how far I've made it. This motivates me to do better.

F6: Parents place certain expectations on their child to perform at their best. As a result, I've noticed students adopting to this value and pushing themselves to excel.

F8: I think parents can play either a negative or positive role in students staying in school. But based on my experience, parents have been helpful.

F9: Many students' parents are very supportive, even when they don't understand the entire college process. I notice on campus those parents are generally encouraging their son or daughter at orientations and Open Houses.

S11: My father is the persistent one who always is behind me. Sometimes, I feel kind of annoyed by my father's persistent attitude toward getting things done. But I do understand that everything he does is for me. And some of his persistence has rubbed off on how I approach certain things in college.

F11: Parents of first-generation students give them the ability and the incentive to work hard, and help them to get an education. With those two things, many students have succeeded at TWU.

S12: My parents moral support was important for me my first year. Even though they did not know much about college, they knew me. Every time I would call home, they would say to keep trying and see what happens.

F13: Many parents have such a huge respect for education and support their children emotionally as well as financially.

S16: Even though she knew that it would be tough financially, my mother always encouraged me to go to college. She is still my biggest supporter, and has sacrificed to make it possible.

S19: My mom worked two jobs. She's the reason I'm here; she knows the importance of education.

Familial encouragement. As with parental support, participants cited familial encouragement as a key reason for attending and/or remaining in college. The notion that the families of first-generation college students are a liability to college access is largely debunked, as participants reported that a very important reason why they went to college was due to familial inspiration. The following quotes are instances of this position:

S2: My younger cousins look up to me so I have to be a good role model and show them if I can do it, so can they and to never give up. Just them asking is a big help.

F3: Besides parents, I've met other relatives of students who are encouraging and supporting them while in college.

S6: Just staying in touch with home really helps with being away at school. I don't talk to my family as much, but we text each other just about every day. My family has been very supportive about me attending college because they want the best for me.

F7: To keep her grandmother connected with what she was doing, I recall a student sending her an envelope of clippings from the campus newspaper. And the grandmother called to say she was so proud of her being in college. The student felt so reassured by the phone call.

S8: Of my siblings, I'm the only one who has gone to college. They always ask how I'm doing and know how to cheer me up.

S9: My older brother dropped out of high school in tenth grade, and he has a child now. When I'm at home, he's always telling me to keep doing what you're doing so that you don't have to struggle like this. So in a way that is support.

S10: I come from a large family. Even though many of my relatives did not complete high school, they knew going to college was important to find a good job.

S14: A lot of my family could not understand why I was going to school so far

away when I could of gone somewhere closer to home. But my parents said that if you were good enough to get into TWU, they would work hard to help me get through.

S17: Without the support of my grandmother, I wouldn't be able to stay in college. She worked and saved for my education. Her support helps financially, but it also helps mentally and spiritually.

Theme 2: Institutional Support Systems

Numerous participants described how becoming involved on campus helped with becoming more integrated with other college students. Several explained how joining groups, organizations, and other support groups served as a resource. A few spoke of finding trustworthy people on campus that could help with adjusting to college and a new environment. Many participants spoke of taking advantage of mentoring programs as well as the variety of offices and programs designed to assist students. Participants described how these services helped first-generation students with navigating the college terrain.

The second interview question posed to the participants inquired about perceived supportive or non-supportive institutional assistance for first-generation students at TWU. Some did not give a direct answer to the question, but many of the respondents experienced positive institutional related support and noted it as critical for progression of this population. Participants identified miscellaneous departments/personnel (n = 6), campus programs/events (n = 8), Residence Life/learning communities (n = 6), and

college mentors (n = 8) as being supportive of first-generation students. Interview responses are described below:

University departments and personnel. First-generation students say navigating the first year of college and receiving continuing support are some of the key elements in raising their aspirations, according to a new study by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (2007). Below participants shared advice or stories about the importance of help provided to students by TWU departments and/or personnel:

F3: Some departments like Intercultural Services specifically support the needs of underrepresented students here at TWU. They do a good job.

S4: [Name] assisted me with my paperwork and letting me know of available scholarships. One staff member was especially helpful, and I felt comfortable speaking to her in Spanish.

F5: [Name] with the Counseling Center does a fine job of helping students with difficult issues.

F6: I think many individuals at the department level are able to help students on a one-on-one basis. Instead of simply handing a student the literature, we're able to walk them through the process.

F13: The Financial Aid office assists first-generations students with understanding deadlines and available scholarships. We also continually explain to students that financial aid award is based on individual situations.

S15: I received assistance from many of the services here at TWU. In particular, the Financial Aid office helped me with my paperwork so that I was able to

concentrate more on my studies.

Campus programs and events. Participants expressed the significance of how several programs and events provide students with a sense of direction. Some participants singled out three particular resources. The mission of the McNair program is to increase the number of low-income and first-generation college students or students belonging to underrepresented ethnic groups, who complete a doctoral degree. The University 1011 course is a one-credit course emphasizing college study skills. Located within Intercultural Services, G-Force members focus on issues of Attitude, Aptitude and Access and develop projects at multiple grade levels to support the College for Texans Campaign goals. Many respondents indicated how these programs provided resources, programs and services to help students accomplish goals and success in the classroom. Knowing where to go for assistance is a crucial part of that success. Below participants described the importance of campus programs and events:

F2: The Open House events serve as a positive introduction for many prospective students and parents. We familiarize students with resources available to them.

F5: Intercultural Services provides leadership opportunities for their students to gain experience.

S6: The McNair program was awesome. It provided plenty of academic assistance and support. I felt understood by the staff/mentors and looked to them for guidance because they had once been college students themselves.

S7: During my first year, the GO Center helped me establish friendships, as well as connected me with a peer mentor.

S9: The University 1011 course was good for me. I didn't realize my study skills were lacking until taking this class. It also really helped explain college expectations.

S13: The G-Force helped with my transition from high school to TWU.

S14: I learned how to become a student leader through the G-Force and this has helped me to understand what is going on in the college and the programs that I can take advantage of.

S19: The University 1011 class helped me to begin thinking ahead. I had to think about simple things like remembering to bring all my materials with me, instead of running back to my room to get it. The course also showed me how to balance my time among different things.

Residence life and learning communities. Participants in this study indicated that those who come together in a dorm (a college or university building containing living quarters for students) or learning community (a small cohort of students that takes a set of integrated courses) provide an anchor and a sense of accountability. Some participants singled out two particular University Housing Living Learning communities. Leadership Connection is a community that helps students develop a personal philosophy of leadership. Using the model that any person can exert leadership at any level of an organization, students learn what it takes to become an effective leader while in college and after they graduate. The Neighbors Educated Together (NET) community offers first year students the opportunity to take courses together while residing in a clustered living environment in the residence hall. Upper class students, who are NET alumna, serve as

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the RAs (resident assistants) and PAs (peer advisors) for the communities. Many respondents described how this setting creates a sense of connectedness between their home community and school life, and between themselves, peers, and instructors. The following comments are representative:

S1: The dorm life really helped. I'm kind of shy, and it was hard meeting people. But living in the dorm my freshmen year put me in contact with other students. This really helped me socially.

S3: I have to mention the Leadership Connection community helped me develop and improve my relationships and how to work better with others.

S5: The NET program was awesome. I really got support with understanding college life. And taking courses together with my friends really helped me to learn how to really study.

F6: The learning communities in the Housing department.

S7: Living in the dorm during my freshmen year.

F11: Living on campus helps to be away from home and become more independent.

College mentors. Respondents identified faculty and staff at the university as individuals who have made a positive impact on first-generations students. They have served as role models and mentors to these students, encouraging them to complete their degrees and providing the guidance necessary to reach their goals. They have developed strong relationships with these students and have supported them both academically and emotionally. Representative comments by participants are presented below:

F1: We can be the support for the student if it's lacking elsewhere.

S2: The department secretary in my major is Hispanic. It is nice to see someone who looks like you, and who is able to offer trusting advice and support.

S3: I got set up with a faculty mentor at G-Force. That was nice.

S4: I got a chance to do research with some of my professors. Some of them are now kind of like role models.

F9: Over the past few years, I've served as a mentor to first-generation students through the Intercultural Services office. I'm assuming our pairing up together has benefited the student. I've enjoyed it.

S10: I've developed a social network here at TWU. I've developed some good relationships with faculty and administrators here. Many have offered a lot of advice.

F11: I've often advised students in many ways, whether it was about having trouble adapting to college or about filling out a form. We are here to listen and help.

F12: As a faculty member, I've tried to encourage students to get to know your professor. Many of us are approachable and can give new insights into the subjects the class is about.

Theme 3: Self-Expectations and External Support

Participants also placed high expectations on doing well in college. Many felt that first-generation students take pride in the grades they made and worked hard to maintain the grades that they earned in high school. Respondents spoke of dedication and

determination to do well academically. Many motivated themselves just as their parents had instructed them to do while growing up. Others understood that earning high grades would afford them the opportunity of attending graduate school or having additional opportunities.

The third interview question posed to the participants inquired about other factors (apart from institutional support), which contributed to the success and persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Respondents articulated that self-expectations to do well (n = 14) and external support (n = 6) was the most important foundation and/or reason for student persistence. Some of the comments were:

Self-expectations.

> F1: The experiences and hardships that first-generation students have endured helps to be more resilient, to know that they have the control and responsibility to decide the course of their life.
>
> S1: I take pride in the grades that I make, and work hard to maintain the grades that I'm used to earning.
>
> F2: Many of these students have dreams of graduating with honors and attending graduate school. Earning high grades will give them those opportunities. That can be a huge motivator.
>
> S3: While growing up, my parents pushed me to do well. I am determined to do well academically.
>
> S4: Sometimes I get a C in my classes, but I really strive for an A. Getting a C is bad for me. Because my mom always pushed me to get an A. This approach to

grades is in my system, but I really work hard to not get a C.

S6: I want to be somebody for my family, so they can be proud. But it's for me, too. I want to feel that I have achieved something.

S7: I'm developed into a person who is self-reliant. In high school, my counselor did not really bring academic or college information to my attention. I ended up digging up a lot of this information. TWU is not that bad, but I do know that it takes extra effort on my part to do well here.

S8: I have to live up to my family expectations, as well as my own.

S9: Even though other people encouraged me to go to college, the motivation to strive for success came from within.

F10: I believe many students persist because of their self-discipline and desire to achieve their goal of graduating from college.

S11: Quite a bit of my college success has to do with my own personal dedication and drive.

S13: I found out that as a first-generation student, I am held accountable to myself and I have had to learn how to succeed on my own.

