

Low Income, First Generation Community College Students:
Reflections on Their Success and Their Motivations

By

Ramona Marie Muñoz, LCSW

Associate of Applied Science
S.U.N.Y. Farmingdale
Farmingdale, NY
1991

Bachelor of Science
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York
1994

Master of Social Work
Washington University
Saint Louis, Missouri
2000

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Dissertation Approved:

Kerri Kearney, M.B.A., Ed.D.

Dissertation Adviser

C. Robert Davis, Ph.D.

Bernita Krumm, Ph.D.

Jesse Mendez, J.D., Ph.D.

Dr. Sheryl A. Tucker

Dean of the Graduate College

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CHAPTER I

Introduction to the Study

One of the biggest predictors of whether a student will graduate from college is completion of a higher education degree by at least one parent. The converse of this predictor is the fact that a student is more likely to drop out of college if a parent is not college educated (Bergerson, 2009). This scenario creates a continuation of class systems, as more often than not uneducated people have less access to securing professional employment, thus perpetuating the existence of the have and have-nots. The scenario also conflicts with the idea that America is meritocratic country where everyone has an equal chance at prosperity. Creating equitable educational experiences at community colleges is the focus of this research.

For populations frequently excluded from higher education, community colleges have often been publicized as mechanisms not only to allow entry, but to also provide the training necessary to earn a degree from a four-year college. This excluded population includes a diversity of students who have one or more of the following characteristics: low-income, first-generation, academically ill prepared, ethnic minority, part-time status, single parents, in need of academic remediation and non-traditional in age (Fike & Fike, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Karp, O’Gara & Hughes, 2008). These characteristics often are indicators of students who are least likely to graduate. Yet, despite these indicators,

some of these students will graduate from a community college, transfer to and graduate from a four-year college.

There are many reasons this segment of students should be studied. The more educated society is, the greater advantages given to the surrounding community. For example, voting behavior is influenced by one's level of education. The more educated a community is, the more the government is able to increase tax revenues, and in return, the financial stability of the community increases. Individually, education benefits the holder of a degree by increasing employment opportunities and salary (Ishitani, 2006; Perna, 2010; Seidman, 2005; Wells, 2008). In fact, a college graduate is projected to earn an additional 1.2 million dollars more over his or her lifetime than employees without a college degree (College Board, 2011; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Seidman, 2005). Earning just *some* college credits will increase employees earnings by nearly 17% (College Board, 2011). Furthermore, recent employment statistics provided by the United States Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that jobs requiring a college degree will increase from 29% of all jobs in 2000 to over 50% of all jobs during 2008-2018 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). One proven way to increase graduation rates, in order to meet the projected labor trends, is for students to begin college immediately after high school, and to start at a four-year college rather than a two-year college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Green, 2008; Ishitani, 2006). These two recommendations fall hand-in-hand with the concept of the "Educational Pipeline," defined as "the continuous progression from high school to college and into the workforce" with the intent of becoming "productive citizens who contribute to national, state, and local economies" (Green, 2006, p.23). In an ideal world, more students would continue their education after

completion of high school and eventually earn professional jobs; however, the reality is that this “pipeline” is not always a good fit for low-income, first-generation students, and they often find themselves trying to navigate their way outside the pipeline.

Definition of Terms

- Academic Resilience: “is the study of high educational achievement despite the presence of risk factors that normally portend low academic performance” (Gordan & Song 1994; Masten 1994; Morales & Trotman 2004, as cited in Morales, 2008, p. 33).
- Artifacts: “are things that societies and cultures make for their own use. They provide material evidence of the past by documenting and recording in the past. Artifacts can provide historical, demographic, and (sometimes) personal information about a culture, society, or people. Insights into how people lived, what they valued and believed, their ideas and assumptions, and their knowledge and opinions are revealed in artifacts” (Given, 2008, p. 25).
- Attrition: “leaving higher education before achieving one’s educational objectives” (Schuetz, 2008, p. 308).
- Community College: “any institution regionally accredited to award the Associate in Arts or the associate in science as its highest degree” (Cohen & Brewer, 2008, p. 5).
- Cultural Capital: According to Bourdieu (1986) the term cultural capital refers to the set of “linguistic and cultural competencies individuals usually inherit and sometimes learn” (Bellamy, 2009, p. 3). Karp and colleagues (2008) add that cultural capital “consists of those symbols that have been deemed by elites to be

valuable in a specific field. Cultural capital is transmitted within social classes, thereby limiting the access that lower class children have to high-status cultural knowledge”(p.6).

- Developmental Education: is defined as educational courses that are developed to help students gain the skills necessary to be college ready or proficient for college level courses (CCRC Working Paper No. 15, Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2009, p. 1).
- First-Generation College Student: A first-generation student is a student whose parents or guardians have not earned a four-year college degree (Davis. 2010).
- Internal Locus of Control: “refers to the belief that a response will or will not influence the attainment of a given reinforcement. Essentially, people can be categorized as either having an internal (they believe that they influence their environment) or external (believing their environment influences them) locus of control” (Rotter, 1966, as cited in Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. 9).
- Low-Income: Students identified as low-income are from families with incomes at 150% or less of the federal poverty levels (U.S. Department of Education, Federal Poverty Guidelines, <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/incomelevels.html>).
- Meritocracy: All people have a chance at economic and social success if only they prove themselves “worthy” enough (Karp et al., 2008).
- Non-Traditional Student in Community Colleges: Nontraditional students are frequently defined by age, specifically including students 25 years or older (Metzner & Bean, 1987). While broader definitions are abundant, this study will use 25 years of age or older as a criterion for identifying non-traditional students.

- Open Admissions: “Students neither need to compete for admission at a set time of the year nor demonstrate a level of academic proficiency to enroll” (Provasnik & Planty, 2008, p.10).
- Persistence: Used interchangeably with the definition “retention” and refers to students who maintain continuous enrollment from one semester to the next within the same institution (Geisler, 2007).
- Resilience: “Generally defined as the capacity to overcome, or the experience of having overcome, deleterious life events. Constructed implicitly it assumes that bad experiences tend to produce disturbed or maladaptive behaviors” (Masten, 1994, p. 3, as cited in Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. 7).
- Retention: “is defined as student attainment of academic and personal goals, regardless of how many terms a student is at the college” (Seidman, 2005, p. 21).
- Student Involvement: “Refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience” (Seidman, 2005, p. 11).
- Student Success: For the purpose of this paper will be defined as students who are both low-income, first-generation and who transferred to and graduated from a four-year institution (receiving a bachelor’s degree) within a six-year time frame.
- Traditional students: Defined as being age 25 years or less at the time of college entry (Kim, Sak, Lee, & Hagedorn, 2010).

Problem Statement

Statistics indicate that between one-third to one-half of all students who attend a community college intend to complete a bachelor’s degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Marti, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Provasnik & Planty, 2008); however, within six years, only 22% of

these students will transfer to a four year college, of which 34%-45% will have earned an associate's degree (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Fike & Fike, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Karp et al., 2008; Mitchell, 2008). Limited information is available about the percentage of community college students who intend to transfer to and graduate from a four-year college, and who are successful at doing so. In fact, most research is focused on college going, rather than college completion (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

Research on the success rate of students who transfer to and graduate from a four-year institution of higher education demonstrates varied success rates between 5%-50% (Handel, 2009). Other statistics indicate that 62% of community college students attend part-time, making them less likely to graduate with their associate's degrees (Handel, 2009; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Given that community colleges enroll a large number of low-income, first-generation students (LIFG), it is of concern that community colleges also have the fewest resources to offer their students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011; Karp et al., 2008). Common examples of these missing or limited resources include scholarship assistance, mental health counseling, tutorial assistance, and textbook support. The statistics, population and lack of support suggest that community colleges are not offering their students the services necessary for success. In fact, Fike and Fike (2008) stated, "Though it costs more to recruit new students than it does to retain current students, institutions often focus on student recruitment rather than student retention" (p. 8). This practice leaves the community college student with little assistance to navigate the educational arena. This is further complicated by the fact community colleges have "Open Admissions" allowing entry for many academically ill-prepared students (Handel, 2009; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Though intended to

“democratize” opportunities for all, this *Open Admission* may in fact complicate the goal of graduating larger numbers of students (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

Despite the statistics and research conducted on the reasons many LIFG students do *not* persist in community colleges, the fact remains that many students *do* persist, transfer to four-year institutions and successfully graduate with bachelor’s degrees (Fike & Fike, 2008; Handel, 2009). Even with limited resources, community colleges are aware of their high attrition rates and are continually developing new programs and initiatives to retain their students. These support mechanisms include student orientations, academic guidance and counseling, academic tutoring, personal guidance and counseling, career counseling, federal TRIO programs, academic learning communities, and developmental education (Karp et al., 2008). What is not well understood is which of these new, or developing community college resources, or other factors, actually *influence* the persistence of LIFG low-income, first-generation community college students through bachelor degree attainment. When considering the low-retention rates and lists of significant challenges, the *success* rate of these students is not well understood.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that supported LIFG transfer graduates of four-year institutions in their persistence at the community college level. Specifically, this study focused on students who started at a community college in a Mid-Western State and graduated with their bachelor’s degree from a Mid-Western State college within six years. This study focused on support services these students accessed at the community college level and on other factors that helped them persist in their

academic journeys at the four-year level, including motivations, both intrinsic and extrinsic. “Other factors” may consist of family support, parental educational levels, peer support, and other outside college influences.

Research Questions.

1. What community college support services, strategies, motivations or other resources do low-income, first-generation students who started at a community college, credit for their persistence or graduation within six years from a four-year college?
2. What community college services did the students use to remove barriers or to work around them?
3. What intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors did students utilize?
4. What off-campus support did students cite as supportive to their degree attainment?
5. What services most often cited as support mechanisms at the community college were also utilized at the four-year college?

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, qualitative techniques were used, including semi-structured interviews, observations, a focus group, and the collection of artifacts and documents. Qualitative research was the chosen method to conduct this study as the intent was toward “promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. This approach implies an emphasis on exploration, discovery, and description” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, pp. 7-8). This study is based upon the epistemological perspective of constructivism, a

qualitative worldview. When examining constructivism, Corbin and Strauss (2008) shared the following:

Concepts and theories are *constructed* by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves. Out of these multiple constructions, analysts construct something that they call knowledge. (p. 10)

This explanation of constructivism links with the intended qualitative analyses of the factors to which community college students attribute their success. By allowing the researcher to recognize that the participants are “making sense out of their experience [s]” at the same time the researcher is receiving the information, a unique opportunity for participant reflexivity occurs.

Critical Theory, which uses a constructivism perspective, aligns and informs this study. Critical Theory is “concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender” (Creswell, 2007, p. 27). A more recent definition provided in the 4th edition of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) indicates that the basic beliefs of critical theory are focused on the following:

Human nature operates in a world that is based on a struggle for power. This leads to interactions of privilege and oppression that can be based on race or ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, mental or physical abilities, or sexual preference. Research is driven by the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, and power and control. Researchers believe that the knowledge that

is produced can change existing oppressive structures and remove oppression through empowerment. (pp. 102-103)

Positioning this study within this theory provides a critical reflection of the services accessed by LIFG students. Critical Theory is an appropriate perspective from which to approach this study, as these students are often marginalized from society, and an understanding of what works in regards to retention may help to liberate this population. Finally, this study is also *applied research* as defined by Patton (2002) as research with the intent “to illuminate a societal concern” (p. 213).

Although it is recognized that academic attrition is a nationwide problem (Alfonso, 2006; Davis, 2010; Dougherty, 2008; Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006; Escobado, 2007; Fike & Fike, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Thayer, 2005; Tinto, 1999), this regional study focuses on students who initially started their education at a community college in a Mid-Western State. The American Institute for Research recently reported that “states appropriate almost \$6.2 billion to colleges and universities to help pay for the education of students who did not return for a second year” (Schneider, 2010, p. 1). This financial assistance is more than what is contributed by federal dollars and comes at an excessive cost to states, especially the poorest states. This cost can be quite high as this Mid-Western State currently ranks 9th in the nation for the percentage of population enrolled in higher education (2010 Annual Report).

Participants.

Eleven students who started at a community college in a Mid-Western State participated in this study. Nine of the students participated in semi-structured, open-

ended interviews. Two of these students, along with two additional participants, were part of a focus group. Students interviewed identified as being LIFG at the start of their community college journey. For the purpose of this study, low-income students are defined as students from families with incomes at 150% or less of the federal poverty levels. First-generation students are defined as students whose parents or guardians have not obtained a four-year college degree. In order to reach students who may have graduated in this six year time-frame, a Midwestern urban community college *Office of Institutional Research* was asked to select 200 names of recent graduates who match the participant criterion for this study; these graduates were then sent a letter inviting them to participate in the study (see Appendix A). Students were selected based on their response to the mailed invitation.

Data Sources.