S15: My determination and attitude were the assets that also helped me succeed at TWU.

S17: I saw the struggles my family went through and knew I wanted something different. I work hard to stay away from influences that might distract me from my goal to do well in college.

External support systems. In addition to institutional support, respondents indicated other forms of support received from friends, peers, and role mentors. Participants spoke of the affective support provided by these sources. The emotional support was most valued by participants because it gave them the determination to continue their education. Many described the encouragement they received to continue their education. Some of the comments by participants were:

S1: My counselor from high school still gives me advice about college.

S3: I go back to my high school to talk with teachers about college.

S4: My neighborhood coach still checks up on me to see how I'm doing.

S5: The youth minister at my church also majored in Education at college. So he talks to me about teaching.

S12: True friends that I grew up with.

S18: Old friends in my neighborhood. Even though they're not in college, they are supportive.

Theme 4: Financial Resources

Many first-generation students are able to fund their college costs through available financial resources. There are three main types of financial assistance available to qualified students at the college level. These consist of grants and scholarships, loans, and work-study. Some students do not qualify for these types of aid and decide to take jobs off-campus. Other students receive familial support in the form of transportation and other living expenses.

The fourth interview question posed to the participants inquired about the types of financial support that contribute to the success and persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Respondents pointed out resources which ranged from financial aid (n = 15), on-campus work (n = 3), off-campus work (n = 5), to family support (n = 2) as the most important financial related factors for student persistence. These statements were representative of respondents' views:

Financial aid (grants, loans, and scholarships). The majority of participants indicated that financial aid provided the means necessary for first-generation students to attend college. Some participants received enough grant and scholarship money to cover tuition and fees, while others were required to take out loans. Participants shared experiences and issues about finances and attending college. The following comments are representative:

S1: Without receiving consistent financial aid awards, I could not attend TWU.

S3: I am grateful for the scholarship support that I've received.

F3: Financial aid support at any level is very much appreciated by students.

S4: Knowing that the university understands our financial need is great support. It means a lot for those of us who need a little extra help getting through.

S5: I was amazed that TWU offered different types of scholarships. It is so important to have financial support.

F5: Many parents are not able to help out financially. Financial aid awards allow students to pay more attention to their studies and less to the worries of paying for books.

S7: My financial aid award has been the most consistent support influencing my persistence at TWU.

F8: Talking with some of the students I've mentored, some are forced to take out student loans. In some cases, the amount of aid awarded to students is not sufficient because increases in grant aid are not keeping pace with increases in tuition and fees.

S12: The financial aid awards have helped, but they should consider we're not rich. Tuition and fees keep going up and up. People assume we can make it, when in reality, we're not.

F13: Even though TWU is a state school, increases in grant aid are not keeping pace with increases in tuition and fees. Many students are having to find a job. That can be tough on first-generation students.

S17: Financial assistance is crucial. School leaves no time for a job, let alone a social life, so my only source of income has been financial aid and scholarships.

S18: Because I didn't receive any type of financial assistance from my parents, the Financial Aid office helped me get a part-time job.

S19: I was really worried about paying for college. During my first year, I found out student financial aid is available. You just have to ask questions and know where to look.

S13: I just wasn't aware of the different scholarships and financial assistance available to me.

S15: Completing a renewal FAFSA application was new. During my first year, I

thought the same information would be used again during my second year. I was glad that I asked questions, and found out that I had to apply each year.

On campus work. A work-study job is often part of a student's financial aid package and is usually on campus. Several participants stated that work-study programs provides for needed financial assistance and helps with basic necessities. Respondents also mentioned that the money earned is used to pay for tuition or other college charges. Some of the comments by participants were:

S3: My work-study job helps out a lot.

S8: I've always worked part-time at TWU to earn money for my books, supplies, and personal things.

F9: We have several first-generation student workers in our office.

Off campus work. Many participants discussed how students work during the summer or part time during the school year to help pay for college. Students generally obtain these jobs on their own. Five participants detailed this experience:

S6: I've always worked and taken a full course load. Having some spending money is fine, but I would suggest applying for some type of financial aid. If you're going to have to miss class to go to work, you won't learn anything that way.

F6: Students can be afraid of taking out a loan to help offset the costs of attending college. Because of this, I know of many students who work to pay for college and support themselves.

S9: I work two jobs and go to school and it's hard, real hard.

S11: I work and sometimes do overtime. It takes a lot of effort to stay in college. It sometimes feels like it's a job in itself. I mean, it's just a lot.

F11: I've discovered some students are not as attentive in class, because they've been working a night shift.

Familial support. Participants identified their mom and other family members as individuals that provided financial support to attend college. Residing at home made it possible for a few students to attend college. Family also assisted with transportation and spending money.

S2: My mom works two jobs so that she can help me out with books and school stuff.

S10: My family helps out with transportation and spending money.

F10: I'm aware of a student whose parents pay for her car payment and cell phone. She feels that because her parents have already done so much for her, that she can at least help out with paying for school. She pretty much works to help pay for school.

Theme 5: Institutional Fit

Each college student interacts with the institution in which s/he enrolls. This interaction takes place with faculty, student service agencies, policies and procedures, to name just a few. The degree to which this interaction is satisfying and successful for the student, create that students "institutional fit." The better the institutional fit, the greater the opportunity for the student to persist in college. Many participants felt the climate at

TWU was welcoming and found the people to helpful and friendly. Others felt the culture helped to broaden first-generation student's network of meeting new people on campus.

The fifth interview question posed to the participants inquired whether campus climate and/or culture contributed to the success and persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Respondents revealed that they fit in at TWU. These responses ranged from positive climate (n = 9), helpful and friendly people (n = 6), to academics and services (n = 5). The following comments are representative:

Positive climate. Most respondents felt TWU provided a healthy climate, where first-generations students are welcomed, respected, and valued by the university. In contrast to some participants, one student felt that although she had positive experiences on campus, she did not see the presence of faculty members from different backgrounds. Interview responses are described below:

S1: To me the campus climate is overall positive. However, I have noticed a few student organizations not being too inclusive if a person does not fit their typical guidelines.

S4: Because TWU is small, you're able to have more opportunities to talk with different people about what you need in order to do well in college.

F4: You've got to develop that trust before you can even really help a student. I'm not sure if that is campus climate or just with me.

S5: From the first day I arrived on campus with my parents, I felt like I belonged at TWU. I just felt comfortable and welcomed here.

F8: Students mention the smaller class sizes and individual attention made TWU a

good fit.

S9: I had come to TWU before for on-campus high school events. I wasn't new to the campus, so I felt that I fit in pretty good.

S10: Although I would like to see more faculty who are people of color, the environment at TWU is pretty cool.

S15: I connected to other freshmen students during our orientation. But even before that, I felt comfortable at TWU because of the small campus.

S12: I did not experience any culture shock here at TWU. I saw plenty of students who looked like me and who were first-generations students.

Helpful and friendly people. For many participants, TWU is about the people. Several shared a response that pertained to understanding that the learning you do in college will often not take place in class. Respondents described how this happens with human encounters with people – whether they are other students, professors, administrators, etc. Participants expressed the importance of first-generation students connected with helpful and friendly people. Some of the comments by participants were:

S2: If you know there is somebody out there to help you, you're going to get motivated to do it. I felt that way about TWU. You always have somebody to call on here no matter what.

F2: We try to make that connection with the students. And if they feel they have someone to talk to, they come back to us to help them.

F3: I think TWU staff members try to build relationships and trust so that students are receptive to the services and support that these programs have to offer.

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S6: I found the people at TWU to be helpful and friendly.

F6: TWU has opportunities for students to get connected to the university early on. I feel this helps students understand the campus climate.

S8: Many mentors at the university not only urged me to become involved, but also encouraged me to become a leader in college and beyond.

Academics and services. Several participants felt that TWU was a university of high academic standards and offered a range of majors and programs. Many stated that the university's strong academic environment was a good fit for helping first-generation students work to achieve their goals. Representative comments by participants are presented below:

S7: TWU really emphasizes the different resources for students on campus.

F10: I think students here at TWU are able to establish peer relations and develop role models and mentors. I this helps create a positive climate both academically and socially.

S13: I wanted to study Nursing at TWU. I knew the university was a good fit for me academically. I tend to make friends easily, so the social part did not stress me out.

F13: TWU has many opportunities for students to reach out to other students, and find ways to gain an appreciation for the campus community.

S19: I felt TWU was a good fit for me with academics. But I didn't really connect with someone until I got involved in activities outside the classroom. That is when I began to feel much better about the campus.

Theme 6: Motivation to Complete Degree

Many respondents felt that first-generation students bring an amazingly strong motivation for completion of their college degree. Participants shared experiences with knowing how to work hard and reported several personal motives that contributed to the desire of students to finish their degree. Achieving financial security was a factor as well as the ability to encourage others. Some felt those opportunities that a degree would afford them was beneficial, while others were motivated by being the first in the families to earn a degree. Still others indicated the sense of accomplishment and gaining knowledge was a factor. Accomplishing the goal of walking across the stage to receive a college diploma was a motivational factor for several of the participants.

The sixth and final interview question posed to the participants inquired about motivation factors involving first-generation students at TWU. Respondents articulated what inspires first generation students to continue with their education. Replies ranged from to financial security (n = 6), encourage others (n = 3), opportunities (n = 11), first in family (n = 5), to a sense of accomplishment (n = 5). Relevant participant comments are presented below:

Financial security. Many respondents felt one of the reasons that motivated students to complete a college degree were the increased financial security. They did not want to experience the financial struggle like their parents and families went through. Some respondents wanted to be able to afford a better quality of life and to provide for their family. Some of the comments were:

S2: I would like to make enough money to provide a good life for my family.

S4: Having enough money to support my lifestyle.

S3: I would like to be able to provide for my family.

S7: I want to be able to afford a future: a house, children and retirement.

F13: Graduating from college is required for security and high-paying professional careers.

S16: Earn more money. I want to enjoy a better quality of life.

S17: I saw my parents struggle financially. I would like to earn more money.

Encourage others. Several participants felt that first-generation students were motivated to complete their degrees because they felt like it would help others follow in their footsteps to college. Earning a college degree would set a positive tone for other family members and community to reach for their goals. Interview responses are described below:

S1: Go back to my family and high school to talk with them about my college education.

S5: Be a role model for my young brother and sisters.

S8: Just being the first in the family to finish. I hope it will help others in my family see that if I can go to college and graduate, they also can.

Opportunities with degree. Several participants felt that the level of education played an important role in the likelihood of landing a higher paying job. Others stated that first-generation students realized that education increases earning potential, so attending college opens doors to a high-paying job. The following statements are representative of how participants responded:

F2: More job opportunities; the world is changing rapidly. More and more jobs require education beyond high school.

F3: To reach a greater potential – go on to graduate school or better job.

S4: I want to be a professional. Most good jobs now require a college degree.

S5: I want to complete my Nursing degree. With my diploma, I will have more opportunities.

F5: Most people in leadership positions have college degrees.

S6: A college degree increases my chances of finding a good job.

F7: Education opens the doors to career choices, and the chance to further education at any point in life.

F8: Job opportunities and more career options.

S10: To get a good job. I'm tired of working part-time jobs.

S12: A college degree opens up more doors for me.

S13: Increase my potential to find a job.

First in family. Respondents identified being the first in their families to earn a college degree as a motivation to continue their education. Many felt that the desire of some first-generation students was to inspire their families to goals as lofty as theirs. Several participants felt that the greatest source of motivation for some students has been giving their siblings and cousins hope. Others did not want to let their families down. Some of the comments were:

S1: Making my parents and family proud of me.

S3: I want to be in a better position to help my family.

F7: One thing is to be an example for other family members.

S9: My siblings are really excited that their brother's in college. I want to graduate to show them that it can be done.

S15: College puts me in a better position to help my family and community.

Sense of accomplishment/knowledge. Participants expressed that they were driven to complete their degrees for the great sense of accomplishment. Many felt as though being the first in the family to earn a college degree would be the culmination of reaching their goal. Earning a degree and walking across the stage was something very special to participants. Another person felt that students are motivated to continue college to gain knowledge and skills that will help them succeed for the rest of your life. Representative comments by participants are presented below:

S8: Just to complete my goal of completing college.

F8: A college education makes you a well-rounded person.

F10: The motivation for some students is walking across that stage at graduation.

F13: Students are motivated to gain knowledge and skills that they will use for the rest of their life.

S14: My goal is to receive my diploma.

Theme 7: Cultural Identity

The final theme that emerged from the data that was related to each of the research questions was that cultural identity plays an important role in the persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Participants shared experiences and observations of how a positive attitude toward one's own ethnic group, a sense of ethnic pride and ethnic

belonging, as well as a strong sense of group membership is meaningful. Replies ranged from seeking affirmation of ethnicity (n = 3) to identifying influences (n = 12) that factor into identify formation. Research indicates that students respond to the challenges or stimulations provided by the college environment, and this process gives rise to the development of identity (Widick et al., 1978) Some influences may include family, friends, communities, gender, sexual orientation, political beliefs, socioeconomic status, personal beliefs, religion or spiritual beliefs, regionality, and life experiences (Collier & Thomas, 1990: Erikson, 1969). Based on the sum of respondents' vocabulary during the interviews, the following comments demonstrate this theme:

S2: The department secretary in my major is Hispanic. It is nice to see someone who looks like you, and who is able to offer trusting advice and support.

S3: I got set up with a faculty mentor at G-Force. That was nice.

S4: I felt comfortable speaking to her (staff member) in Spanish.

F3: Intercultural Services supports the needs of underrepresented students here at TWU.

S5: Being assigned a peer mentor through G-Force really helped me.

F5: Intercultural Services provides leadership opportunities.

S6: The McNair program was awesome.

S7: During my first year, the GO Center helped me establish friendships, as well as connected me with a peer mentor.

F9: I've served as a mentor to first-generation students through the Intercultural Services office. I'm assuming our pairing up together has benefited the student.

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S10: Although I would like to see more faculty who are people of color, the environment at TWU is pretty cool.

S12: I did not experience any culture shock here at TWU. I saw plenty of students who looked like me and who were first-generations students.

S13: The G-Force helped with my transition from high school to TWU.

S14: I learned how to become a student leader through the G-Force.

S18: My sorority sisters have helped me at TWU.

Summary of Findings

This chapter presented participant profiles and responses to the two research questions posed by this study. The first question involved the factors, as perceived by first-generation university undergraduates, that contributed to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University. The second question involved the factors, as perceived by faculty and administrators, that contributed to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University. Seven themes and patterns were presented. These included parental and familial encouragement, institutional support systems, self-expectations and external support, institutional fit, financial resources, and motivation to complete degree.

A universal theme emerged from the data collection that was related to each of the two research questions was that persisting and attaining a college degree is a life-changing journey. The following statements illustrate this theme:

S2: I am not only in college for me, but for my mom, dad, grandmother, brothers

and sisters, etc. I am here for everyone in my family that wanted to go to college, but for some reason or another was not able to attend. I am setting the stage for others who will follow me. They will have someone to look up to. They will be able to say my sister went to college and graduated. If she did it, I can do it too. Being first-generation college student is great, but my goal is to become a first-generation graduate.

S8: Fortunately, my decision to leave for school was one of the best I have ever made. It taught me to depend on myself. It taught me how to be independent. It allowed me to figure out my values and beliefs. I also learned how to establish friendships in a new city, and make my way around new roads. I do think my college education away has made an impact on my family. In some way, I'm paving the way for the other, younger members in my family. I hope that one day my younger siblings and cousins will see the benefits of going to college.

S14: By going to college, I am proud to set an example not only for my siblings, but also for my cousins. I'm not only the first person in my family to attend college, I am also the first woman to pursue higher education. I do this not only for my future and myself, I do it for my father and mother because I want them to know their struggle was not in vain.

Summary

This chapter presented the demographic information of the sample, and participants' responses in the interviews. Transcripts of the interviews were coded

according to common themes and patterns. Excerpts from the individual interviews and focus groups were presented which captured the voices of participants and supported the findings. The next chapter provides conclusions drawn from the study, implications for policy and practice, and consideration for future research.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter contains a review of the purpose of the study, the research questions posed, and the methodology used to conduct the study. A summary of the findings is presented followed by a discussion of the factors found to contribute to the persistence first-generations students at Texas Woman's University. Conclusions are followed by implications and recommendations for future research.

This study was descriptive in nature and sought to explore the meanings and experiences of first-generation university student persistence and progress at Texas Woman's University. The study used a qualitative approach of in-depth interviews with a sample of participants who met the study criteria. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What factors, as perceived by first-generation university undergraduates, contribute to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University?

2. What factors, as perceived by faculty and staff, contribute to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University?

Summary of the Study

The institution selected for this study was Texas Woman's University. Upon receiving approval from the Texas Woman's University Institutional Review Board, recruitment of participants was initiated. For student recruitment, the researcher contacted faculty members of several uppers level courses to request permission to have a research assistant attend their classes, and announce the project and hand out recruitment flyers. In addition, several professors were asked and agreed to make classroom announcements and hand out recruitment flyers. Also, a flyer calling for participants was posted in high traffic areas in various locations at the university. Participants were also recruited through suggestions from those participants who had already completed the interviews themselves. Participants were self identified first-generation university students who began as first-year students at Texas Woman's University and have successfully completed 45 or more credit hours. All participants were registered part-time or full-time students. The individual interview sampling consisted of 19 participants.

The focus group participants were solicited based on their commonality of having experiences working with first-generations students at TWU. All were recruited for participation in this study via an e-mail message from the researcher. These participants included employees at Texas Woman's University who worked full-time and were employed at least one year in an instructional or staff capacity. The sampling consisted of 3 focus groups (total of 13 participants).

Through the triangulation of various data sources, the trustworthiness and validity of the study's findings were enhanced. This was achieved by utilizing individual

interviews, focus groups, and the researcher's journal. Data were collected through focus groups and extensive individual interviews. Conducting individual interviews, along with the focus groups, allowed for exploration of emerging themes and gave the participants an opportunity to respond in a more intimate setting. The researcher's journal involved self-reflexivity, reflexivity about those studied, and reflexivity about the participants. Through this methodology, the voice and personal observations of participants were heard and documented as well as the voice and view of the researcher.

This study followed qualitative research methods to fully capture richness and detail of the experiences of the participants studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data analysis involved identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns found in the interview transcriptions (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and analyzed through open coding. The lists of open codes of each interview were categorized based on words and phrases used by the participant. The coded text was compared and contrasted to find correlation or patterns among themes. Results were illustrated through the presentation of quotes or excerpts from transcripts in support of each theme.

Theoretical Framework

Vincent Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975, 1987, 1993) perspective guided the theoretical basis of the study. This perspective is a theory that specifies a longitudinal process in which a number of background variables (e.g., finances, secondary academic performance, and parental encouragement) interact to form students' initial commitment to the college campus and to educational attainable goals. These initial commitments are

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modified, over time, as a result of students' integration into the campus community. Tinto

theorizes that successful integration yields satisfaction that enhances these commitments

and positively influences students' intentions to persist on a particular campus.

Drawing heavily from Durkheim's (1897, 1951) foundational work on suicide, the

role that social structure is presumed to play in the persistence has been widely refined

and elaborated by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993). Using the solar system as an analogy, Tinto

makes reference to the numerous subcultures revolving around the center of institutional

life. Each of these subcultures has a unique character relative to that of the larger

institution (Newcomb & Wilson, 1966). Some are more marginal than others in terms of

the dominant values of the institution, and some may provide a safe harbor for students

with values deviant from those espoused by the institution, formally or informally.

Accordingly, the Tinto model allows for differential impact of integration into these

subgroups based on the relative congruence between the values of the group and the

values of the larger institution. The theory provides a useful lens to view the factors that

influence first-generation student persistence at TWU.

Phenomenology

The study used a phenomenological perspective both as a philosophy and as an

approach to qualitative methodology. Phenomenology is attached to the student

integration perspective in that it looks at the personal understandings constructed by

participants in this study based on their shared history, perspective, and interpretation of

events (Van Manen, 1983). A component of phenomenology as a school of thought is

that people's subjective experiences contain intersubjective interpretations that are shared

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with others of the world. What makes those personal experiences and meanings intersubjective is that they are shared and understood meanings of everyday life beyond the individual to society (Crotty, 1998).

<center>Discussion of Findings</center>

Nineteen students participated in the individual interviews, and thirteen faculty/staff members participated in the three focus groups. The data analysis is based on the descriptions presented by the participants during the interviews, and the interpretations of the findings are those of the researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The findings are delineated based on each research question. Analysis of the data revealed seven themes by participants as factors that contribute to persistence of first-generations students at TWU. In this section, the themes are discussed in terms of the current literature related to the subject.