The number of participants for this research study on LIFG community college student success was limited to nine individual interviews to allow for depth of data to be collected. All participants were purposefully selected. Questions from the interview were derived from the literature review and the research questions which focused on support services utilized and self-determination theory. One focus group was conducted with four participants, two of whom also participated in individual interviews and two who participated solely in the focus group. All interviews and the focus group were audio taped on a digital recorder, with each participant's knowledge and permission, then transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The researcher also took notes on participants' verbal and nonverbal behaviors, as well as other indicators of comfort or discomfort, emphasis or hesitation. The researcher also requested *artifacts* from the focus group

participants. Examples of artifacts brought to the interviews included diploma's, certificates of accomplishment (Dean's Honor Roll, President's Honor Roll), pictures of family, or any other "material evidence" that a student believed "documented historical, demographic, and (sometimes) personal information" about their academic journey (Given, 2008, p. 25).

Data Analysis.

Making sense out of the data is a complex part of this research. Creswell (2009) shared that data analysis involves the following.

Making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. (p. 183)

For the purpose of this study, interviews and focus group tapes were transcribed verbatim; artifacts that represented success to participants were photographed and analyzed; themes and codes were sought out through the use of analytic statements, and story or vignette.

Theoretical Framework

A priori theoretical frameworks in qualitative research are used to aid the researcher in setting pre-determined themes. *A priori* means to look at the theory first, whereas *a posteriori* means to look at theory after collecting the data. The *a priori* theory is particularly helpful for graduate students and less experienced researchers as it gives a "road map for data collection and analysis" (Kearney & Hyle, 2006, p. 124). While some qualitative researchers suggest that this is not an appropriate way to conduct qualitative

research, others argue that using this framework “affords clarity in design, data collection and analysis that is impossible to get in any other way” (Kearney & Hyle, 2006, p. 125).

Self-determination theory (SDT) was used as the a priori theoretical framework for this study. Given that community college students are faced with multiple barriers to academic success, an increase in self-determination may help these students get over hurdles, whether self-imposed or imposed by society. SDT posits that by learning a specific set of skills, students increase their likelihood of graduating. These skills include “promoting in students an interest in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence in their own capacities and attributes” (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991, p. 325). Recent research by Stone, Deci and Ryan (2009) indicates “self-determination theory is rooted in a set of assumptions about human nature and motivation. Humans are inherently motivated to grow and achieve and will fully commit to and even engage in uninteresting tasks when their meaning and value is understood” (p. 77). These intrinsic motivations are then nurtured in an effort to create greater output.

Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that motivation, as defined by SDT, is comprised of energy, direction, persistence and equifinality. What is most important about motivation, and why researchers and practitioners want to replicate it, is because it produces outcomes. In the college environment motivation produces academic outcomes, higher grade point averages, greater retention and graduation rates, and an increased quest for knowledge. More specifically, SDT indicates that motivation is comprised of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivations; both will be examined more thoroughly in Chapter II. Another related trait of SDT is the concept of *amotivation*. Ryan and Deci (2000) define *amotivation* as the “state of lacking the intention to act. When amotivated,

people either do not act at all or act without intent-they just go through the motions” (p. 72). All components of SDT are present in every person at different times or projects in their lives. This study intended to uncover if the skills successful students utilize are more naturally aligned to the utilization of intrinsic skills or extrinsic skills.

Significance of the Study

An increase in an educated workforce contributes to the economic security of communities: locally, nationally and globally. The societal benefits of increased college graduates from the LIFG population are an increase in workforce participation with less reliance on governmental benefits. According to Robison and Christophersen (2003),

Mid-Western’s 14 community college districts generate a wide array of benefits.

Students benefit directly from higher personal earnings, and society at large benefits indirectly from cost savings (avoided costs) associated with reduced welfare and unemployment, improved health, and reduced crime. (p. 1)

The significance of this study is further discussed as specific to the areas of research, theory and practice.

Research

As previously mentioned, there is an abundant amount of research conducted on why low-income, first-generation students do not succeed (Bergerson, 2009; Engle et al., 2006; Geisler, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Green, 2006; Ishitani, 2006; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Prospero & Vohra-Gupa, 2007;). Additionally, most research is focused on the four-year college with as little as 10% of all higher education research focused on community college student population (Marti, 2007). Furthermore, most research on this population is focused on their first year, but little is done to understand

why these students *do* persist across multiple years. This research study can contribute to the field of student retention and can help identify support services that contribute to retention as well as motivation skills this segment utilizes in order to transfer to and graduate from a four-year college. Patton (2002) stated that results from research contribute to the wider field of literature. The intent of this research is to contribute to this wider field of literature through analyzing and sharing the success stories of the participants.

Theory

By examining support services utilized by community college students who are low-income, first-generation in congruence with SDT, this study was able to explore not only which support services they utilized, but also what they reported as the motivation to access them or to succeed. The resulting information will further enhance our understanding of the effectiveness of using self-determination theory as a lens for understanding this population.

Practice

Given the recent attention placed on community colleges (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Jones & Wellman, 2010; Marti, 2008; Nitecki, 2011; Smole, 2009), these institutions are working vigorously to increase the retention and transfer rates of their students. This study will contribute to the practice of community colleges seeking to enhance their support services.

Reflexivity and Motivation

A fear shared by seasoned researchers is that naïve and ill prepared researchers may lose objectivity during fieldwork and be in danger of harming their data set (Hahn,

2006). Therefore, as LeCompte (1987) argued, “identifying the sources of bias and subjectivity in the researcher’s own makeup is critical to the quality of the work done” (p. 43). So what skills do seasoned researchers utilize in order to make sure their personal biases and experiences do not “upset” the data and that they have produced quality work? As I pondered this question, I was reminded of Patton’s (2002) words:

The qualitative analyst owns and is reflective about her or his own voice and perspective; a credible voice conveys authenticity and trustworthiness; complete objectivity being impossible and pure subjectivity undermining credibility, the researcher’s focus becomes balance--understanding and depicting the world *authentically* in all its complexity while being self-analytical, politically aware, and reflexive in consciousness. (pp. 494-495)

Following the wisdom and guidance of Hahn (2006), LeCompte (1987), and Patton (2002), I proceed with an analysis of my own personal reflexivity as it pertains to my research with low-income, first-generation students’ successful graduations from one community college in a centrally located mid-western state. To outline my reflexivity, I apply Patton’s (2002) notion of triangulation. Patton (2002) explained that triangulation in reflexivity is critical and involves three sets of reflections: (1) self-reflexivity, (2) reflexivity about those studied, and (3) reflexivity about audience. Furthermore, when considering bias, LeCompte (1987) demonstrated two sources of bias: (1) personal experience, and (2) professional experience and training. The work of Patton (2002) and LeCompte (1987) was used as a guide throughout this reflection.

My *self-reflection* included the question “Why is this 41-year-old female student interested in producing an applied research study on the success of LIFG students who

started their higher education journeys at a community college?” An immediate, and perhaps logical, response may come from my *personal experience* as a low-income, first-generation college student who graduated from a two-year community college and successfully transferred to, and graduated from, a four-year college; however, that reflection does not go deep enough. The reality is that my reflection on this very topic specifically goes back more than twenty years when I attended an orientation for new students in a program called Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at State University of New York (SUNY) Farmingdale, now named Farmingdale State College, in New York State.

In late March during my senior year in high school, my academic counselor *finally* asked me what I intended to do after graduation. I had no idea how to answer that question, especially since it was so late in the academic year and many college application deadlines had passed. *I guess I could join the Navy?* All I knew is that whatever happened, I needed to have a new place to call home. It was then that my counselor provided me information about the EOP.

The SUNY EOP provides college access to students who are inadmissible through the traditional admissions process. Although academically underprepared, students must show promise for mastering college-level work utilizing support services offered by the Educational Opportunity Program. Offered to full-time students who are New York State residents, applicants must meet both the academic and income requirements for program consideration (http://www.suny.edu/student/academic_eop.cfm).

I was eligible for this program because I came from an extremely low-income family who survived on food stamps, Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing allotments, and what was then known as *Aid For Dependent Children* (AFDC). I was one of seven siblings, all of whom were exposed to the child welfare system due to the chaotic nature of our parental unit. Education was not a priority in our home. In fact, if one dropped out of high school, it would not be considered a crisis, as neither of our parents graduated from high school, nor did they value education. Nonetheless, I attended high school daily and also worked three jobs, all as a way to have legitimate reasons for not being home. As a result, my academic record in high school was not strong, but made me eligible for the EOP program.

Those Studied

Reflection about *those studied* brings me back to the EOP orientation in my first year of college. As I looked around the room I saw that there were a lot of minority students present. Despite being an American Indian woman, who was raised by her White mother and White step-father, I knew nothing about my culture, nor had I been raised around a lot of minority people. My biological father was absent from my life and I never knew him or his family, thus not allowing me to be raised with any traditional understanding of my Shinnecock heritage. During this orientation a pivotal point came when the EOP counselor, Mr. James Woodberry, asked a room full of low-income, mostly first-generation, academically underachieving, and predominately minority students to look to our left, look to our right, and take note that half of us would not be here next semester. *What??? What is this man talking about? How is that statement going to motivate me?* As angry as I recall feeling at his prediction, it was nothing

compared to how I felt the following semester when he once again gathered us and asked us to reflect on who was not present. I felt an immediate knot form in my stomach as I began to realize that he was correct in predicting that half of the previous semester's cohort was no longer present. Despite his best efforts to expose students to educational workshops, free tutoring, academic and personal counseling, there were far too many students no longer enrolled at our college. *Why? Why was I able to persist academically but they were not? We had the same demographics. We had access to the same on-campus support mechanisms. We all lived on campus. We all hung out together. So why did "they" not make it?*

These questions have been stirring in me for the past twenty years. Through reflection, I realized I had as little support as they did. My main reason for going to college was to escape the realities of my so-called "*home life*". I recall sneaking in through my dorm window during school intercessions so that I had a place to stay. I worked close to fifty hours per week while going to college and was active in student organizations; yet I managed to graduate from SUNY (State University of New York) Farmingdale with an Associate in Applied Science degree, and to later graduate from Cornell University, a four-year private ivy-league college, with a bachelor's degree. Instead of pondering why *they* did not graduate, I often asked myself why *I* graduated. *What made me resilient? What motivations or services did I utilize?*

An important aspect of my cultural identity came about when I transferred to Cornell University. At that point I moved into Akwe:kon, the American Indian Residence House, along with 35 other students, of who half of them were also Native American. Through my time at Cornell University I became very involved in the

American Indian community and began to proudly call myself Shinnecock Indian, rather than thinking it was something to be ashamed of. The reason this cultural awareness did not partake at SUNY Farmingdale was because there was not a Native community present there. In fact oddly enough, I found myself strongly affiliated with the Latin American student population at Farmingdale and even became the secretary of the Latin American Student Association, a very active student organization on campus. The cultural significance of being part of both groups (albeit it ethnically, or socially) was instrumental in my development as a woman, social worker, educator and advocate. My American Indian culture, coupled with my years of working with the American Indian Program, provided me with a cultural lens that considers the Native American framework when completing this dissertation.

Moving ahead 20 plus years, I find myself still drawn to that question, *Why me?* However, now that “why me” question has been developed into a research question as part of my educational plan towards the completion of a research doctorate. *What support systems and services do low-income, first-generation students who attend community college credit to their successful transfer to, and graduation from, a four-year college?* This question also influences my professional work as a director of a TRIO Student Support Services Grant. TRIO is not an acronym, rather “TRIO is a set of federally-funded college opportunity programs that motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in their pursuit of a college degree” (U.S. Dept. of Education, n.d.). Although this dissertation is *not* about my specific experiences as a LIFG community college student, the reflexivity portion provides a mechanism for me to help the reader understand my interest in the topic, my experience with the topic, and my

inquiry into exploring the topic further in order to liberate future LIFG students.

Furthermore, and more importantly, the writing process helps the researcher recognize personal bias by better understanding the linkages to my experience.

Professional Experience and Training

My intrigue with these questions helped me select the latter college degrees I have earned, or am working toward. The second source of bias, as outlined by LeCompte (1987) is “professional experience and training” (p. 44). In 2000, I earned a Master’s of Social Work degree from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. I had the fortune of using this degree in educational settings, and also for four-years as a home-based social worker who helped families who are at risk of having their children removed from their custody. I then returned to working in a college environment, as I believe that an education is the surest possible way to escape poverty and to enable at-risk and low-income individuals to make positive choices in their lives. For five years, I was employed as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in a TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) SAGE Program at Red Rock Community College (RRCC). Through the TRIO grant from the United States Department of Education, I was charged with providing mental health support, along with academic guidance and motivation to low-income, first-generation, and students with disabilities. By the second year in this position, I realized my passion for, and commitment to stay in the field of higher education and work with at-risk college students. At this point, I applied for and was admitted into the Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership Program at Oklahoma State University. In September of 2010, I was named the Director of the SAGE SSS program at RRCC. My personal and

professional experiences have led me to my current research question and to my audience.