Research Question 1

This question sought to identify the factors, as perceived by undergraduate students that influence their persistence at TWU. Participants discussed their college experience and described local barriers to persistence and the actions that helped overcome them.

Research Question 2

This question sought to identify the factors, as perceived by faculty and staff that contribute to the persistence of students in their persistence toward and progress in baccalaureate study at Texas Woman's University. Participants discussed accounts of

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their experiences working with first-generation students and what they perceived helped students to persist at TWU.

The first-generation experiences described by the participants in this study are both compelling and complex. During the early stages of my correspondence with the respondents, a singular impression began to emerge that ultimately influenced the findings in an important way. Much of what the participants described related to the changing nature of first-generation students' self-concepts, their identities and the relationships they had with others. As might be expected the participants spoke extensively about relationships with institutional support systems at TWU. However, many also reported about relationships with others who were not directly connected with the university—parents, friends, mentors, and role models—past and present. Through the participant's descriptions of the complex interaction of personal, social and institutional factors that influenced first-generation student progress, the construct of relationship—with self and other—emerged as central to the understanding the meaning first-generation students attached to their persistence at TWU.

In addition, it is this construct of relationship that explains much of the variation among factors that enhanced their college progress and may be central to understanding a potentially critical influence on first-generation student persistence. For these students, the decision to pursue a college degree represented a life-shaping event that left a permanent mark on their lives. It was a decision that shaped and reshaped identities and their relationships with others.

In this study, the following themes (parental and familial encouragement, institutional support systems, self-expectations and external support, financial resources, institutional fit, motivation to complete degree, and cultural identity) emerged as important factors that influenced first-generation student persistence to pursue college and shaped their subsequent college experiences at TWU. The critical personal, social and institutional factors identified within themes are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9

Themes

Themes	Description
1. Parental and Familial Encouragement	Participants indicated that parents and family were the most important reason for first-generation student persistence at TWU.
2. Institutional Support Systems	Participants indicated the many ways first-generation students received institutional assistance at TWU.
3. Self-expectations and External Support	Respondents described the expectations that are placed on first-generation students to do well academically and earn a college education. Participants described support received from friends, mentors and role models.
4. Financial Resources	Participants stated the many ways financial aid and financial support assisted in the persistence of first-generation students.
5. Institutional Fit	Participants indicated how the climate at TWU played an important role in the success of first-generation students. They described the university programs and services as welcoming and the people as helpful and friendly.
6. Motivation to Complete Degree	Participants described what inspires first-generation students at TWU to continue their education and complete a degree.
7. Cultural Identity	Participants shared experiences and observations of how a positive attitude toward one's own ethnic group, a sense of ethnic pride and ethnic belonging, as well as a strong sense of group membership is meaningful.

Theme 1: Parent and familial encouragement. The encouragement participants received from parents and families was acknowledged as a significant and contributing factor to persistence on first-generation student experiences in this study. Throughout their lives, parents influenced them to do their best and to challenge themselves to do well in school. Not only were many of these students motivated by their parents' expectations to attend and succeed in college, but they were also influenced by other family members to go to college and to persist and graduate.

Responses from this study support the literature on the relationship between family encouragement and first-generation student persistence at TWU (Hicks, 2002). In reference to parental inspiration, several participants remembered hearing encouraging words regarding education from their mother or father as a young person growing up. These early interactions with the parent seemed to be important factors in the participant's developing sense of self. One participant commented: "My parents actually decided for me that I would go to college. Ever since I was a little kid, they told me that graduating from college would provide more opportunities for a better future. This still inspires me to this day.

Respondents indicated the fact that because the parents(s) of many first-generation students didn't have the opportunity to attend college, there seems to be more parental support for their children to attend college and do well while in college. It also appeared that the students who maintained positive relationships with their parents during the initial year of college form better relationships, seek out help, and are generally more integrated social in university life. This factor made it easier for them to develop more

positive relationships at TWU. The following interview data from three of the respondents described the importance of this theme with helping with the importance of parental encouragement on college: "I think in many cases parents instill in their children the value of going to college to do well early on," and "Although I feel pressure to succeed in college, I see the happiness in my parent's eyes when they look at me. They're just so proud of how far I've made it. This motivates me to do better," and "Even though she knew it would be tough financially, my mother always encouraged me to go to college. She is still my biggest supporter, and has sacrificed to make it possible."

As with parental support, other family encouragement played an important role in some of the first-generation students' perceptions of their experiences in regards to persistence. The notion that the families of first-generation college students are a liability to college access, as participants reported that a very important reason they persist in college is due to familial inspiration. For many students, the presence of positive support from family members was central to first-generation students maintaining and doing well at TWU. Summaries of some participants' comments included: "Of my siblings, I'm the only one who has gone to college. They always ask how I'm doing and know how to cheer me up," and "Without the support of my grandmother, I wouldn't be able to stay in college. She worked and saved for my education. Her support helps financially, but it also helps mentally and spiritually," and "My older brother dropped out of high school in tenth grade, and he has a child now. When I'm at home, he's always telling me to keep doing what you're doing so that you don't have to struggle like this. So in a way that is support."

Theme 2: Institutional support systems. Among the significant findings in this study was the overall impact of institutional support systems on first-generation students' persistence at TWU. Numerous participants described how becoming involved on campus helped with becoming more integrated with other college students. Several explained how joining groups, organizations, and other support groups served as a resource. A few spoke of finding trustworthy people on campus that could help with adjusting to college and a new environment. Many participants spoke of taking advantage of mentoring programs as well as the variety of offices and programs designed to assist students. Participants described how these services helped first-generation students with navigating the college terrain.

Research on student persistence has indicated that institutional support systems serve as positive resources to first-generation students (Swanson, 2003; Tinto, 1993) Consistent with these findings, many of the participants believed that a variety of campus university departments and/or personnel served as a meaningful resource. It appeared that navigating the first year of college and receiving continued support were some of the key elements in helping with students' transitions from high school to TWU. Respondents reported that these programs helped reinforced that they mattered to TWU and would be supported as they proceeded toward their completion of degrees. Several participants share stories about the importance of assistance provided to first-generations students by this particular means: "I think many individuals at the department level are able to help students on a one-on-one basis. Instead of simply handing a student the literature, we're able to walk them through the process," and "[Name] assisted me with my paperwork and

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letting me know of available scholarships. One staff member was especially helpful, and I felt comfortable speaking to her in Spanish."

Campus programs and events played a role in some first-generation student retention. Participants expressed the significance of how several programs and events provide students with a sense of direction. Besides orientation type events, three particular resources were singled out. They were the McNair program, University 1011 course, and the GO Center. Several respondents indicated how these programs provided resources, programs and services to help first-generation students accomplish goals and success in the classroom. Knowing where to go for assistance was a crucial part of that success. Research has shown that overall results suggest that a student's entering characteristics play an important role in persistence to graduation, but potential for success can be increased with the addition of a first-year programs/events (Mugenda, 2000; Swanson, 2003).

The participant's perceptions of the influence of college mentors were identified as a factor relating to persistence of first-generation students. Respondents identified faculty and staff at the university as individuals who have made a positive impact on first-generations students. They have served as role models and mentors to these students, encouraging them to complete their degrees and providing the guidance necessary to reach their goals. They have developed strong relationships with these students and have supported them both academically and emotionally. One participant commented: "I've developed a social network here at TWU. I've developed some good relationships with faculty and administrators here. Many have offered a lot of advice."

Among the significant findings within this theme was the overall impact of Learning Communities. Respondents singled out two particular housing communities. They were Leadership Connection and the Neighbors Educated Together (NET) programs. Many participants described how this setting creates a sense of connectedness between their home community and school life, and between themselves, peers, and instructors. One particular comment summarized this experience: "The NET program was awesome. I really got support with understanding college life. And taking courses together with my friends really helped me to learn how to really study."

The findings of this theme can also be linked with results of the comprehensive National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) conducted by Texas Woman's University during spring 2007. The NSSE is specifically designed to assess the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience (Kuh, 2001). The main content of the NSSE instrument, *The College Student Report*, represents student behaviors that are highly correlated with many desirable learning and personal development outcomes of college. Responding to the survey requires that students reflect on their college experience.

In the TWU administration of the NSSE, a statistically sound sample of first-year and senior students was asked to rate their experience through a web-based questionnaire. Fifty-one percent of the students at TWU who were selected to participate in the survey responded. Regarding this theme, respondents perceived TWU as a supportive campus environment because the university is committed to their success as well as the working and social relations among different groups on campus. Some of the comments by

participants supported this: "I found the staff, advisors, and administration to be helpful. I have referred many students through word-of-mouth to TWU," and "Texas Woman's University is an excellent school that provides their student body with the chance to advance not only academically but also personally and socially. I have been fortunate to attend this university and would recommend it to anyone looking for a four year college." These results are confirmed by the findings of the current study.

Theme 3: Self-expectations and external support systems. This study found that self-expectations and external support systems had a significant influence on first-generation student experiences at TWU. Participants in the study were asked about other factors they perceived contribute to the success and persistence of first-generations students here at TWU. Most of the respondents reported that these two factors played a key role in the persistence of participants. Many felt first-generation students were influenced by their own drive to succeed. Others indicated that access to a strong network outside of the university community is very important to the persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Friends, mentors and role models constitute effective external support systems.

Previous literature emphasizes that a student's own commitment to an academic goal has been identified as one of the single most important determinants of college persistence (Bandura, 1997; Ramist, 1981; Schunk, 1990). Many participants in this study felt that first-generation students take pride in the grades they made and worked hard to maintain the grades that they earned in high school. Respondents spoke of dedication and determination to do well academically. Many motivated themselves just as

their parents had instructed them to do while growing up. Others understood that earning high grades would afford them the opportunity of attending graduate school or having additional opportunities.

Consistent with previous research (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Lango, 1995), several participants emphasized the importance of external relationships on student persistence. The successful first-generation student at TWU has a network of friends with similar backgrounds and interests. Some participants remained in touch with high school teachers/counselors and other educated people who benefited from college or who served as role models. Participants spoke of the affective support provided by these sources. The emotional support was most valued by participants because it gave them the determination to continue their education. Many described the encouragement they received to continue their education. While the majority of research has been limited to the influence of peers within college, associations with peers who are not students proved to be important to some first-generation students in this study. Participants in the current study described how neighborhood friends and extended family emphasized the importance of continuing their education. One participant described summarized this: "Old friends in my neighborhood. Even though some of them are not in college, they are supportive."

In this study, the significance of role models and mentors inspired first-generation students at TWU to continue their education. Because their parents had never attended college, students were unfamiliar with what college was about. Participants described how adult mentors and role models offered guidance because they had once been college

students themselves. Consistent with the results of this study, Bandura's (1977) theory of observational learning argues that observers watch models performing responses, which embody a certain principle. Several respondents reported that former high school mentors still served as role models in their life. One student commented: "The youth minister at my church also majored in Education. So he talks to me about teaching."

Theme 4: Financial resources. The study found that financial resources, particularly with regards to institutional financial aid, had an influence on the persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Although students reported working off campus and familial support as important resources, the majority of participants stated state and federal grants, loans, and college work-study improved student persistence.

Prior research suggests that the institutional financial aid can be viewed as a form of "courtship" during the recruitment process, thus strengthening students' feelings of belongingness and commitment to the institution (Hu & Hossler, 2000; St. John, 2004). The benefits of some type of financial resource, when these were available, were significant in terms of enabling the students to continue their education. Without this benefit, most of the students would have been hard pressed to even contemplate pursuit of their degree. For some of the students, there were benefits to finding employment on campus. Those who held college work-study positions in several departments felt more integrated into the university environment than those who worked off-campus.

The effect of institutional aid was also found to be a significant influence on these student's persistence experience. The majority of participants received some type financial assistance through TWU's Financial Aid office. The results also raise the

possibility that the average amount of institutional aid rewarded to students may help explain campus retention and graduation rates. St John (2004) found that financial aid has an indirect effect on the level of student engagement. He posits that financial aid reduces the need for students to work, thus allowing them more time to be engaged in the collegiate experience.

As reported by respondents, financial resources are important to the persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Some of the comments by participants summarize this: "I was really worried about paying for college. During my first year, I found out student financial aid is available. You just have to ask questions and know where to look," and "Without receiving consistent financial aid awards, I could not attend TWU." The availability of funds, as a factor, is consistent with the literature that indicates that financial assistance is a crucial factor contributing to college persistence (Martin, 2004). Being able to pay for college related expenses unburdens a student of financial hardship and strengthens one's commitment to an institution given that it provides the financial means to remain in college.

Theme 5: Institutional fit. Among the noteworthy findings in this study was the overall influence of institutional fit on first-generations students' persistence at TWU. This factor was a strong theme, as evidenced by numerous references by participants. A student who feels as though he or she 'fits in" the campus environment is more likely to persist than one who does not. Several participants in the current study reported a sense of overall satisfaction and belonging at TWU. This appeared to enhance the level of commitment to TWU. Tinto' college fit model notes that the greater the congruence

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between the values, goals and attitudes of the students and those of the college, as well as between the students' capabilities and the college's demands, the more likely a student is to persist in college.

First-generation student relationships with faculty, staff and peers were primary indicators of institutional fit. "Positive," "trust," "comfortable," "welcomed," "pretty cool," "connected," "helpful," "friendly," "encouraged," and "receptive" were some of the descriptors used by participants in describing the climate at TWU.

For many of the participants, support networks filled an important void in their college experiences and in some instance provided a refuge for students. The kind of climate the respondents described as enhancing their persistence was one in which they had frequent opportunities to engage in conversations with university personnel and peers who were able to challenge and extend their network. The climate at TWU was a central indicator of the overall well being of first-generation students and may well be an important indicator of the experience that future students could expect.

Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that institutional fit is a strong predictor of college students' intent to persist, and ultimately student persistence itself. Some of the comments by participants supported this: "If you know there is somebody out there to help you, you're going to get motivated to do it. I felt that way about TWU. You always have somebody to call on here no matter what," and "Because TWU is small, you're able to have more opportunities to talk with different people about what you need in order to do well in college." The findings in this theme of the study are consistent with the literature that notes that institutional fit is a precursor or predictor of student-persistence

behavior.

The findings of this theme can also be linked with outcomes of TWU's NSSE report. Similar to the results from this study, many respondents who completed the NSSE survey reported an enjoyable college experience at TWU. Some of the comments by participants supported this: "I have never felt more at home. I consider TWU to be my second family. They have been supportive and helpful in helping me to set my expectations and achieve my goals," and "This school is great because of the smaller classes. There is definitely more one-on-one available with teachers."

Theme 6: Motivation to complete degree. Of central influence in several of the participant's experiences was the motivation to complete their degree. In this study, respondents reported being motivated by something or someone contributed to the persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Motivating factors related to the completion of a degree, financial stability, and access to greater opportunities. Being the first in one's family to earn a degree is a motivating factor for some first-generation students. In addition, earning a degree to encourage others may also serve as motivation to persist.

Studies suggest that freshmen are highly motivated to complete college (Noel & Levitz, 2006). Out of the 97,626 freshman surveyed over the summer of 2006, more than 95 percent expressed a strong desire to complete college. Consistent with this finding, participants repeatedly emphasized completing a degree as a prominent part of persistence and motivating first-generation students to continue their education. Some of the comments by participants supported this: "My siblings are really excited that their

brother's in college. I want to graduate to show them that it can be done," and "I want to be a professional. Most good jobs now require a college degree," and "I want to complete my Nursing degree. With my diploma, I will have more opportunities." While it is clear that investment in a college degree, especially for those students in the lowest income brackets, is a financial burden, the long-term benefits to individuals as well as to society at large, appear to far outweigh the costs.

Theme 7: Cultural identity. As evidenced by numerous references within the interviews, a major emergence from this study was how a positive attitude toward one's own ethnic group, a sense of ethnic pride and ethnic belonging, as well as a strong sense of group membership is meaningful and plays an important role in the persistence of first-generation students at TWU. Studies suggest that this is especially important for students who are first-generation college attendees, or are from a cultural or minority background (Landry, 2002).

In addition, Kuh and Love (2000) reported that students can become comfortable in the college environment without abandoning the values and norms of their home communities. In this study, participants described the need to maintain connections to their cultural heritages and traditions in order to succeed in college. Those respondents found that first-generation students perceived this cultural connection as providing essential nourishment that assisted them in dealing with racism, cultural isolation, and other adversity they experienced at TWU. These findings suggest that cultural connections play a much larger role in minority college student persistence than simply facilitating social integration into the university.

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Departments such as Intercultural Services can provide minority students with a place to meet, retain pride in culture, and share common interests while they receive support through counseling, tutoring, and mentoring. Through such meeting places, TWU provides academic and social activities and personal counseling that affirm the cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds of minority students. These types of resource centers are an important way for students to connect and gain social support through interaction with staff who act as mentors and with other students with whom they share a sense of identity.

This theme was a consistent finding in previous research. Some researchers believe that students can honor their ethnic and background identity and still succeed in college. Tierney (1992) believes the goal of persistence efforts is not to figure out how to help students integrate into the system, but to change the system through experiences that validate and respect students' individual identities. Rendon (1994) proposes that this could be done through "validating experiences." Consistent with previous findings, participants in this study described incidents in which some individual validating agent confirmed a student's worth and identity. Validating agents can be individuals in or out of the classroom, who made use of the interpersonal and academic validation. These individuals may have taken an interest in students or provided encouragement and supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment.

The findings of the present study regarding cultural influences support previous research on the role it plays with persistence of first-generation students. Some of the comments by participants supported this: "The department secretary in my major is

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Hispanic. It is nice to see someone who looks like you, and who is able to offer trusting advice and support," and "I did not experience any culture shock here at TWU. I saw plenty of students who looked like me and who were first-generations students."

Universal Theme: Persisting and attaining a college degree is a life-changing event. A final theme that emerged throughout the current study was the experience of persisting and attaining a college degree as a life changing event. Data analysis resulted in the identification of 1 universal theme. From Spradley's perspective (1979), universal themes can be utilized by researchers to understand behavior that exists across cultural subsystems or domains of behavior or knowledge that emerge from the data. This universal theme represents the commonalties among participants in this study.

As this study unfolded, this particular theme emerged and could be applied to numerous situations and also had a high degree of generality. In many ways, participants thought of themselves as a role model or pioneer. Students felt that they were forging a new path in life not only themselves, but also for their families. It's precisely that idea of stepping into uncharted terrain and making a safe way for others to follow that makes first-generations college students' great role models.

The ordeal of being a first-generation student is just one part; the second part requires that student to be an inspiration for others. Many participants spoke of serving as role models to family members, younger siblings, peers, and other young students who wish to go to college but don't know how. Several spoke these words with sense of selflessness. Several felt they could provide invaluable tips, advice, experiences, and knowledge for many aspiring college students.

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Others described how by attending college, other family members looked up to them or saw that person as a positive influence to someone younger or older, and a guide to someone's future. Many success stories of the first-generation student at TWU show how they have met the challenges of higher degree education that they pursued. Nothing succeeds like success and so success stories provide both inspiration and encouragement to the current generation.

Summaries of some participant's comments included: "I am not only in college for me, but for my mom, dad, grandmother, brothers and sisters, etc. I am here for everyone in my family that wanted to go to college, but for some reason or another was not able to attend. I am setting the stage for others who will follow me," and "By going to college, I am proud to set an example not only for my siblings, but also for my cousins. I'm not only the first person in my family to attend college; I am also the first woman to pursue higher education. I do this not only for my future and myself, I do it for my father and mother because I want them to know their struggle was not in vain." For many participants, this type of universal theme had an intuitive effect of reinforcing the resolve to persist.

<div align="center">Conclusions</div>

A primary focus of the study was the concept of first-generation university student persistence as it was perceived by the participants. In summary, participants described their individual experiences of being a first-generation student at TWU. Faculty and administrators also described their observations and/or direct interaction of working

with first-generation students at TWU. Perceptions of persistence in relation to this experience were described from a variety of perspectives, yielding common themes.

Based on the results of the qualitative research questions, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Strong parental and familial encouragement or support for the first-generations student to attend and complete college relate positively to student persistence.

2. Student commitment to personal values and goals, including academic and occupational goals, was found to be an important factor in student persistence.

3. Commitment to college and completion of degree are positively related to student persistence.

4. A positive self concept, together with the availability of an external support person was found to be positively related to persistence.

5. The genuineness and strength of faculty and staff members' interest in and concern for students and for helping them relates positively to student persistence.

6. Residing on campus (particularly in learning communities) can be a factor in persistence among first-generation students. The quality of students' interpersonal relationship with roommates, peers, and faculty in this setting relate positively to persistence.

7. The availability, quality, and use of institutional support systems such as miscellaneous departments/personnel, campus programs/events, and college mentors tend to promote persistence.

8. The frequency and quality of interaction with the peer group, as well as the kind and compatibility of student peer group lifestyles and values, all affect student retention.