Audience Consideration

The last step in reflexivity triangulation is to *consider the audience*. There was great seriousness and humility behind the question “*Why me?*” I am not asking what makes me so special, rather I am asking, “*What resources did I access, and what intrinsic motivations enabled me to be successful?*” If I can find the answers to these questions perhaps I can share them with future at-risk college students. Teaching motivation is not an exact science; however, it is something to be considered. As a part-time instructor of a freshman orientation course at RRCC, I am charged with teaching students several proven retention skills and techniques. The output of energy, and utilization of skills taught, varies dramatically from student to student. This teaching experience again leads me back to my education at SUNY Farmingdale. Why is it that some students will be successful while others will not be? Research is replete with information as to why students are *not* successful; however, much less is known about why they *are* successful and what factors influence their persistence. SDT is a framework for examining these questions. Finally, given that “researcher identity is part and parcel of any investigation (whether or not it is recognized) and knowledge of it through reflexivity and disclosure makes qualitative work richer and more comprehensible for both researcher and reader” (Gordon, 2005, p. 280), it is my desire to have conveyed my own personal history and interest in this subject in order to make my research more transparent and richer.

Qualitative Measures of Inquiry

There are a variety of ways to evaluate for the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1998) indicated that credibility, dependability, and transferability are important considerations that must be addressed in qualitative research. Chapter III will highlight the steps that were taken to ensure a check for trustworthiness within the research findings in this study.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the proposed study by providing the research problem to be examined as well as providing a brief synopsis of the problems LIFG community college students face while working towards a bachelor's degree. This chapter also included definitions of terminology, research questions and research approach. It moved into identifying the intended methodology, the theoretical framework, significance of the study to research, theory and practice, and personal researcher reflexivity. Furthermore, it introduced the reader to the fact that I will use a Native American Framework for analyzing some of the forthcoming themes. Though only one of my participants identified as being American Indian, the framework still provides a worthy interpretation of the findings. Following this chapter are six additional chapters. Chapter II consists of a literature review; Chapter III includes an in-depth look at the methodology, demographic data, analyses and synthesis of data, and limitations. Chapter IV introduces the participants and the site study, Chapter V evaluates the themes, whereas Chapter VI provides a deeper analysis of the final theme, as well as more attention to the focus group. Finally, Chapter VII includes an analyses and interpretation of findings, along with conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Low-income, first generation (LIFG) students who attend community colleges have statistically higher rates of non-completion when compared to students who are not first-generation or low-income. Literature on why LIFG students are *not* successful at degree attainment is plentiful, whereas literature on why these students *do* succeed is sparse (Geisler, 2007). Specifically, most literature on this subject is focused on the failure or dropout rate of LIFG students in their first year of college. There is a paucity of literature focused on the second year, and particularly on the continuation of the LIFG student who starts his or her education at the community college, successfully graduate and then transfer to a four-year college. Additionally, there is considerable literature focused on increasing access for students who are LIFG or minority, but this literature does not consider that although access has increased degree attainment has not. Furthermore, most of these at-risk students start at a community college; a factor that also increases the probability that they will not graduate with a four-year degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In fact, recent findings by Goldrick-Rab (2010) indicate that middle-income students benefit the most from community colleges.

How is success measured? Students have a variety of reasons for attending college, including personal enrichment and obtaining job skills. For the purpose of this study, success will be defined as a degree-seeking student who began his or her academic

journey at a community college, transferred to a four-year college and graduated with a bachelor's degree within a six-year time frame. Furthermore, definitions that were provided in Chapter I will be utilized throughout the remainder of this document.

This chapter explores in more detail some of the components of the research problem presented in Chapter I. First, the community college setting is addressed, including the historical context and future trends. This includes an evaluation of the characteristics of community college students, specifically including LIFG students. The next subject explored is the student services areas that are affiliated with student success and retention; this will include a more in-depth understanding of financial aid, campus student services, and academic enrichment programs. The transfer process to a four-year college, and the impact community colleges play on Baccalaureate attainment in a Mid-Western state are also explored. The final area of review for this chapter is SDT and the LIFG community college student.

Community College Historical Overview: Past and Future

Community colleges are often viewed as democratizing or meritocratic institutions that provide opportunity to those who have often experienced hardship (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Roman, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Wells, 2008). More precise statistics demonstrate that community colleges also have higher percentages of the following students than do four-year colleges: delayed enrollment (45%), graduate equivalent degree (GED) and high school dropout (12%), part-time attendance (47.4%), financial independence (34%), one or more children (20%), single parent (10%), and work full-time (35%), (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Given that students are more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree if they begin at a four-year college rather than a

community college, it is apparent that community colleges must work harder at increasing their graduation rates (Alfonso, 2006; Dougherty, 2008; Marti, 2008). When considering the terminology of graduation, persistence, dropout or success, one must argue that these terms are not synonymous with four-year colleges and community colleges. For example, at community colleges almost 75% of first time students indicate a desire to obtain a four-year degree, yet close to half of all these degree seeking students drop out within the first year (Marti, 2008; Schuetz, 2008; Wells, 2008); however, a recent report by ACT (2011) found that retention from first year to second year at community colleges has slightly increased to 56%, an all-time high (“College Retention Rates”). The same report by ACT indicated that for the first time on record, four-year public colleges had a higher return rate of students, 74% compared to a 72% return rate at four-year private colleges (“College Retention Rates,” 2011). This is compelling because more community college students transfer to four-year public colleges, rather than four-year private colleges. When considering community college graduation rates, one can posit that these students do not follow the same linear path of four-year college students and may have goals different than the college’s goal of graduating students with a degree or certificate (Alfonso, 2006; Geisler, 2007). The diversity of students at community colleges include students who are non-traditional in age, students who have academic deficiencies, students interested in a certificate or associates degree, and students who have no intentions of transferring to a four-year college (Alfonso, 2006; Rendón, 1998). Furthermore, over the years, there has been a significant increase in the number of minority students and female students who attend community colleges (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Seidman, 2005).

Some of the strengths of a community college include their locations, lower-costs, open-door admissions, and the ability to provide vocational training, especially in a volatile market where a quick response to local industry employment needs can be provided (Dougherty, 2008; “College Retention Rates,” 2011). Additional strengths that community colleges have to offer students and the local community include their openness and services to help address academic deficiencies. The “*Open Admission*” policy is an opportunity for the community college to support the democratizing of opportunities for people from low-income backgrounds (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). The significantly lower cost of attending a community college versus a four-year institution is a tremendous strength, as many community college students are low-income. Location is also a considerable strength as most community college students travel only 10 miles to attend college. Diverse academic offerings allows for many students to either gain a certificate, an associate’s degree, or take pre-requisites necessary for transfer to the four-year college. Furthermore, by allowing admission of some academically underprepared students, community colleges are giving opportunities to students and recognizing that students can overcome deficiencies and succeed with hard work, thereby allowing them to return to their community with employable skills. Through developmental education at community colleges, students can correct past deficiencies and move forward in gaining new skills (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Recent research indicates that attention to developmental education is one of the top rated programs for increasing retention (College retention rates, 2011). This is especially important as this research also indicates that students who have to take three or

more developmental education courses leave college after the first year (Kinzie et al., 2008).

Although most attention brought to community colleges is positive, there are some harsh criticisms. Some of the criticisms include too much emphasis on practical, rather than educational skills, a “watering down of the curriculum,” being “subject to the whims of business and industry,” and “perpetuating the gaps between the have and have not’s” (Levin, Cox, Cerven & Haberler, 2010, p. 38). However, the biggest criticism is the problem community colleges have with retaining and graduating students who indicate a desire to graduate with an associate’s degree. A recent journal article prepared by Goldrick-Rab (2010) indicated “within six years of transitioning to college only slightly more than one third of community college entrants complete a credential of any kind” (p. 437). More specifically Goldrick-Rab (2010) found that after three years, only 16% of community college students intending to transfer to a four-year college had gained a certificate or degree. Also, when given six years, only 36% had earned a certificate or associate’s degree. These statistics are reiterated in *President Obama’s American Graduation Initiative*, in his 2009 speech announcing this initiative he remarked “Nearly half of students who enter community colleges intending to earn a degree or transfer to a four-year college fail to reach their goal within six years” (Obama, 2009). The retention concern brought about many research studies focused on creating new mechanisms for increasing retention. Now tied into accreditation measures, retention will remain in the spotlight for decades to come as colleges look for ways to increase retention, specifically when considering LIFG community college students (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005).

Community college history.

A deeper understanding of the origins of community colleges and how *President Obama's American Graduation Initiative* will work toward increasing the number of college graduates is helpful for the retention issue. Community colleges have been functioning in the United States since the early 20th Century when Joliet Junior College was established in 1901 (Coley, 2000; Tollefson, 2009). Though the definition has changed over the years, Cohen and Brawer (2008) wrote, "We define the community college as any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree" (p. 5). Today community colleges enroll over six million students, close to 46% of all undergraduates at U.S. colleges (Marti, 2009; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Schuetz, 2008; Tollefson, 2009). However, almost 50% of these students fail to earn a degree or certificate within six years (Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Schuetz, 2008). There are more than 1,000 community colleges across the United States, and they comprise 25% of all higher education institutions in the United States (Tollefson, 2009). Statistically, community colleges enroll almost half of all undergraduate students nationwide (Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Nitecki, 2011; Schuetz, 2008), and have higher percentages of LIFG and minority students than do four-year college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Mendoza, Mendez & Malcolm, 2008).

General demographics from Goldrick-Rab (2010) indicate that as few as 31% of community college students attend full-time, 26% enroll part-time, with the remainder having fluctuating enrollment status. These statistics are supported by the findings of Bailey and Alfonso (2005) that only 36% of community college students attend full-time,

while 71 % of four-year college students are enrolled on a full-time basis. Additional statistics indicate that 20% of community college students are married parents, 15% are single parents, and 10% are married without children, with the remainder being single students. Fifty-three percent of community college students are over the age of 23, and 35% are over the age of 30, demonstrating that almost 75% of community college students are considered “non-traditional” in age (Chaves, 2006; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Many non-traditional students enroll part-time due to the demands of balancing their families and careers. Additional demographics of community colleges indicate that currently “96% of the two-year college matriculates nationwide are in-state residents; the distance from their home to the campus is a median of ten miles” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 43). More than 50% of community college students hold jobs as compared to 37% of students at four-year colleges. Over 61% of community college students have to take at least one developmental education course and close to 25% have to take two developmental education courses or more (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). All minority students combined make-up 40% of community college population, compared to 33% at four-year colleges. First-generation college students comprise 38% of community college enrollment compared to 25% at four-year colleges, and women make up 56% of community college enrollment compared to 53% at four-year institutions (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Although somewhat overwhelming, these statistics are an important part of understanding the demographics of community colleges and are indicators of why retention in community college is often viewed as being overwhelming, and perhaps impossible, to improve upon.

Table 1

Community College Demographics

Community College Demographics	Percentage
Percent of all higher education enrollment	46% attend community college
First-Generation & Low Income	24% at all colleges
LIFG	4 times more likely to drop out compared to non-LIFG
First-Generation	38% as compared to 25% at four-year colleges
Attrition during the first year at CC	50%
Over the age of 23	53%
Over the age of 30	35%
Minority	40% as compared to 33% at four-year colleges
Married	20%
Single parent	15%
Married without children	10%
Attend full-time	36% as compared to 71% at four-year colleges
In-state resident	96%
Distance from home	Median of 10 miles
Take at least one developmental course	61%
Take two or more developmental courses	25%
Female	56% as compared to 53% at four-year colleges

Note. Adapted from Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Chaves, 2006; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Tollefrson, 2009; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Handel, 2009; Nitecki, 2011; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Schuetz, 2008

The other issue to be examined, pertaining to the federal focus on community colleges, is *President Obama's American Graduation Initiative*. Focused on increasing the number of community college graduates by an additional five million by the year 2020, this initiative is set to challenge the way community colleges operate, while giving them the financial support necessary to make needed changes. During the announcement of this initiative in July 2009, President Obama proclaimed, "By 2020, this Nation will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. It will reform and strengthen community colleges from coast to coast, so that they get the resources students and schools need –and the results workers and businesses demand" (Obama, 2009, ¶ 3). This ambitious plan will cost approximately \$12 billion over the next decade, but it is anticipated that it will be paid through the Student Financial Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009 (SAFRA), which increased Pell grants by \$500, provided a \$2,500 American Opportunity Tax Credit, and replaced guaranteed loans with deficit loans (Smole, 2009).

States financial crisis and the federal focus on community colleges.

Due to increased financial constraints of the past decade, student retention and persistence has taken on a larger, and perhaps more critical, role. Furthermore, with increasing calls for transparency about the use of state and federal funding, more colleges are taking a proactive role in finding ways to retain students (Marti, 2008). Community colleges are particularly vulnerable to the Nation's current financial crisis. State and local funds constitute approximately 65% of funding for community colleges, with approximately 46% coming directly from the state governments and 19.5% from local governments (Tollefrson, 2009; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). The remainder of funds

comes from tuition and fees (19.5%), the Federal Government (5.4%), and private gifts, grants and other funds (5%) (Tollerfrson, 2009).