9. When student attitudes, values, and lifestyles are congruent with those expressed by the college, student development and persistence are facilitated.

10. Student participation in student services such as effective orientation, counseling, and learning assistance positively affects persistence.

11. Financial aid (grants, scholarships, and loans) has a positive influence on persistence.

12. Student employment was found to have a positive effect on persistence.

13. Cultural influences affect first-generation students' level of persistence. Seeing themselves reflected in the academic environment helps to avoid feelings of marginality.

<div align="center">Implications for Policy and Practice</div>

The results of the study present several implications for both policy and practice. Implications are offered for parents, teachers, counselors, schools, college administrators, educators, and policymakers to cultivate persistence among first-generation students.

1. Institutional support was a consistent theme in the study findings. These systems must be available to assist students in developing a network of

academic, social, and personal support. Most students, especially those in the first year of college, require some form of support. Some may require academic assistance, while others may need social or personal support. For others, it may mean finding a "safe haven" in a sea of unfamiliar peers. Support may be provided in structured forms such as orientations, freshman seminars, learning support programs (learning communities, tutoring, supplemental instruction), mentoring programs, and any other program that provide students with an opportunity to work in more friendly settings where they are able to build relationships with students, faculty and staff. I would recommend that colleges and universities share these strategies, best practices, evaluation, and research on retention and completion efforts implemented at the campus level.

2. Every effort should be made to employ qualified staff, faculty, and administrators who mirror the demographics of the institution's student population. Such mentors and/or role models are critical to the persistence of first-generation university students. Many first-generation college students have left the comfort of home to be in an environment where they would need to seek affirmation of their ethnicity, if they desire it. From family, friends, and the community, they have learned the messages about the role their ethnicity plays in where they came from or their identity. In some cases, these ideas are challenged when they enter the world of college life where they will begin to answer the questions, "Who am I?" and, "Where am I going?"

Through mentors and/or role models, postsecondary institutions can provide personal counseling that affirm the cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds of minority students.

3. For institutions, all practioners involved must work diligently to ensure that (a) the appropriated services are in place to assist first-generation students, and (b) the institution intrusively identifies and serves students that are in need of these services. With regards to the former, institutions should conduct an audit of what they offer and whom they need to serve. Institutions must reflect on what they currently offer and decide whether these programs or strategies fit the bill. Second, they must find what the student body needs in terms of academic and social support, especially for students who have the profiles of school leavers. The third step is to then match what the institution offers with student needs and see what fits and what doesn't. That's when identifying new possibilities enter the process. This could possibly initiate discussion on developing a local model of student success to help Texas Woman's University's efforts to retain first-generation college students.

4. For college administrators, the financial ramifications of student persistence are an area of concern. As state support has fallen and tuition increased at public institutions, campus administrators should become more interested in student persistence and graduation rates. Besides financial incentives based on the tuition students pay, there are other reasons for university leaders to be concerned about the rates at which students persist or graduate from their

institution. Public policymakers have also turned their attention to persistence rates and to graduation rates. Some states have considered using graduation rates as one measure of institutional effectiveness for determining levels of state support. Perhaps more importantly, proposals have been made as part of the current re-authorization of the federal Higher Education Act to include measures of institutional effectiveness as part of the reporting requirements for college and universities. Graduation rates are one of the most often mentioned possible measures.

Where to start? One suggestion for administrators is to continue to increase the quality of learning. A significant proportion of students who do not complete a degree are in good academic standing (Adelman, 2004). They don't need institutions to lower their standards. They need someone to make sure they stay on track. TWU could increase the number of first-generation graduates by just making sure that those who have completed at least 60 hours and are in good standing actually complete a degree.

5. Another suggestion would be in addition to base institutional funding that rewards institutions for students' completing the courses for which they enroll, incentives for program completion (or other measures of student success) can be added and reinforced through various mechanisms: primary among these are institutional rewards for continuous improvement in the numbers of students graduated. Variations can provide special incentives for

graduating students from particular subpopulations-such as first-generation

students, transfer students, or students enrolled in high-demand programs.

6. Higher education leaders should develop a plan with concrete goals for

    improvement. If something is really important, and it needs to be better, then

    we have to start by making a public, coordinated, and vigorous commitment to

    improving it, with specific, verifiable goals for success. Administrators need

    to send a clear message to every level of their institutions that improving

    graduation will be based through outcome based assessment. Perhaps a

    graduation rate taskforce could conduct a comprehensive evaluation of

    strategies and practices at each campus, including comparisons to peer

    institutions with greater rates of success. State, system, and institution-level

    higher education governing boards should also tackle this issue head-on and

    develop specific graduation rate improvement goals—both for all students and

    for the under-represented minorities whose graduation rates often lag—against

    which institutions are measured.

7. Within the text of accountability, state governments should strengthen

    incentive programs that provide institutions resources to develop and pilot

    innovative programs designed to improve, over time, student learning and

    persistence, especially for low-income and first-generation students. As they

    do so, states should establish support systems that provide institutions

    information about and support for the development of innovative projects. The

    results of funded programs should be highlighted on state sponsored websites

and widely shared among state institutions so that institutions can learn from one another.

8. The cost of higher education is increasing far faster than the ability of people to pay, and federal aid programs haven't kept pace. The federal government should rework current financial aid policies so as to promote the types of access that further persistence. Since an absolutely basic requirement for program completion is students' ability to sustain their enrollments, college affordability is a necessary condition. One means of ensuring affordability is to sustain a policy of low tuition, at least within one sector of the public higher education system.

   Low tuition, in and of itself, does not guarantee college affordability for all students. The ability of students to pay the associated costs of attendance is also at issue. Regardless of tuition levels, some form of student aid that removes economic barriers to participation and persistence is a necessity if students are to complete academic programs.

   Incentive mechanisms that encourage students who complete their programs of study and move on to further study or careers in critical need areas can complement need-based financial aid programs that remove economic barriers to participation and persistence. Besides TWU continuing to improve affordability, I would suggest incentives to students to complete a bachelor's degree "on-time" in four years (e.g., change a loan into a grant for last year or reduce tuition for senior year/last semester of college).

Strengths of the Study

The strengths of this study relate to the theoretical framework and the phenomenological qualitative research approach. Although previous studies have addressed student persistence, and some have specifically addressed persistence as recognized by first-generation university students, the current study looked at persistence perceived by both first-generation university students and the faculty or staff members working with first-generation students at TWU. Furthermore, the researcher provided an opportunity through in-depth individual interviews and focus groups for participants to reflect on different factors of persistence in relation to their perceptions of effectiveness with first-generation students.

The approach directed the process as each participant revealed their experiences as a first-generation student or their observations and/or direct interaction of working with first-generation students at TWU. Quantitative research instruments would not have provided the type and depth of information as was obtained in this qualitative process. A final strength of the study was the researcher's ability to incorporate the review of literature with emerging themes from the interview data.

Limitations of the Study

In qualitative studies, generalizabilty of the findings is related to the potential for gaining new understanding from the descriptions and concepts developed (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Generalizations from this study are limited, in that it was an exploratory, qualitative study. The findings represent the perceptions of the participants in the study only. In addition, this study does not seek to provide data for all higher education

institutions. The responsibility of utilizing and drawing conclusions belongs to the reader (Bogden & Bilkin, 1998). The intent of this study was to provide a perspective on student persistence at a specific higher education institution.

Areas for Further Research

The results of this study, together with data from existing literature, suggest a number of areas for future research. This small-scale qualitative inquiry into the specific nature of persistence on first-generation university students is a first step toward increased understanding of a complex, evolving relationship as students make their way to and through college. In this section, I will discuss some possible lines of inquiry.

One important suggestion for future research, as recommended by Glaser (1983), is that the findings could be enhanced by using a combination of research methods to examine the same variables. Quantitative research paradigms could be used to complement the qualitative data and produce a more complete understanding of first-generations students.

Furthermore, this study was conducted utilizing qualitative research methods and a small sample which limits the ability to generalize findings to the larger first-generation population. The study did not capture the experiences of first-generation students transferring from community colleges or other four year institutions. Further research in these areas is warranted.

Another suggestion for future research is for a replica of this study to be conducted at community colleges. As mentioned previously, the findings of this study were limited by the demographics of the participants—namely, undergraduate students

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and faculty/staff at a four-year public university. Expanding the implementation to include other colleges at the undergraduate level will provide additional valuable information.

In addition, another theory foundation may reside in Claude Steele's Stereotype Threat Theory (1997). The basic premise of his theory is that a person's "social identity"—defined as group membership in categories such as age, gender, religion, and ethnicity—has significance when "rooted in concrete situations." Steele defines these situations as "identity contingencies"—settings in which a person is treated according to a specific social identity. Subsequent studies might pursue the question of what group identity/stereotypes exists for first-generation college students?

Finally, future research could compare results regarding factors that influence persistence of first-generation versus non first-generation students. These studies could be conducted to examine the differences and similarities in factors affecting persistence between two types of students as well as the strategies successful non first-generations college students employ. This would also provide insight into the unique needs of first-generation students, assuming such differences exist.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

This chapter summarized the findings of the study, placing themes within relevant theoretical and research literature. Conclusions were listed, along with implications for individuals, families, and professionals. The strengths and limitations of the study were given. Finally, recommendations for future research in the persistence of first-generation university students were offered.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flyer

Pathfinders: Identifying the factors influencing first-generation college students' persistence at Texas Woman's University

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors influencing first-generation (those students whose parents have not attended college and/or have not earned a bachelor's degree) that have persisted here at TWU.

The study is looking for participants who began at Texas Woman's University as first-year students and having successfully completed 45 or more credits hours. The respondent must currently be an enrolled student (full or part-time) and should describe herself or himself as a first-generation student.

Participants will be those who voluntarily agree to a face-to-face interview. If you have questions or would like to participate in the research, you may contact me at [   ] or [   ].

Samuel Wheeler
Researcher, Doctoral Dissertation
Department of Family Sciences
Texas Woman's University
Denton, TX 76204

APPENDIX B

Letter of Introduction to Faculty/Staff

February 14, 2008

Dear Faculty or Staff:

My name is Samuel Wheeler, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Family Sciences. For my dissertation, I am researching the factors influencing first-generation college students' persistence here at Texas Woman's University. Besides individual interviews with current first-generation students, I am also seeking faculty and administrators to participate in a group interview (focus group). The information gathered from each method will be examined for possible themes and patterns.

I am requesting your assistance to participate during the Spring 2008 semester. I plan to hold three to four short focus groups. Each group interview will last no longer than one hour and will be held on the Denton campus. The meeting will be audio taped. Your participation is voluntarily, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. A code number, rather than your name, will be assigned to each participant and used on the audiotape and transcription. I will take all possible measures to ensure the confidentiality of all participants. My research may give you and your colleagues' insight into how TWU might improve on student engagement and retention.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk with you and answer any questions you may have. Please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone at [   ] or e-mail at [   ] to schedule a convenient day for you to participate in one of the focus groups. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Samuel Wheeler

APPENDIX C

Letter of Introduction to Students

February 14, 2008

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Samuel Wheeler, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Family Sciences here at Texas Woman's University. I am interested in identifying the factors influencing first-generation college students' persistence at TWU. I will be conducting a research study involving students whose parents have not attended college and/or have not earned a bachelor's degree. The study is looking for participants who began at TWU as first-year students and having successfully completed 45 or more credits hours. You must currently be an enrolled student (full or part-time) and should describe yourself as a first-generation student. You are invited to participate in the study if this description fits you. Your participation will provide valuable contributions for a better understanding of successful first-generation students who have persisted at TWU.

The research project will involve participants completing a demographic questionnaire and an individual interview. The interviews will last a maximum of one hour. The meetings will be audio taped and no names will be used on the tape. The information shared in the interview will be confidential and all data will be anonymous. The following steps will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data: assigning a code to responses, keeping data in a secure place, erasing audio tapes after completion of the study, and shredding transcriptions one year following the completion of the study. Your participation in the research will be voluntary and you may terminate your participation at any time. A summary of the findings will be available if you are interested.

Please contact me at [   ] or [   ] to arrange an interview at a time and location of your convenience. Thank you in advance for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Samuel Wheeler

APPENDIX D

Consent to Participate in Research Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: Pathfinders: Identifying the factors influencing first-generation college students'
            persistence at Texas Woman's University

Investigator: Samuel Wheeler
Advisor: Mary Bold, Ph.D.

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding first-generation students at Texas
Woman's University. This study is being conducted for Samuel Wheeler's doctoral dissertation at
Texas Woman's University. The purpose of the study is to determine the factors influencing first-
generation college students' persistence at Texas Woman's University. Your participation with
this study will help add to the existing literature and more importantly, provide a greater
understanding of the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of first-generations students.

Research Procedures

For this study, the investigator will conduct in-depth individual interviews with students and
focus group interviews with full-time faculty/administrators. These interviews will take place at a
public area agreed upon by you and the investigator. You will be audiotaped during the interview.
The purpose of the audiotaping is to provide a transcription of the information discussed in the
interview and to assure the accuracy of the reporting of that information. Your maximum total
time commitment in the study is approximately one hour.

Potential Risks

Potential risks related to your participation in the study include fatigue and physical or emotional
discomfort during your interview. To alleviate fatigue, you may take a break (or breaks) during
the interview as needed. If you experience physical or emotional discomfort regarding the
interview questions, you may stop answering any of these questions at any time.

Another possible risk to you as result of your participation in this study is release of confidential
information. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that it is allowed by law. The
interview will take place in a public location agreed upon by you and the researcher. A code
number, rather than your name, will be assigned to each participant and used on the audiotape and
transcription. Only the investigator and the transcriber will have access to the tapes. The tapes,
hard copies of the transcriptions, and the computer diskettes containing the transcription text files
will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in

                                                        Participant Initials _____
                                                            Page 1 of 3

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the investigator's home office. The tapes and transcription diskettes will be erased and the hard copies of the transcriptions will be shredded 1 year after completion of the data collection. Because email will be used to communicate with the participants, there is a potential loss of confidentiality through all email transactions. Participant names will not be used on dissertation, presentations, or publications. Any identifiable data will be kept separate from other data.

A third potential risk related to your participation in this study is risk of coercion. Individuals have the right to decline to participate in the study. In addition, potential participants will only be asked once to participate in the study and may choose to stop participating at any time.

A fourth potential risk to you as a result of your participation in this study is risk of boredom. Participation in the study is voluntary and you will be able to discontinue or terminate participation at any time.

The researcher will try to prevent any problem that could happen as a result of this research. You should let the researchers know immediately if there is a problem and they will help you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

Participation and Benefits

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary, and you can discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. The only direct benefit of this study to you is that at the completion of the study a summary of the results will be mailed to you upon request.*

Questions Regarding the Study

If you have any questions about the research study, you may ask the researchers; their phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (940) 898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@TWU.EDU. You will be provided a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

You have read the contents of this consent. You have been given a copy of the dated and signed consent form.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

*If you would like to receive a summary of the results of the study, please provide an address to which this summary should be sent:

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX E

Question Guide for Student Interviews

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction: I am interested in learning about the persistence of first-generation students here at TWU. The following questions are designed as a framework to encourage you to share your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. There are no right or wrong answers. You may take a break at any time. I will be audio taping throughout the interview. Do you have any questions before we start?

Questions

1. Tell me about your experience as a first or second year student at TWU.

2. What were the most important reasons for your persistence at TWU?

3. Which institutional support did you find supportive or non-supportive as a first generation student at TWU?

4. Apart from institutional support systems, what other factors do you perceive contributed to your success and persistence here at TWU?

5. What was your financial situation like during your first few years of college? What type of financial support was most important to your persistence at TWU?

6. What influence did campus climate and/or culture have on your persistence as a first generation student at TWU?

7. What goals do you have for yourself? What motivates you to continue with your education?

8. Would you like to add a final comment on one particular thing that you heard today that was really important to our discussion?

If participants show reluctance in answering the questions or do not provide enough information, the researcher will use prompts to gain additional information. Prompts may include:

1. Tell me more about that.

2. Please give me some examples.

3. Would you like to add anything else?

Conclusion:

Thank you for your time. Please let me know if you have questions or concerns.

APPENDIX F

Question Guide for Faculty/Staff Focus Groups

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Introduction: I am interested in learning about the persistence of first-generation students here at TWU. The following questions are designed as a framework to encourage you to share your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. There are no right or wrong answers. You may take a break at any time. I will be audio taping throughout the interview. Do you have any questions before we start?

Questions

1. Tell me about your experiences with first generation students here at TWU.

2. What are some of the most important reasons why first generation students have persisted at TWU?

3. What institutional assistance and/or resources do you feel first-generation students find supportive or non-supportive?

4. Apart from institutional support systems, what other factors do you perceive contribute to first generation student success and persistence here at TWU?

5. To what extent do you feel campus climate and/or culture plays a role on the persistence of first generation students at TWU?

6. In your experience, what role do you perceive financial support plays in the persistence of first-generation students at TWU?

7. As a faculty or staff member, what do you feel motivates first generation students to continue with their education?

8. Would you like to add a final comment on one particular thing that you heard today that was really important to our discussion?

If participants show reluctance in answering the questions or do not provide enough information, the researcher will use prompts to gain additional information. Prompts may include:

1. Tell me more about that.

2. Please give me some examples.

3. Would you like to add anything else?

Conclusion:

Thank you for your time. Please let me know if you have questions or concerns.

APPENDIX G

Demographics Survey Sheet

Demographics Information

Please read each question and provide your response. You do not need to put your name on this demographic sheet.

1. What is your gender?

   o Male
   o Female

2. What is your academic classification?

   o Sophomore
   o Junior
   o Senior

3. How do you describe yourself?

   o American Indian or Alaska Native
   o Asian
   o Black or African American
   o Hispanic or Latino
   o Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   o White
   o Other: _____

4. How many credit hours have you earned at TWU? _____

5. Are you attending part-time or full time (check one)?

   _____ Part-time (11 hours or less per semester)

   _____ Full-time (12 hours or more per semester)

7. What is your current major? _____

8. What is your GPA? _____

9. What are your academic goals? (Check all the apply)

   o Complete Bachelor's Degree
   o Complete Master's Degree
   o Complete Ph.D.

- o Complete J.D.
- o Complete M.D.
- o Other (Please specify) _____

10. Are you currently employed?

- o Yes
- o No

11. If yes, how many hours per week do you work? _____

12. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities (i.e., campus organizations, sports, church, volunteer, etc.)?

- o Yes
- o No

If you answered yes to the previous question, please specify the activities in which you are involved: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

13. What is your age? _____

Thank you!

APPENDIX H

Investigator's Reflection

INVESTIGATOR'S REFLECTION

This section is a reflection of my thoughts and impressions as I set out upon my own journey through this study. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, reflexivity is an awareness of the ways in which a researcher, as an instrument in research with a particular social identity and background, has an impact on the research process. The discourse that follows allows the reader to understand the position of the researcher as well as the lens through which he viewed the contributions of participants. Having access to this information allows the readers to make their own postulations, putting into perspective the context in which the findings are presented within this study.

My story begins during the week in which the first initial individual interviews were scheduled. As I arrived on campus the day of the first interview, I began thinking about how far the project had come from the inaugural stage of recruiting students for the project. After following all the procedures related to student recruitment, I had been a little apprehensive of how many students would respond to my invitation to participate in the study. I was pleasantly surprised when after just a few days of recruiting, several students had either emailed or telephoned to volunteer their time for this project.

I was determined to do everything possible to insure that the participants would show that first week. After confirming their participation, I had sent emails and reminded them the day before we were scheduled to meet. There was some last minute rearranging of schedules, however I managed to conduct ten individual interviews during that first week. For this, I was proud and encouraged.

I met Sharon (all names in this paper are pseudonyms) in the library and utilized one of the study rooms to conduct the interview. What struck me about this interview as Sharon's openness to my interview questions. After asking the initial question, there was really no need for me to use any type of prompting. It was interesting to hear how her transition from high school to college. She never hesitated when explaining how with every challenge that had been thrown her way at TWU, she had worked through it with her family and support from the university. I was impressed with Sharon because her story brought back memories of how I persisted during my undergraduate years. With this being such a positive first interview, I felt excited and looked forward to meeting with the next student.

Once I concluded my interview with Sharon, I waited around the library for the next interview. I was becoming comfortable with the library and study room environment. My second interview was with Rubi. She too was very open and described how she felt like she really fit in at TWU. Because of the campus size and small number of students, she felt that she could really get to know her peers and professors. I thought it was interesting because she echoed my initial impressions of the TWU campus.

My third interview was with Nikki, a student who was married and living in family housing on campus. I was impressed with her determination to succeed and graduate from college. Also impressive was her husband's support of her college education even though he himself was not enrolled in college.