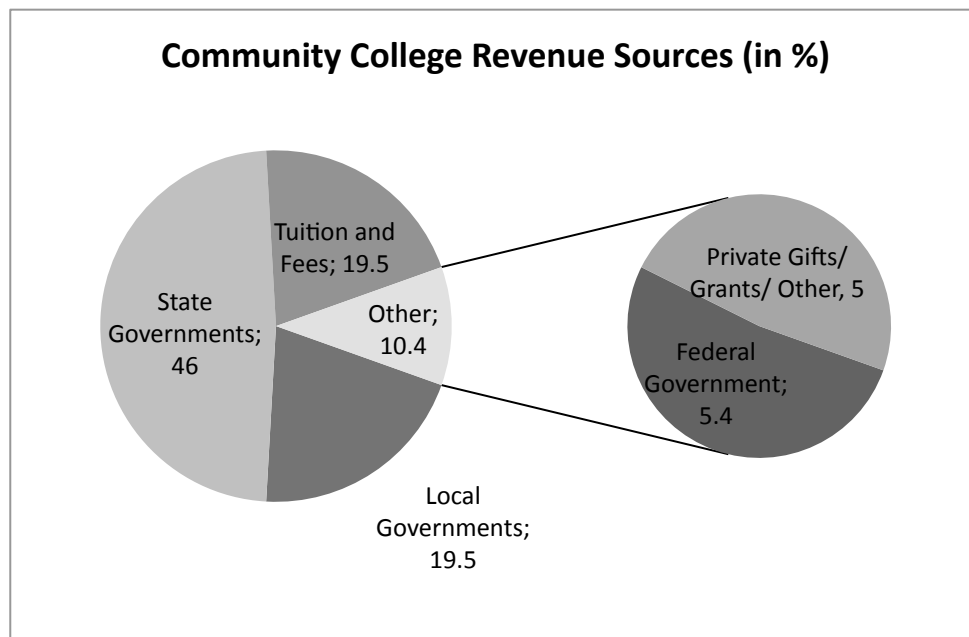


Figure 1. Representation of Community College funding sources (in %). Based on findings from Tollerfrson, 2009; and Provasnik & Planty, 2008.

Students are also vulnerable, as the issue of affordability drastically affects them. In fact, Mendoza, Mendez, and Malcolm (2009) provided an argument that any increase in tuition will affect college access for low-income students as even the “low-cost” of a community college is difficult for a low-income student.

However, in this time of financial crisis, class sizes are increasing, course sections are being reduced, budgets are being cut 15 to 20%, and in 48 states there are projected deficits for 2011 and 2012 (Jones & Wellman, 2010). States are hesitant to raise taxes in a time of high unemployment; therefore, increases in tuition must remain an option for community colleges. Jones and Wellman (2010) have projected that the new financial crisis will cause a decrease in enrollment, as well as a decrease in spending level per

student. There is also an increase in employing part-time faculty as these colleges enter “growing tuition dependence” (Jones & Wellman, 2010, p. 8). Those hurt most by all these reductions are LIFG students, those who make up the majority of community college students. The future does not yet appear any brighter. The National Conference of State Legislatures (2010) currently projects “over 60 billion in shortfalls for 2011, with another 50 billion for 2012” and this will impact institutions at all levels, including community colleges (as cited in Jones & Wellman, 2010, p. 8). More than likely, even when the national recession comes to a close it will take several years for higher education to recover.

Recommendations for coping with the financial crisis in higher education are abound. Jones and Wellman (2010) recommend more collaboration between the states and higher education leaders. They also advocate for the consolidation or elimination of programs that are costly and underutilized, as well as improving “teaching and learning productivity” (Jones & Wellman, 2010, p. 12). Recommendations made by Chabotar (2010) are to (1) increase and better utilize financial aid, (2) increase consortium agreements, and, (3) to focus on retention as “keeping current students enrolled is more effective than trying to replace them with new students” (p. 9). In this time of great financial crisis, it is more critical than ever to heed the call for financial prudence, while at the same time, keeping the doors of community colleges “open” with focus on greater retention methods, especially ones that are focused on LIFG students.

Characteristics of LIFG Community College Students

Combined, LIFG students represent approximately 24% of the undergraduate population in the United States (Engle & Tinto, 2008). LIFG Students are four times

more likely to leave college within the first year as compared to students who were not LIFG (Engle & Tinto, 2008). For the LIFG students who did remain in college, Engle and Tinto (2008) found that only 11 percent earned a bachelor's degree as compared to 55% of non-LIFG who went on to earn bachelor's degrees. LIFG students who started at a four-year college, versus a two-year college, were seven times more likely to graduate. This information is important as it illuminates the difficulties in LIFG students graduating as is evidenced in the given statistics.

Low-income students.

Low-income students are far less likely to attend college than their higher income peers. When they do attend college, they are more likely to have varying patterns of college attendance including taking time out of college, and transferring from a four-year college to a two-year college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). These patterns result in lower retention and graduation rates. Statistically, 26 % of low-income students will earn their four-year degrees in six years, as compared to 56% of their higher income peers (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). This information correlates with findings by Mendoza, Mendez and Malcolm (2009) who found that 23% of community college students obtained a bachelor's degree after transferring to a four-year college within six years. Factually speaking this means that low-income students are less likely to attend college than are their more affluent peers (Purnell, Richardson & Tinto, 2007). This indicates that financial aid, especially in the form of Pell Grants, has an impact on persistence. Even when considering loans, low-income students may have to stop-out or dropout if there are no loans available which, in turn, lowers the attrition and also increases the amount of loan defaults (Haynes, 2008). Dr. Arnold Mitchem, President on

the Council for Opportunity in Education, shared this alarm, when he emphatically emphasized that “The notion of equal opportunity for low-income education was, and remains, a struggle” (Mitchem, 2010). This statement can be supported with the following statistical information provided by Engle and Tinto (2008) who found that in 1970, 6% of low-income students had earned bachelor degrees as compared to 40% of higher income youth. By the year 2005, high-income student attendance had increased 33%, whereas for low-income students, the increase was only 6%. Statistically speaking, this translates into a six times greater likelihood that college attendance will occur for high-income students. Thayer (2005) posited that in addition to looking at juxtaposing first generation and low income students, one must consider the intersections of race and class when examining retention. In fact, several authors (Longwell & Longwell, 2008; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Thayer, 2005) all contend that class status is a stronger indicator of college persistence than first-generation status. A final, and important addition to the struggles low-income students have, includes difficulties justifying college to their family and friends, as they often feel too intimidated to talk about their academic achievements, causing additional stress as they can be seen as “changing” and becoming “different” than their peer groups (Rendón, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1994).

For both LIFG students degree attainment is in the best interest of the national and global economy. Over time the gap in salary between those with a high school diploma and those with a college degree is considerable. Precisely, those with a four-year degree will earn more than 1.2 million dollars over those who only have a high school diploma. Even those students who only earn a two-year degree, or attend “some” college will make over \$500,000 more over their lifetime than those without any college (Engle & Tinto,

2008; Seidman, 2005). This increase in salary contributes to an increased tax base for communities, as well as a reduction in crime, public assistance, and general physical health (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Furthermore, as the labor market continues to increase the minimum education needed to enter the workforce, more educated citizens will be needed to meet the demands of future employers.

First generation students.

First generation students are defined as students whose parents or guardians did not obtain a bachelor's degree (Mitchell, 2008; Davis, 2010). Over 60% of all new students in higher education are first-generation (Mitchell, 2008; Davis, 2010). Of this number, nearly half of them attend community college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Mitchell, 2008). First generation students come less prepared to tackle college having lower levels of cultural capital, making it more difficult for them to graduate from college (Mitchell, 2008). When considering first generation students separately, parental expectations and strong support from parents are highly correlated with those who go to college. This is represented in the verbal expectations set forth by parents, as well as savings put away toward college (Bergerson, 2009; Engle et al., 2006; Mitchell, 2008). For children whose parents did not go to college, there is often little access to college information. For example, many low-income families are unaware of Federal Pell grants and believe that the cost of college is just not in their reach. The non-degreed parent may hope their child will go to college, and believe that their child will receive adequate college information from a variety of sources, including high school personnel or from colleges directly. However, this is often not the case, particularly in low-income schools; unless a student is

very ambitious and goal oriented, he or she may not come across the necessary information or timelines for college (Bergerson, 2009).

First generation students often start college with lower high school grade point averages, standardized test scores, and critical thinking skills, and often have lower achievement scores than their non-first generation peers (Davis, 2010; Engle et al., 2006; Mitchell, 2008; Thayer, 2005). They also take more remedial courses and less academically challenging courses (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Demographically, they are more likely to be older, female, minority, lower-income and have children, as compared to non-first generation students (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008). They are also more likely to take part-time classes, work full-time, and stop in and out of college (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Research by Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) found that first generation students are 71% more likely to drop out of college than their counterparts. Ishitani (2003) completed a study that found “the survival rate for first-generation students in the first semester was about 9% less than that of the group of students with two college-educated parents. However, in the sixth semester, the survival rate for first-generation students was 22% less than the one for students with two college-educated parents” (p. 441).

One final difference regarding first generation students is that career mobility is the main reason this group of students attend college, whereas with second generation students, their main reason for college attendance is personal growth (Mitchell, 2008). Furthermore, this population of students has lower levels of confidence and isolation regarding their college going experience (Davis, 2010). When juxtaposed to self-determination theory, one could posit that it may be inevitable that first generation

students are perhaps more extrinsically motivated, whereas second-generation students are more intrinsically motivated.

Student Services: Success & Retention

Student success, for the purpose of this paper, was defined as students who are both low-income, first-generation and who transferred to, and graduated from, a four-year institution (receiving a bachelor's degree) within a six-year time frame. Despite the many hurdles LIFG community college students face, there are many student services to assist them in their desire to transfer to and graduate from a four-year college. For example, choosing the correct academic major is highly correlated with graduation. Nitecki (2011) indicated that finding an academic program or major that is a good fit for the student will aid in retention. Karp and colleagues (2008) recommended that academic guidance and counseling, academic supports, personal guidance and counseling, career counseling, and supplemental services such as child care or transportation, be available to all students at community college as a means to increase retention. Tinto (2010) shared that the best strategies for college success included intrusive advising and mentoring, integrated support services, supplemental instruction, and accelerated learning, learning communities, assessment of student learning, and structured first-year programs. Seidman (2005) supported this by indicating that involvement and advising are "crucial components for developing and sustaining a successful retention program" (p. 13).

Purnell and Blank (2004) indicated that poor academic advisement could serve as a detriment to graduation. This is why Tinto (1999) argued that students be given *clear and consistent* information about academic requirements. An additional retention mechanism is found in student success, freshmen orientation, courses provided by the

colleges to enhance the overall learning experience (Escobado, 2007). These classes focus on learning strategies, including test-taking, note-taking and how to communicate with faculty. An academic component connected to retention includes *Academic Learning Communities*. These communities have proven to be beneficial to students giving them the opportunity to be more engaged academically and socially (Dougherty, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Stevenson, Duran, Barrett & Colarulli, 2005). Defined as students sharing a co-registration or block scheduling, students are given the opportunity to learn together in small communities. There may be linked courses, or unique ways of learning. Typically there is a crossover of material among various classes, with group work and active learning. The idea is that students who study together will form smaller communities who may travel together from semester to semester supporting each other's academic growth (Stevenson et al., 2005; Tinto, 1999). These communities increased retention by 5% at community colleges and 10% at four-year colleges (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Reasons cited for the success of these communities included, peer learning, peer support, connections to campus services, and faculty mentoring. Furthermore, in addition to increased retention, grade point averages improved (Stevenson et al., 2005).

Another support service proven to increase retention rates is the TRIO Federal grant program. Established in 1965, the federal TRIO programs, including *Student Support Services* (SSS), were established by the federal government with the intent of “ensuring equal educational opportunity for all Americans, regardless of race, ethnic background, or economic circumstances” (Balz & Esten, 1998, p. 334). These eight different grants that serve students in a variety of settings, including high school, college and graduate school, are intended to help students overcome social and cultural barriers

to degree attainment (Engle & Tinto, 2008). To participate in these programs students must be low-income, or first-generation, or have a documented disability. The SSS grant is geared at providing supportive services to help to alleviate some of the barriers that may prevent students from dropping out. Services include supportive counseling, academic counseling, tutoring, and financial literacy. Specifically, program managers are responsible for (1) increasing college retention and graduation rates, (2) increasing transfer rates, and (3) providing supportive services (Chaney, Muraskin, Calhalan, & Goodwin, 1998; Federal TRIO Programs, n.d.). A study completed by Chaney et al., (1998) indicated that students who utilized TRIO Student Support Services were retained 8% higher than eligible but non-participating TRIO students. Nationwide, there are over one million students served by over 2,800 TRIO programs and over two million students have graduated through TRIO services (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2011).

Financial assistance can benefit LIFG students. An example of a state grant in this mid-western state is the Mid-Western Promise (MWP) program that pays up to six years of in-state tuition for low-income students who enrolled in the program in the 8th grade, maintained over a 2.5 grade point average, took prescribed coursework and remained out of trouble with the law (MW Promise, 2009). This program is an example of a state's commitment to providing equal access to education for all its citizens. Unfortunately, there are far too many qualified students who do not take advantage of it because their families do not complete all the paperwork in the required timeframe. Despite this fact, the number of students taking advantage of this program continues to increase each year. In 2005, there were 9,155 students who were accepted by the program. In 2011 that number is estimated to more than double to 20,275 participants enrolled (MW Promise,

n.d.). Mid-Western State's commitment to education is apparent, however, they rank only 23rd in "total state expenditures and 21st in total federal grants to first-year-only students, spending \$132.4 million and \$25.8 million respectively" (Study: Many Freshman, n.d.). These grants are critical to low-income students as a mechanism to avoid or reduce loans. Ishitani (2006) indicated that when students take out loans, they are less likely to graduate as compared to students who were able to obtain grants. Perna (2010) concurred with Ishitani's (2006) assertion when her research indicated that grants do promote the college going rate, especially as it pertains to low-income students. Mendoza et al., (2009) found conflicting research as to whether loans or grants help or hinder students.

Community College Impact on Baccalaureate Attainment in a Mid-Western State

A review of higher education in this Mid-Western state perhaps paints a bleak picture, yet one filled with glimmers of optimism. According to the *2010 Annual Report on the State of Higher Education in Mid-Western State*, for the past several years, Mid-Western State has worked hard at increasing the number of students enrolled in public higher education. In 2001, the state ranked 14th in the nation; however, in 2011, Mid-Western State moved to the 9th place ranking. Like many other states, females are enrolled in greater numbers than males, 57% and 43% respectively. White students make up 69.9 percent of the enrollment while minority student enrollment makes up 30.1 percent.

Affordability of colleges in Mid-Western State is one of its strengths, and in fact, state residents pay less in tuition and fees than most of their colleagues in surrounding states. Academically, 37.7 % of all students needed to take a developmental education

course, which was a slight increase over the previous year's number of 36.8%. Of these 37.7 % of students who needed to take remedial courses, over 80 % of them were enrolled in Mid-Western community colleges. Retention at four-year state colleges decreased 3.4 % points this year, and decreased 1.9 % points at community colleges. Despite the lower retention numbers, the six-year graduation rates have increased for public four-year colleges by 1.2 % points. Unfortunately, the six-year graduation rates for community colleges within Mid-Western declined 1.7 % points (Annual Report, 2010). These statistics help to better understand the educational climate in this Mid-Western state as it pertains to the population explored in this research.

Self Determination Theory & the LIFG Community College Student

Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that there are two basic kinds of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. However, it also theorizes that by teaching a set of skills, students will increase the likelihood of graduating. These skills include “promoting in students an interest in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence in their own capacities and attributes,” (Deci et al., 1991, p. 325). This theory was chosen as it is a good conceptual fit to this study and because community colleges may be able to teach some SDT skills to at-risk students. Furthermore it can help community colleges reconsider some of their practices and develop programs and climates that support student engagement. Advancement in techniques to promote tenants of self-determination theory will result in higher persistence rates and lowered attrition rates (Marti, 2007; Schuetz, 2008).

Despite the numerous odds LIFG students may have against them, many of these students are successful. Certainly, one can posit that these *successful* students have

higher levels of social and cultural capital, or that they were wise enough to take advantage of the support systems that existed on their community college campus. However, one could also suppose that they may have higher levels of self-determination. A review of the literature indicates that Ryan and Deci (2001) coined SDT, who defined it:

An approach to human motivation and personality that uses traditional empirical methods while employing an organismic meta theory that highlights the importance of human's evolved inner resources for personality development and behavior self-regulation. Thus, its arena is the investigation of people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration, as well as for the conditions that foster those positive processes. (p. 68)

More recent research by Stone, Deci and Ryan (2009) indicated "Self-determination theory is rooted in a set of assumptions about human nature and motivation. Humans are inherently motivated to grow and achieve and will fully commit to and even engage in uninteresting tasks when their meaning and value is understood" (p. 77). These intrinsic motivations are then nurtured in an effort to create greater output. For example, Ryan and Deci (2000) indicated that SDT is concerned not only about individual development, but also about how environments can be "antagonistic" toward positive individual development. This can certainly be seen in the scenario of a LIFG student who is trying to advance educationally without the assistance of supportive environments. In fact, one can compare the *Crab in the Bucket* analogy, a common analogy in the American Indian community, and certainly has been used with other

oppressed groups, to the notion of antagonistic environments. This analogy posits that as one crab tries to get out of the bucket, the other crabs quickly pull him down. Kidwell, Willis, Jones-Saunty, and Bigfoot (2007) wrote about the “crab” analogy and indicated that in the American Indian community, when one community member tries to make a positive change for him- or herself, he or she is open to “gossip, ridicule and possible harassment” (p. 320). With LIFG students, this scenario can be juxtaposed as the student entering the college facility with the hope of gaining an education, while at home in his or her community, there is a negative reaction to this “crab” trying to leave the bucket. This example is a worthy scenario for understanding low motivation in LIFG students, as Ryan and Deci (2000; 2008) indicated one of the most detrimental elements of motivation are “social environment’s that are antagonistic” toward motivation.

An examination of SDT indicates motivation is comprised of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Overall motivation is comprised of energy, direction, persistence and equifinality. What is most important about motivation, and why researchers and practitioners want to replicate it, is that it produces outcomes. In the college environment, motivation produces academic outcomes, higher grade point averages, greater retention and graduation rates, and an increased quest for knowledge. Another related trait of SDT is the concept of *amotivation*. Ryan and Deci (2000) defined *amotivation* as the “state of lacking the intention to act. When amotivated, people either do not act at all or act without intent they just go through the motions” (p. 72). The three reasons amotivation occurs are that a person may not value the activity, or feel competent, or believe it will produce a wanted outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This concept of *amotivation* is critical as often times LIFG students may find themselves in

this situation. For example, they go to class because they were told that is important, however, once in class their enthusiasm is not present.

Intrinsic motivation is defined as “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). It is also behaviors that are done without the promise of reward, rather for the natural ability that is related to enjoyment and social development. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) indicated, “people are innately curious, interested creatures who possess a natural love of learning and who desire to internalize the knowledge, customs, and values that surround them” (p. 133). People who have strong levels of intrinsic motivation also have high levels of competency, autonomy, or an internal locus of causality. People who are operating from this framework do not respond well to threats, timelines, or pressure; rather, they respond more to how they feel about what they are doing. La Guardia (2009) demonstrated that the question of “Who am I?” is pivotal in understanding identity development. She posited that parents and teachers help shape how children develop and she encourages positive reinforcement as a way to increase intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation in SDT indicates that there are three basic needs that must be met: (1) autonomy, (2) competence, and (3) relatedness. *Autonomy* indicates that the person is able to “self-rule,” and make decisions, willingly. *Competence* indicates that there is some mastery of skill and a willingness to garner new skills. Finally, *relatedness* refers to connecting with others in a real and genuine manner. All three of these needs must be met in order to increase a desire to work on tasks and projects that produce intrinsic results and satisfy basic psychological needs (La Guardia, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2008).

There are three additional basic needs that are related to SDT: (1) belonging, (2) competence, and (3) autonomy. Deci and Ryan (2000), as cited in Schuetz, (2008) stated *belonging* creates “innate growth tendency more robust and may be particularly important in fostering engagement in orientations and other early campus experiences” (p. 23). *Competence* is considered as one of the most direct psychological needs a student can have and is related to feeling and being effective in an environment. This competence is gained through exploring an environment and mastering the steps along the way. One could posit that utilizing support services in the community college may have begun as an extrinsic motivating factor, but as levels of competence increased, there is then an increase in the intrinsic motivation to access services. Finally, *autonomy* “is connected to students’ clarity about what they value most in educational objectives or career opportunities offered and their ability to determine and follow through on steps required to attain the related objectives” (p. 23).

Extrinsic motivation is defined by Ryan and Deci (2000) as “the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (p. 71). Another definition provided by Gagne and Deci (2005) demonstrates that extrinsic motivation “requires an instrumentality between the activity and some separable consequences such as tangible or verbal rewards, so satisfaction comes not from the activity itself but rather from the extrinsic consequences to which the activity leads” (p. 331). Examples of extrinsic motivation are students producing academic work because they need the knowledge for their future careers, or because their parents told them to. Ryan and Deci (2000) indicated that both of these examples are extrinsic motivations, but “the former case of extrinsic motivation entails personal endorsement and a feeling of choice, whereas the

latter involves compliance with an external regulation” (p. 71). Both examples are not being completed for the “joy” of learning, rather for the demanded outcome. There are four behaviors defined by Ryan and Deci (2000) as being associated with extrinsic motivation: (1) external regulation, (2) introjected regulation, (3) identified regulation, and (4) integrated regulation. *Externally regulated* behaviors are ones that are completed to “satisfy an external demand or reward contingency” (p. 72). *Introjected regulation* is a “relatively controlled form of regulation in which behaviors are performed to avoid guilt or anxiety or to attain ego enhancements such as pride” (p. 72). *Identified regulation* “reflects a conscious valuing of a behavioral goal or regulation, such that the action is accepted or owned as personally important” (p. 72). The final behavior is *integrated regulation* and this occurs “when identified regulations are fully assimilated to the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into congruence with one’s other values and needs” (p. 73). All four of these behaviors can be utilized at any point, and do not have to follow through a continuum. In fact, people may utilize different behavior sets based on projects given to them. Regardless of the behavior set used, extrinsic motivations are never very enjoyable to the person and are done to please others, which Ryan and Deci (2000) reinforces that being connected to other people is an important part of one’s psychological conditioning.

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations can be utilized by individuals and will be accessed at different times depending on the project or task an individual is working on (La Guardia, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The reason a person may be focused on extrinsic motivation is for reward, such as a good grade, whereas, when considering

intrinsic motivation, the reward would be self-satisfaction they gain in obtaining new knowledge. Autonomy correlates highly with outcomes when a person feels supported.

Use of SDT in the Community College--Implications for Educational Practice

Students have natural tendencies to learn and teachers can be taught how to regenerate lost enthusiasm. Even though much of academic learning can be tedious and perhaps not “fun,” students can find ways to produce incentives or other reasons to learn. In fact Niemiec and Ryan (2009) indicated “students learn better and report higher levels of psychological health when they have well-internalized extrinsic motivation for learning” (p. 138). One of the most important tenants of SDT is that environments can either help support or diminish increased motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Intrinsically motivated studying is demonstrated by “concentration and engagement; it occurs spontaneously and people become wholly absorbed in it” (Byman & Kansanen, 2008, p. 608). This occurs with perceived autonomy by the student who is studying. As indicated by Ryan and Deci (2008; 2009), autonomy must be present in order for intrinsic motivations to surface. Student autonomy is also supported by teacher autonomy. In fact research by Deci, Nezlek, and Sheinman (1981, as cited by Byman & Kansanen, 2008) indicated “teachers who are autonomy-oriented have been shown to have more intrinsically motivated students with higher levels of self-esteem, compared to students of teachers who are control-oriented” (p. 609).

Ryan and Deci (2000) found that people could be extrinsically motivated while being *committed and authentic*. This could be accomplished by faculty in community colleges who help to meet student’s basic psychological needs, for both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. For example, by simply explaining the purpose for course

objectives, students feel more attached to the material. Students need to be challenged, but at the same time respected, liked, given feedback on the process, and encouraged to continue to grow (LaGuardia, 2009; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In addition to the classroom, it is easy to replicate these practices in student support areas of community colleges.

By using SDT as a framework, and a critical theoretical lens, the research provides a critical reflection of the services accessed by successful LIFG students in community colleges. More importantly, by juxtaposing services accessed with levels of motivations, this research contributes to creating new methods to strengthen student engagement as a mechanism to address attrition and retention at the community college level.

Chapter Summary

This literature review serves to examine statistics surrounding LIFG community college students. Most literature on student retention and attrition is focused on the first year of college, but less is known about the second year, and the transfer to the four-year college. This chapter aimed to address some of this missing information by exploring the historical context and future trends of community colleges. It evaluated the characteristics of community college students, specifically LIFG students. Student services affiliated with community college retention were explored, as was the transfer process to a four-year college. Finally, an examination of SDT and the LIFG community college students was explored. More research is needed in order to more deeply understand the phenomenon of LIFG students' successful transfer to and graduation from a four-year college.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This chapter provides an introduction and overview of the research problem, as well as discussion of the theoretical perspective for this study. It will restate the purpose statement and the research questions. It will also include information about the research sample, including the population from which the participants were drawn. A deeper understanding of the choice of qualitative methods for this study will be examined, as well as an inquiry of constructivism, a qualitative tool. Data collection methods will be discussed, including an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of each method used. Following the analyses of data collection methods, data analysis and synthesis, as well as ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness will be examined.