James was the first male that I interviewed individually and was the first that had graduated from a local high school. He was talkative and very open about his persistence

at TWU. He also spoke of his friends kidding him about attending a "woman's" university. The way he described his experiences was humorous. It took me back to when I told my family that I would be enrolling at Texas Woman's University. They too assumed the university was only for women, and wondered why I wished to attend. I was pleased with the reasons James chose to come to TWU, and with his courage to not let the university name affect his decision.

Lauren was scheduled as my fifth interview. Numerous thoughts came to mind as I listened to Lauren. The first was in regards to the fact that she had traveled a significant distance to attend TWU. She was from Amarillo. Lauren stated that she had lived in the dorm, but that her parents had such a hard time with her being away from home. Even though they were supportive of her education, they hinted at her coming back home and attending a local school. My own biases made me feel as though her family should have considered Lauren's desire to venture out into the world. At the same time, I was pleased that their relationship was open enough as to not influence Lauren to abandon her goals.

Anna was my sixth interview. Anna was a local girl, having graduated from one of the area high schools. She told me that she had wanted to attend TWU since the 9th grade. Since middle school, she had visited both the local universities, and just felt that TWU was such a better fit for her. I was encouraged by her knowing at such an early age to know not only that she would go to college, but also the college that she would attend.

My seventh interview was with a student by the name of Erma. She spoke of overall experience at TWU as being positive, and especially of her positive experiences with her roommates. The way she described these experiences was humorous. It took me

back to my own college days and reminded me of the good times I had being on my own and living with someone other than a family member.

I met with my Robert for the eight interview. What stood out about Robert was his maturity beyond his years. He appeared to be a responsible young man who, when he spoke, sounded well beyond his 20 years of life. He was very courteous and stated that his father had died when he was 13 years old. Although he wasn't sure if that had anything to do with his demeanor, he felt that he had to grow up quicker and become more responsible after his father's passing. I admired Robert for his courage and setting an example for his younger brothers and sisters.

Diana described her family as being conservative, and initially did not want her to live on campus. Her father felt that she would be safer by staying at home and commuting to campus from Dallas. After visiting the campus/touring the dorm rooms and literally "begging," her father (and mother) decided that it would be OK for Diana to live on campus. She felt that this was a huge turning point with her parents. She felt that they finally were allowing her to grow, and not remain their little girl. I was touched by her story.

My tenth interview was with Lorena. She was a young mother who had become pregnant her senior year of high school. I was impressed with her determination to seek out her goal, despite what many would consider a significant barrier. Also impressive was her parent's support of her college education even though they did not complete high school.

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As I began my second week of individual interviews, I reflected on how smoothly the first week had gone. To my surprise, no student had cancelled or not showed up during the previous week. In addition, I had opportunities last week to confirm the schedule the focus groups and confirm the participants. So far, the project had gone smoothly.

Laura was my eleventh interview. She spoke of her family and how when she was younger and thinking of college, many family members were encouraging. They pushed the issue that when she got out of high school, she needed to go to college. I commend her family for supporting her with her education. This brought back memories of when I was in middle school. Even though no one in my family attended college, they were still setting a good example for me by explaining the importance of having some type of degree. I hear of many stories where young people were able to attend college because of that parental or familial support. Laura mentioned earlier that having that family encouragement made it that much more of a reality to seek an education.

Lisa was my twelfth interview. The initial thought that came to my mind as I listened to Lisa was her resilience. She explained her need to always have some type of part-time job while in college. She explained that her financial aid award was never enough to cover all living expenses. During some academic years, and depending on the type of job, she ended up working two to three part time jobs. A part of me began thinking of the rising college tuition/costs and I wondered would our elected officials make true on their promise to make college more affordable for every qualified student. I

admired Lisa in that the lack of money was not preventing her from seeking a college degree.

My thirteenth interview was with Gloria. She was very bubbly and excited to share her thoughts of being a first-generation student at TWU. What impressed me most about Gloria was her description of her role models. She explained that when it came to education, she always felt more confident after she had identified a role model in that particular setting. For example in high school, her teachers and counselors inspired and challenged her to do better. Her counselor at school always called her to talk about college and where she wanted to go. She went on to say that she choose these individuals as role models because she could relate to them given their similar backgrounds and Hispanic origins. The same scenario occurred at TWU. Since arriving, she has identified several Hispanic mentors and role models who have been supportive of her attending college. Again, I was intrigued by her description of her role models.

Norma was my fourteenth interview. She explained how even at a young age, she had decided to break the typical stereotype of a Mexican woman who marries at a young age. She went on to say how the motivation to attend college came from within. I was fascinated by this part of her story because it reminded me of my college days. There was no doubt that my mother supported my goal of attending postsecondary education. But she could only encourage and support me so much. The bottom line was that I had to take care of my part, which I saw as my own self-expectations. This played a huge role in motivating me to go to class, to ask questions, to find resources to pay for tuition, etc.

Going through these types of situations really helped my confidence and was indeed an eye-opening experience.

My fifteenth interview was with Juana. Two things really stood out during my listening to Juana. I discovered that her family was very important to her and that she was very thankful to them for supporting and believing in her throughout her struggles. I could hear the sincerity in her voice, and this really touched my heart. The second thought was the fact that she was proud to be a first-generation college student. She did not see it as hindering or shameful. She felt that coming from this background caused her to become more independent and to learn how to succeed on her own. I was so pleased to hear her express her opinion. It also made me want to know who she would become in the years ahead.

Rachael was my sixteenth interview. As with many of my other interviews, her parents had a profound respect for education. They supported her emotionally, even when they could not financially. Rachael explained how they had made sacrifices for her to go to school so she could make a better life with more opportunities. She went on to say how her college experience was a great opportunity to find out who she really was. She felt that in high school, her biggest difficulties were adjusting socially. Once she got to TWU, it was if she was a totally different person. She met many friends during her first semester. This was a familiar case with many of the other participants that I had spoken with that also gained more independence while in college.

My seventeenth interview was with Yvonne. My first impression of her was that she was very career-oriented. Even though obviously Yvonne did not come from a highly

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educated family, she was eager to explore graduate school and internship opportunities. She struck me as being highly motivated to do well and take advantage of her bachelor's degree and possibly continue on to law school. I immediately had a respect for her intelligence. I wondered what in Yvonne's environment led her to have such a value of higher education. Regardless, I was pleased to hear her opinion and that she was so focused on reaching her dreams.

Connie was my eighteenth interview. At first Connie seemed skeptical about the interview with me. She asked me more questions about the interview than the other students had. She wanted to make sure she understood the purpose of the study, and the reason why I was using the audiotapes. I explained the intention of the study and assured her that the tapes were only being used in order for me to transcribe the recording. Despite her initial hesitation with the interview, she shared her experiences openly. I was overwhelmed by her story.

My final interview was with Amanda. As with many of the previous students I had interviewed, she felt that she had taken the right path by choosing to attend TWU. She explained how although it was really difficult leaving home, coming to the university has helped her mature and grow as a person. Like so many of these students, Amanda explained how she had such a supportive group of people around her. She went on to say how many programs on campus introduced her to wonderful opportunities. Again, I was moved by how Amanda and how I saw many of the interviewed students as trailblazers and setting the right example of taking college seriously.

The scheduling and confirmation of the focus group participants was quite interesting. Initially, I had assumed that pretty much the majority of faculty and staff would accept my invitation. Adversely, I did not receive replies from many of the people who I had assumed would participate in the study. Nevertheless, several of the invitees did accept my invitation and I was able to schedule the focus groups over a three-day period. I had reserved a conference room. It was located in the Administration building, and was an excellent focus group type setting.

On the day of the first focus group, I prepared the room, assembling my audio recorder and paperwork. I felt a good type of nervousness and looked forward to meeting with the group. One of the participants arrived. I introduced myself, thanked her for coming, and offered her a bottle of water. I told her that we were waiting for three other participants. The other three members of the group arrived, and I felt a sigh of relief that all had showed up.

I tried to be very informal and make the participants as comfortable as possible. Prior to introductions, we joked around about food and it was suggested that I should have provided lunch. I started off with introductions, purpose of the focus group, and an explanation of the consent forms. After completing the paperwork, we began the interview. Many of the participants were forthcoming with information. As the facilitator, I made sure that all participants were involved and taking part in the discussion. I was very pleased with the way the focus group ran. I felt like I had captured a great deal of rich information. I also felt as though they enjoyed engaging in conversation. They left in good spirits.

The next day as before, I set up the room as I felt necessary and awaited the arrival of the next group. I was hoping that would be a repeat of the previous group in terms of all participants arriving on time. It was. As a matter of fact, many arrived early and it gave me an opportunity to create a casual setting.

As with the previous focus group, I was impressed with their willingness to share their experiences with me. As I listened to the group, common themes were becoming evident as they described experiences similar to yesterday's group. Our discussion concluded, and I thanked them for their time and candidness.

Just as I had done the previous day, I walked over to the Student Union for lunch. As I took notes from the focus group I had just completed, I noticed my surroundings and began to think about what the participants had shared with me. Some of their comments came to mind as I observed students going about their day on campus. I wondered to myself if some of these students were first-generation, and if they had or were experiencing some of the same situations that were shared in the focus group. As my lunch hour ended, I hoped that my third focus group would run as smoothly as the first two.

As I walked over the next day to set up for the third and final group, I noticed a person already seated at one of the conference room tables. I introduced myself, and happily discovered that the person was a focus group participant. We talked and I informed him that we were waiting for four other group members. As the scheduled time approached, three other members arrived. As the meeting time arrived, I became a little anxious when one person still had not showed up. As I excused myself to contact the

final participant, the person walked in and apologized for being late. I tried to act calm on the outside, but my heart was beating a sigh of relief. As with the other two focus groups, this one went fine. I was once again pleased with the way the focus group ran. The discussion was lively and many of the same themes and patterns became evident as they described their experiences with first-generation college students at TWU. The energy was high and I felt that each enjoyed engaging in conversation.

In concluding both the individual interviews and focus groups, I thought back to the information I have gathered. Did I do a good job of introducing the study topic? Did I craft the set of questions and their order to flow as natural conversation? Did I pick up on everything that the participants wanted me to hear? Did my own biases lead me to selectively hear what was of interest to me? I had asked myself comparable questions prior to the interviews in an effort not to influence the participants in any way or to impair the data collected.

The time spent with both students and faculty/staff was an exceptional experience for me. I was genuinely touched by their eagerness to share the details of their stories. I was so appreciative for the time each took out of their busy schedules to sit with me. The voices of these participants will remain in my soul and have contributed to the way in which I view higher education at TWU.