Problem Statement

Statistics indicate that between one-third to one-half of all students who attend a community college intend to complete a bachelor's degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Marti, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Provasnik & Planty, 2008); however, only approximately 34%-45% of these students will graduate with an *associate's degree* within six years (Fike & Fike, 2008; Karp et al., 2008; Bailey et al., 2005; Goldrick-Rab, 2010), and only 22% of them will transfer to a four-year institution (Mitchell, 2008). There is limited published information about the percentage of community college students who intend to transfer to and graduate from a four-year college, and who are successful at so doing. In fact, most

research is focused on college attendance rather than college completion (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

Research on the success rate of students who successfully transfer to, and graduate from, a four-year institution of higher education demonstrates varied success rates between 5%-50% (Handel, 2009). Other statistics indicate that 62% of community college students attend part-time, making them less likely to graduate with an associate's degree (Handel, 2009; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Given that community colleges enroll a large number of LIFG students, it is of concern that community colleges also have the fewest resources to offer their students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011; Karp et al., 2008). Common examples of these missing or limited resources include scholarship assistance, mental health counseling, tutorial assistance, and textbook support. The statistics, population and lack of support suggest that community colleges are not offering their students the services necessary for success. In fact, Fike and Fike (2008) state that colleges, both two-year and four-year, generally spend more money on recruiting new students than on retaining them, leaving the community college student to navigate through their educational journey with little assistance. This is further complicated by the fact community colleges have "Open Admissions" allowing entry for many academically ill-prepared students (Handel, 2009; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Although intended to "democratize" opportunities for all, this *Open Admission* may in fact complicate the goal of graduating larger numbers of students (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

Despite the statistics and research conducted on the reasons many LIFG students do *not* persist in community colleges, the fact remains that many students *do* persist, transfer to a four-year institution and successfully graduate with a bachelor's degree (Fike

& Fike, 2008; Handel, 2009). Even with limited resources, community colleges are aware of their high attrition rates and are continually developing new programs and initiatives to retain their students. These support mechanisms include student orientations, academic guidance and counseling, academic tutoring, personal guidance and counseling, career counseling, federal TRIO programs, academic learning communities, and developmental education (Karp et al., 2008). What is not well understood is which of these new or developing community college resources, or other factors, actually *matter* in the persistence of LIFG community college students through bachelor's degree attainment. When considering the low-retention rates and lists of significant challenges, the *success* rate of these students is not well understood.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that supported LIFG transfer graduates of four-year institutions in their persistence at the community college level. Specifically, this study focused on students who started at a community college in a Mid-Western state and graduated with their bachelor's degree from an Mid-Western college within six years. This study focused on support services these students accessed at the community college level and on other factors that helped them persist in their academic journeys at the four-year level, including motivations, both intrinsic and extrinsic. "Other factors" may consist of family support, parental educational levels, peer support, and other outside college influences.

Research Questions

1. What community college support services, strategies, motivations or other resources do LIFG students who started at a community college, credit for their persistence or graduation within six years from a four-year college?
2. What community college services did the students use to remove barriers or to work around them?
3. What intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors did students utilize?
4. What off-campus support did students cite as supportive to their degree attainment?
5. What services most often cited as support mechanisms at the community college were also utilized at the four-year college?

Overview of the Design of the Study

As indicated in Chapter II, this study was based upon the epistemological perspective of constructivism, a qualitative worldview. Corbin and Strauss (2008) say:

Concepts and theories are *constructed* by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves. Out of these multiple constructions, analysts construct something that they call knowledge. (p. 10)

This explanation of constructivism clearly links with qualitative analysis and to the factors to which community college students attribute their success. By allowing the researcher to recognize that the participant is “making sense out of their experience” at the same time the researcher is receiving the information, a unique opportunity exists for participant reflexivity to occur. Guba and Lincoln (1994) further demonstrated that

epistemologically, constructivism must be viewed by considering that “individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction *between* and *among* investigator and respondents” (p. 111). Lincoln and Guba, (1995, 2000) indicated constructivism state that “reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed” (as cited by Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, pp. 8-9), and that it is the researcher’s job to understand the “social phenomena from a context-specific perspective.” It is recommended that the researcher using this epistemological perspective engage deeply with their participants, and acknowledge that their own experiences will shape their interpretations of the data. Creswell (2009) posited that the constructivist researchers *position* themselves in the research and that they validate the findings, as well as make recommendations for creating “an agenda for change or reform” while collaborating with the participants (p. 17). Therefore, these researchers will inductively develop meaning from the data they have collected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Critical Theory (CT) uses a constructivist epistemology and aligns with the nature of this specific research; thus it serves as the study’s *theoretical perspective*. CT is “concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender” (Creswell, 2007, p. 27). For this study, CT provides for a critical reflection of the services accessed by community college students who are LIFG. CT is an appropriate perspective from which to approach this study, as these groups are often marginalized from society, and an understanding of what works in regard to retention may leverage their successes in higher education. Creswell (2007) found that a critical researcher needs to acknowledge “their own power, engage in dialogues, and use theory to interpret or illuminate social action” (p. 27). Finally, this study is also *applied*

research as defined by Patton (2002), as research with the intent “to illuminate a societal concern” (p. 213).

Research exists at multiple levels in the field of higher education and requires varying *research methodologies*. Research methodologies or strategies of inquiry include *quantitative* and *qualitative*, or a combination of the two called *mixed methods* (Creswell, 2009). It is the qualitative researcher who is concerned with finding “rich, thick descriptions” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). For the purpose of this study on LIFG students who begin their studies at community colleges, a qualitative approach connects with social change (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), a concept that correlates well with educational attainment and social mobility. Specifically, qualitative research places an “emphasis on exploration, discovery, and description” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 8). Some of the components of qualitative research include acknowledging that the research may shift and be fluid as the data begins to emerge. Furthermore, qualitative research utilizes an inductive process that builds patterns, categories, and themes as the data continues to emerge (Creswell, 2009). Creswell reminds his readers that the qualitative researcher is to be cognizant that the focus of learning is built on the participants’ meanings, and “not the meaning the researchers bring to the research or writers express in the literature” (2009, p. 175). In fact, qualitative researchers specifically and purposefully “select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2009, p. 178). In their role as qualitative researchers they assume the role of the *emic* (insider) and are very involved with asking questions, and probing for more valuable information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Given the intense and intimate nature of qualitative research, it is appropriate to have a small number of purposefully selected research participants, who will serve as the lens to view the social phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Qualitative research is “seeking to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (Glesne, 1999, p.4). In this scenario, the researcher becomes the main instrument in the study as she situates herself deeply into the study.

Within qualitative methodology, various theories may be used to guide the research and analyses of data; for this SDT will be used as an *a priori* theoretical framework. As indicated in Chapter II, SDT posits that there are two basic kinds of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is defined as “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). Ryan and Deci (2000) defined extrinsic motivation as “the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (p. 71). Another definition provided by Gagne and Deci (2005) demonstrates that extrinsic motivation “requires an instrumentality between the activity and some separable consequences such as tangible or verbal rewards, so satisfaction comes not from the activity itself but rather from the extrinsic consequences to which the activity leads” (p. 331). Using SDT as a guide and lens of analysis, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations will be examined in this study.

According to Merriam (2002), “Narratives are first-person accounts of experiences that are in story format having a beginning, middle, and an end” (p. 286). Another definition is provided by Chase (2011) who defined it as “meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or

others' actions, or organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (p. 421). A narrative approach was used in conducting this research. Creswell (2007) posited that narratives are best utilized when interviewing only a small group of people, as the researcher will spend substantial time with the participants to collect their stories. Collection methods may include story sharing, documents, pictures or other artifacts. "Restorying" is the concept used to assemble all of the stories together by "reorganizing the stories into some general type of framework and then rewriting the stories to place them within a chronological sequence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). This approach is also "holistic in that it acknowledges the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions of meaning making. It also takes into account the biological and environmental influences on development" (Merriam, 2002, p. 287).

Research Procedures and Considerations

Throughout the research process, the researcher must ensure that all ethical considerations are being met, that trustworthiness of the study is assured and that delimitations and limitations of the study are stated (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). *Ethical considerations* include ensuring that all participants give informed consent for participation in the study. Creswell (2009) stated that a qualitative researcher will be sure to not "further marginalize or disempower the study participants" (p. 88). One way this researcher reduced the possibility of further disempowering this study's participants was to have both the selected community college and Oklahoma State University Institutional Research Board (IRB) review the intended informed consent (Appendix B). The IRB is charged with providing "protection against human rights violations," (Creswell, 2009, p.

89) and plays a critical role in making sure that research participants are not hurt. Additional ethical considerations outlined by Creswell (2009) include honoring confidentiality, safe-keeping of the data (5-10 years), accurate interpretation of the data, using unbiased words and language, and having reciprocity between the researched and the researcher (meaning there is a mutual benefit).

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) discuss in great detail the importance of *trustworthiness*. They break trustworthiness into three traits:

- (1) Credibility: whether the participants' perceptions match up with the researcher's portrayal of them,
- (2) Dependability: whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data, and
- (3) Transferability: how well the study has made it possible for the reader to decide whether similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding how they occur at the research site. (pp. 76-78)

Ways of ensuring trustworthiness in this study included allowing research participants to read and give feedback on the transcribed interviews, keeping notes of the research process and organizing and securing all research data. Data was kept in the confines of the researcher's home and on her personal computer. All data and access to the computer were password protected. There were no personal identifying markers on the data, as pseudonyms were assigned. The "key" of all pseudonyms was secured in a restricted location in the researcher's home. All data was organized in a manner that protected the identity of the participants. Finally, the researcher offers thick, rich descriptions about the research setting, participants, and findings.

Finally, limitations or more specifically, *delimitations* and *limitations* of this study must be addressed. Delimitations “clarify the boundaries of your study,” whereas limitations “of the study expose the conditions that may weaken the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, pp. 78-79). To address delimitations, this researcher reminds her audience that this study focuses on exploring specific strategies and services that supported persistence at the community college level for students who are LIFG and who had the intent of transferring to, and graduating from, a four-year institution (earning a bachelor’s degree). Limitations included geographical boundaries of the study (limited to students graduating in this Mid-Western State) and to students who graduated with a bachelor’s degree within a six-year time frame. One final limitation is that the researcher focused on only students who started at one particular mid-western urban community college, and who graduated within six years from a variety of Mid-Western four-year colleges.

Study Site

Students were purposively selected from one urban community college located in a Mid-Western State. This community college is the largest community college in the state; it is also the third largest college in the state, making it a valuable institution to look at when considering the large number of students it transfers to four-year colleges. Red Rock Community College (pseudonym) serves a diverse representation of students, including large numbers of students who are LIFG, and meet important participant criteria for this research. Students who attend this college may transfer to a variety of colleges located throughout this Mid-Western State through articulation agreements established by the Mid-Western State Regents for Higher Education. Red Rock

Community College (RRCC), was established in 1970, currently offers over 200 degrees and certificates, and enrolls over 25,000 students each year.

Study Participants

Creswell (2007) stated that purposeful sampling means “that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). In order to identify the eleven participants for this study, the researcher approached the Office of Institutional Research at Red Rock Community College and requested the names of LIFG students who began their associates at RRCC and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in state, within six years. Specific information requested included the students’ name, grade point average at the community college, as well as last known contact information, including a mailing address, telephone number and email. The researcher then contacted the students via United States mail with a written letter informing them of the intended research project as well as an invitation to participate (Appendix B). The letter included the researcher’s contact information, as well as notice that the researcher would also try to make contact by phone and email. When the researcher was able to assemble at least eleven participants she did not continue to follow-up requesting more participation. The researcher selected four of the eleven participants to participate in the focus group. Selection was based on choosing a diversity of students, representing diverse backgrounds and college experiences. Those selected for the focus group were students who are able to commute to Tulsa for an interview. The researcher also used the *Demographic Facesheet* (Appendix C) as a method to determine diversity of student backgrounds (i.e. traditional vs. non-traditional, race, gender, rural and urban).

A smaller sample size of participants is common for a qualitative study as results are not intended to be generalizable, rather, to gather extensive information about the individuals studied (Creswell, 2007). Given that this is a narrative study that used a variety of qualitative methods for data collection, the chosen sample size of 11 participants was appropriate; data was analyzed individually, as well as collectively to create one story.

Often in research, the study participants are those from marginalized and less powerful groups. The reason for this is that these groups are easier to access, and because the research outcomes should be able to highlight inequalities and the need for more attention to be given to these groups. Given this information, it is important that researchers are called upon to make sure that protections are put in place to ensure this group is not further marginalized (Thorne, 2004). One such protection is informed consent. The federal regulations define informed consent as “the knowing consent of an individual or his legally authorized representative, so situated as to be able to exercise free power of choice without undue inducement or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, or other forms of constraint or coercion” (Annas et al., 1977: 291, as cited in Thorne, 2004, p. 160). The regulations of informed consent fall into the following guidelines: *fair explanations, description of risk and benefits, an answer to inquiries, and instruction that the person is free to withdraw consent at any time* (Thorne, 2004). The inclusion of CT as a theoretical perspective would advocate that diligent application of consent and all ethical considerations be practiced at all times. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix B.

In addition to informed consent, other areas to consider in the area of research participants include anonymity and confidentiality. Though researchers cannot guarantee anonymity, they can promise confidentiality. Warren and Karner (2010) advocated for following the professional code of ethics and what is outlined in the IRB proposal in order to protect the participants and the integrity of the research. This would include not describing participants in such detail that their identity can be determined. Another example of protecting the research participant is not asking questions that may be harmful to the participant.

Data Collection

A variety of data collection methods appropriate to qualitative research were utilized in this study, including a face sheet, one-on-one interviews (including observations), one focus group, and an exploration of artifacts shared by research participants.

The face-sheet (Appendix C) was utilized in order to gather accurate demographic data. Warren and Karner (2010) suggested that a face sheet include information that a participant can fill out while the researcher is setting up his or her recording device. They suggest that in order to practice confidentiality, the form be coded to match the code on the tape and on the transcript of the interview.

Individual or one-on-one interviews used open-ended questions, some pre-determined, and some that naturally emerged as follow-up questions. At the beginning of each interview, the purpose of the interview was explained and fluidity in feedback, honesty, and thick descriptions were encouraged. Questions asked of the interviewees focused on which support services were used, expressed barriers, attainment of support,

and which services best supported the participants. A copy of the interview guide is located in Appendix D. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Using a data summary sheet that I immediately filled out at the conclusion of the interview or focus group enabled me to capture observations and other important findings before I transcribe the interviews (Appendix E).

A focus group of four participants, including two participants who did take part in individual interviews, was conducted. Focus groups are another way to analyze data related to this study. According to Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2011), focus groups can take the form of “collective conversations or group interviews. They can be small or large, directed or non-directed” (p. 545). More importantly, focus groups serve to take the researcher out of the “center” of the research and, thus, “can facilitate the democratization of the research process, allowing participants more ownership over it, and promoting more dialogue interactions and the joint construction of more polyvocal texts” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011, p. 560).

In anticipation of the focus group, the researcher asked participants to bring one object or artifact with them that they believe highlights their community college experience. The advantage to using artifacts is that it adds to the thickness of the data collected. Furthermore, Marshall and Rossman (2011) believe that these materials can be gathered without disturbing the setting. Examples of artifacts for this research included awards won by students, transcripts, diplomas, organizational membership certificate, and transfer acceptance letters. *Restorying* will be utilized by searching for themes and codes in the data, organizing the data into different sections and then preparing a new story of the participant(s) using their own words and experiences.

Data Analyses

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) state that the process of analyzing and synthesizing qualitative data includes devising a plan to organize and shape the collected data into meaningful data. A data summary which was completed immediately following the conclusion of an interview or focus group was used. This helped to capture observations and other important findings prior to transcribing the interviews (Appendix E). After all interviews and the focus group were transcribed, data analyses began.

Creswell (2009) stated that the “process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, presenting the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 183). In order to evaluate and interpret data collected in this study, the researcher first read and then reread all of the data. Data were sorted for emerging themes and important outliers, which were cut and pasted into a Microsoft Word document. The Microsoft Word comment function was used to make margin notations denoting possible themes. Warren and Karner (2010) cautioned that before “narrowing your focus, you need to have some sense of the ‘big picture’ of your data” (p. 220). Through the data collection of all data into one document, the researcher first considered the ‘big picture’ before cutting each piece of information into strips of paper to sort into numerous themes. Once collected into themes, the researcher looked for similarities, outliers, and other descriptive data that helped to describe the phenomenon under study.

Chapter Summary

This methodology chapter outlined the research questions to be explored through qualitative narrative methodology. The participant sample was made up of eleven purposefully selected individuals. Five different data collection methods were utilized including the collection of face sheets, one-on-one interviews, one focus group, formal and informal observations, and an exploration of artifacts shared by research participants. Data were analyzed using qualitative procedures until themes begin to emerge. Ethical considerations were addressed including the use of member checking and reciprocity. Trustworthiness was created by addressing credibility, dependability and transferability. Finally, limitations were addressed so future researchers can consider them for their research.

CHAPTER IV

Participants and Site Description

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Maya Angelou

As described in Chapter I of this research, the purpose of this study is to identify the factors that supported LIFG transfer graduates of four-year institutions in their persistence at the community college level. Specifically, this study focused on students who started at RRCC, transferred to a four-year institution, and graduated with their bachelor's degree within six years. The research questions reflected themes identified in the literature review.

Research Questions

1. What community college support services, strategies, motivations or other resources do low-income, first-generation students who started at a community college, credit for their persistence or graduation within six years from a four-year college?
2. What community college services did the students use to remove barriers or to work around them?

3. What intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors did students utilize?
4. What off-campus support did students cite as supportive to their degree attainment?
5. What services most often cited as support mechanisms at the community college were also utilized at the four-year college?

This chapter first presents a description of the county and RRCC. It then presents “thick, rich” descriptions of the eleven participants, obtained from nine one-on-one interviews, and one focus group comprised of four participants.

The Local County (located in a central part of the United States)

The county that hosts the four campuses that comprise RRCC has a population of 603,403 according to the 2010 U.S. Census Quick Fact Data. Males and females are equally represented in the population. Roughly 25% of the residents are under the age of 18, with 12% being over the age of 65. Approximately 69% of the residents, within the county, are Caucasian, while the remainder is made up different ethnic groups, with the largest group being African American at 10%, followed by American Indians (6.1%), Asian/Pacific Islanders (2.3%), Hispanics (11%) and bi-racial (5.8%). Twenty-eight percent of the population hold a bachelor’s degree or higher, as compared to the national data of 27.9%. Nearly 15% of the local population is considered below the poverty line, as compared to 13.8% of the national population (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

The Institutional Setting

RRCC is a landmark in its community, situated in a centrally located small sized city in the United States. Established in 1970, as Red Rock Junior College, the name was

changed in 1996 to Red Rock Community College to reflect the changing mission of the college. The most recent mission statement states:

Red Rock Community College betters its community through the intellectual achievement, creative energy, and responsible citizenship of its students, faculty, and staff by their engagement in teaching, learning, and service opportunities that transform and enrich lives. Red Rock Community College commits to innovative, flexible, and affordable public higher education that responds to a dynamic global environment (www.redrockcc.edu).

Literature provided by the college provides the following history:

Red Rock Community College has served its community as a valued educational resource for more than four decades. After opening in the heart of downtown Red Rock, RRCC has become a multi-campus community college serving 35,000 students in credit and continuing education programs annually. Four fully equipped campuses populate the Red Rock area, along with several community campuses in the suburban areas. As one of the nation's premier community colleges, RRCC consistently ranks among the Top 35 of the nation's 1,150 community college associate degree producers. The College serves more students in higher education than any other public college or university in the Central area and regularly ranks among the state's top three institutions in first-time college freshman enrollment (www.redrockcc.edu).

Further information indicates that there are over 200 associate degree and certificate options. Other additional Quick Facts include:

- The student to faculty ratio at RRCC is 18:1.

- RRCC’s tuition costs and fees are nearly half of those at public universities.
- RRCC’s four campus locations offer a total of 205 degree and certification programs.
- RRCC is the leader in online education in the state with over 7,000 students enrolled in online and distance learning courses.

A closer look at the exact numbers and demographic makeup of the college assists with comprehending the student population at RRCC. The college’s student demographics for the most recent year in which data is available (Fall 2011) is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

RRCC Enrollment Demographic Information Fall 2011

	Total Enrollment for Fall 2011	27, 460
Gender	Male	37%
	Female	62%
Enrollment Status	Full-Time	46%
	Part-Time	54%
Race	Caucasian	63%
	African American	10%
	Asian	3%
	Native American	9%
	Hispanic	6%
	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0%
	More than 1 Race Reported	5%
	Other	0%
Age	No response	3%
	21 or Younger	39%
	22-31	37%
	32-41	14%
	42-51	6%
	52-61	3%
	Over 61	1%
Major	No Response	3%
	University Parallel	61%

Note. Interpreted from RRCC website, 2012.

A majority of students indicated intent to transfer to a four-year program and were using RRCC as a pathway. Over 63% of the population was Caucasian, with the remaining 37% representing diverse backgrounds. Almost 80% of the RRCC population was under the age of 31. The enrollment status, or part-time versus full-time student attendance, was almost evenly distributed with the greater number attending part-time. As is common with most community colleges, female attendance was significantly higher than male attendance at 62% to 37% respectively (American Association of Community College, 2012). Specifically, data by the American Association of Community College (AACC) demonstrates that nationally, community colleges are comprised of 61% of females, and 39% of males, respectively. National enrollment patterns are listed at 41% full-time attendance and 59% part-time attendance, making fall of 2011 at RRCC unique in that it was almost evenly split in attendance ratio of part-time to full-time students. Furthermore, RRCC had a more diverse student population than the national norm.

Figure 2 presents enrollment by ethnicity from the AACC webpage, demonstrating the racial breakdown nationally, of student ethnicity in community colleges. Figure 3 presents an additional pie chart demonstrating the greater diversity at RRCC. However, it appears that the greater diversity at RRCC comes at the cost to African American students. Whereas the national average shows 27% of African American makeup at community colleges, RRCC had only ten percent. However, RRCC also had a significantly greater percentage of enrollments of American Indian and Hispanic Students.

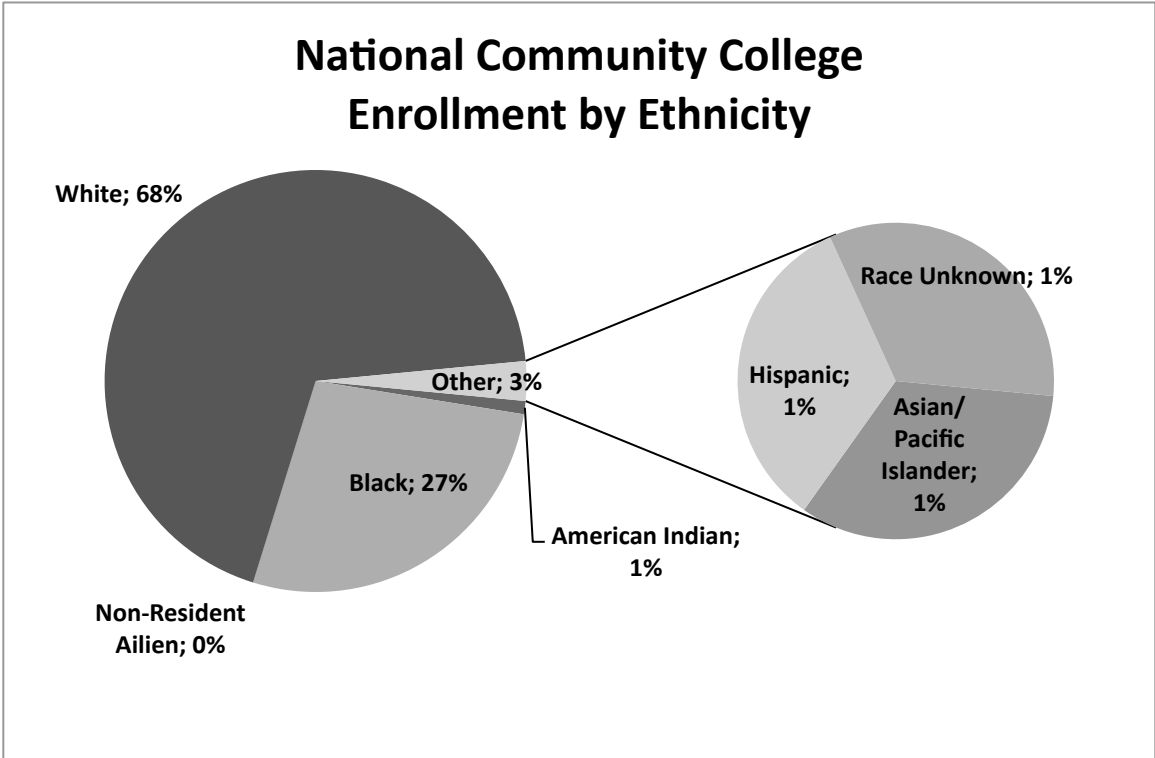


Figure 2. Representation of ethnicity of enrollment based on data available for the Community Colleges in the United States (Community college enrollment, n.d.).

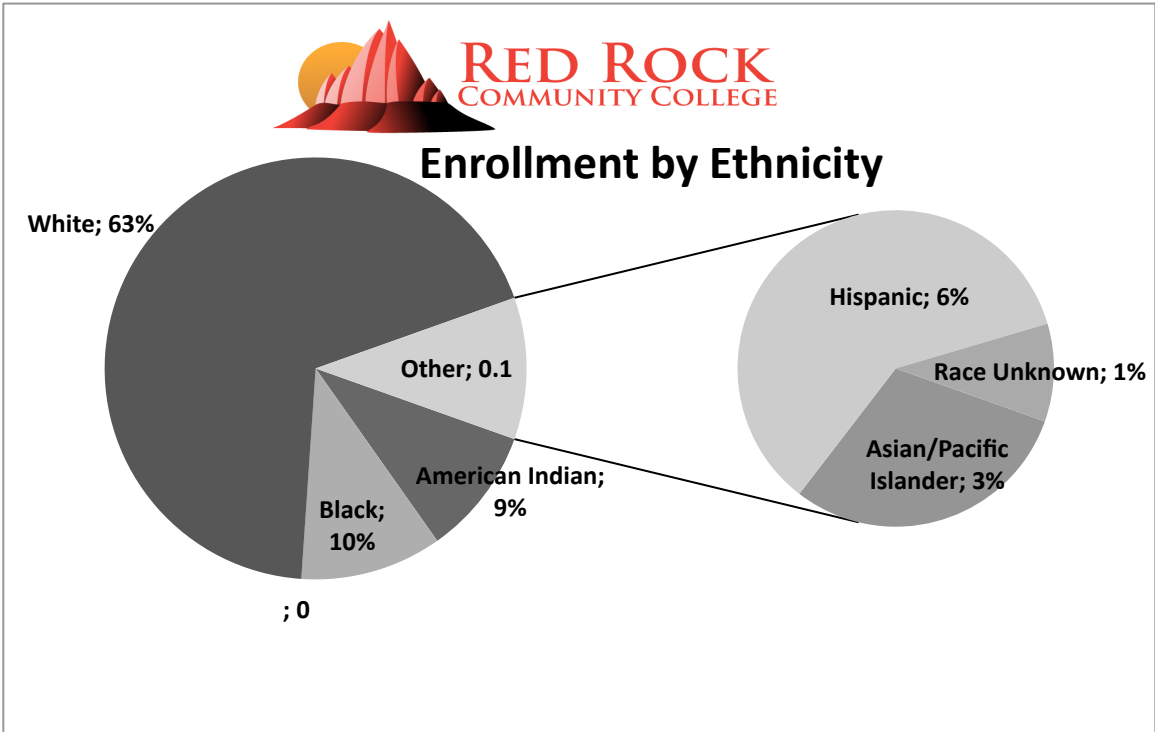


Figure 3. Representation of ethnicity of enrollment at local county community college based on data on their informative website (RRCC.edu, 2012).

Despite the greater diversity at RRCC, compared to the national data, the same racial and ethnic diversity was not represented in the faculty and staff of the college. The administration was working toward a more inclusive hiring pattern that would reflect the diversity of the community. The institution's diversity statement read as follows:

Diversity Council Mission Statement

The Diversity Council is committed to bridge the gaps among students, faculty and staff of all cultures and ethnicity. The Council's mission is to promote an increased awareness of and a shared commitment to inclusiveness and diversity throughout the learning-centered environment at [Red Rock Community College] (www.redrockcc.edu).

This diversity mission statement was included in the college's strategic planning efforts. Two direct goals related to diversity included: (1) Recruit and retain students of color and minority students, and (2) Recruit and retain faculty and staff of color. In addition to diversity, the college, led by a board of regents, and President Connors, were dedicated to the advancement of the community through educational achievement. In a recent media release, President Connors (September, 2011) shared the following message:

[RRCC] is committed to facilitating student learning. We believe that we can best fulfill that commitment by providing a supportive learning-centered environment that focuses on the individual. Students tell us that they like the small class sizes

and accessible faculty they find at [RRCC]. The College's faculty and staff are second to none in providing quality education opportunities and services to our students and our community. Our faculty includes outstanding educators who have been honored by organizations including the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the [state's] Heritage Society, and numerous other professional educational organizations.

A review of the current RRCC website indicates the following services are available to their students, at all four locations: academic advisement, bookstores and textbooks, learning resource center (library), career services, disability support, financial aid, fitness center, labs and tutoring, student activities (including student organizations), testing, veterans and military, campus police, TRIO programs, recovery support, international student services, allied health counseling, international language lab, and an honor's program. These services are representative of typical student support services found at community colleges across the United States.

Research Participants

In order to recruit participants, 150 letters of invitation, each including a self-addressed stamped envelope, were sent out to a sample of RRCC graduates who met the criteria of having started at a community college and graduated from a four-year college within six years. The RRCC Office of Institutional Research provided the list of potential participants. However, the list of alumni did not filter out students who were *not* LIFG while at RRCC; furthermore, the addresses provided were at least six years old. Of the 150 mailed letters, 47 were returned with an indication that the participant no longer resided at that address. Eight participants responded that they were not interested

in participating in the study. Ten responses indicated an interest in study participation. Of the 10 who expressed interest, three were excluded as they did not meet the criteria for participation, two did not return calls and one was interviewed but was later disqualified as not meeting the criteria. Four of the 10 initial responders were interviewed. Given the poor response rate, a modified IRB expanded recruitment methods to include word of mouth through Facebook, a social media network, and through previous participants in the RRCC TRIO Student Support Services Program (Appendix F). It was in this latter attempt at recruitment through Facebook and word of mouth that led to an additional seven participants, for a total of eleven participants.

The diversity of RRCC students was represented in the participants who agreed to participate in this study. Table 3 outlines the demographic data for the participants of this study.

Table 3

Participant Self-Reported Demographics.

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Current age	Race	Participated in SAGE/TRIO Program	Relocated and graduated from:	Earned Master's
Steve	Male	27	White/ Native American	No	Relocated to 4-year college out of town	No
Ashley	Female	27	White	No	Relocated to 4-year college out of town	No
Marcus	Male	26	Black	No	Attended 4-year college in town	No

Happy (Non-Trad)	Female	30	White	Yes	Relocated to 4-year college out of town	No
Orquidea	Female	31	Hispanic	No	Attended 4-year college in town	No
Samantha (Non-Trad)	Female	36	White	Yes	Attended 4-year college in town	No
Mike	Male	24	African American	Yes	Relocated to 4-year college out of town	No
Delisha	Female	23	Black	Yes	Relocated to 4-year college out of town	No
Cody (Non-Trad)	Male	34	Black	No	Attended 4-year college in town	Yes
Greg	Male	35	Caucasian	No	Relocated to 4-year college out of town	Yes
Becky (Non-Trad)	Female	52	White	No	Attended 4-year college in town	Yes

A summation of this data indicates that of the 11 participants, five were male and six were female. Ages of the participants ranged from 23 to 52 years; four participants were considered non-traditional students when they started college. Five of the participants were Caucasian, four were Black or African American, one was Hispanic, and one identified as being both White and Native American. Seven of the students did not

participate in the SAGE TRIO Student Support Services Program, while the remaining four did. Seven of the students transferred to a college outside the town of RRCC and four remained in town to continue their education. Since completing their four-year degrees, three of the participants earned Masters' degrees, including one who is currently working on his doctorate. All but one of the participants indicated a desire to continue their education.

I utilized guiding interview questions and was able to witness themes emerge that created a broader picture of the of LIFG community college student experience. This chapter will begin with exploring the participant backgrounds, family support and demonstration for the importance of higher education, participant desire for higher education, and the reason for choosing a community college. In Chapter V, an in-depth analysis of students' motivations will be observed through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, looking specifically at *Extrinsic Motivations*, *Intrinsic Motivations*, and *Sense of Belonging*.

Participant Backgrounds

Steve “Kind of things you have to do.”

A face-to-face interview was not possible as Steve lived out of state, so a phone interview was scheduled. Steve presented himself as a professional young man who was eager to participate in the interview as he felt it was an “important and greatly overlooked” topic. He described a cheerful childhood growing up in a suburb of Red Rock. His parents divorced when he was in the third grade, and he was raised solely by his mother. He attended the local high school and graduated with strong grades in 2003.

Though he had hoped to join the military after high school, a medical condition prevented it so he reluctantly decided on RRCC.

Though Steve and his mother never actually had a *plan* for college, his mother did *stress* to him the importance of education, but she never did *push* it. However, Steve knew that a higher education was needed for the future he desired; he stated that his future was to include, “not just a job, but a career.” In fact he knew throughout his time in high school that he would go to college in order to obtain that “career.”

It was always kind of a known that I would, I mean I just accepted the fact that I was going to go even if I had to pay, pay my way through for everything. So it really wasn't if, or a matter of do you want to go, it was where do you want to go and how are we going to accomplish this?

Ashley “I wanted more than fast food, you know.”

Ashley met me at the local four-year college library, located downtown. She was an attractive petite Caucasian woman, approximately 5'7, with shoulder length blond hair and was wearing professional, business casual clothing. A large smile emanated from her face as she greeted me.

Ashley was born and raised by both parents in a rural suburb of Red Rock. She recalled a constant financial struggle in the home. Her mother was unable to hold employment due to a traumatic brain injury, and her father's job did not pay enough to cover all the bills. Ashley reported that her father had a history of spending precious money on alcohol and marijuana. This was frustrating to the family given that they depended on food stamps and other forms of assistance, including the Angel Tree at Christmas.

Ashley enjoyed spending time with her friends in high school but admitted she was not a strong student. “I was just not interested in the homework and the tests.” But she was very interested in drama and eventually pursued that field in college. Although Ashley’s dad held an Associate’s Degree and advanced abilities in math, he neither promoted the importance of education to his daughters nor provided them academic support. Ashley’s mom tried college, but was unable to retain any of the information due to her disability. As Ashley reported,

You know, they were all for it, but they didn’t really push it. They were just kind of “do whatever you wanted to do”. And I worked at a fast food restaurant my junior and senior year of high school and I just knew *I wanted more than fast food, you know*, all my life I knew I couldn’t do what I wanted to do without some kind of education. So, I just kind of took a leap of faith.

Another motivation for Ashley to attempt college was her desire to leave her rural community and her parents’ home. “I just don’t want to stay here any longer. I wanted to get out of the house, my parents’ house. It just wasn’t a good situation, and I wanted it over with.” Her grandmother, who lived in a more urban area, offered her a chance to live with her and attend the nearby community college. This worked out well as Ashley had been accepted to two private religious colleges, but was unable to attend due to the cost. Furthermore, she was not admitted to the state four-year college of her choice due to her overall ACT scores. All of these reasons made the community college option very attractive to her.

Marcus “Of course you wanted to seem somewhat successful, so you went to college.”

Marcus is a small framed African American man standing at approximately 5'4" tall with a slight build and a warm and peaceful grace. He offered me his hand and appeared a bit nervous about the impending interview; nonetheless, his authentic and sincere smile radiated a desire to help me learn more about the LIFG experience.

Marcus shared that he grew up in the north part of town, which is a predominantly low-income African American community that is overridden with violence, poverty, little surrounding health care, grocery stores, or safe parks for children to play in. It is a neighborhood that is in constant despair, needing economic stability, educational opportunities for its residents, and more of a positive police presence. However, despite the community's disparities, it is also a community that has risen through tremendous adversity including past race wars that were targeted at destroying the community. Notwithstanding the past history, the community is filled with generations of families and caring people who are committed to community organizing and change.

Marcus was raised by his single mother and had little contact with his father. His younger brother and maternal grandparents also resided in the home. The family struggled to pay bills as they all depended on his mother's income, his grandmother's social security, and eventually the money Marcus made when he started working at age fifteen.

High school "wasn't bad" according to Marcus. He reported that because he did not have the money or desire for materialistic things such as clothing and shoes he wasn't among the popular group, rather was part of the "mediocre crowd" taking the opportunity to hang out with all different types of people. He attended a magnet school that had a strong emphasis on education and was recognized for graduating a large percentage of

their students and sending them on to national colleges. He recalled earning good grades in high school, though he did reflect that they could have been stronger. He did not recall meeting much with the high school counselors to talk about college, which he recalled as surprising as there is intense pressure from that particular high school to attend college. However, he did recall being counseled to fill out the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and meeting with a RRCC recruiter.

When asked how his family stressed the importance of an education, Marcus appeared to pick his words carefully, out of respect for his family.

They always encouraged me to go forth. They didn't really push it. They didn't obtain a type of education, so they were just happy for me to graduate from high school. You know, they just wanted me to get a job. But me going to (sic a magnate school) you know everybody else was going to college that was the thing, so of course you wanted to seem somewhat successful.

Marcus reported that he decided to attend a community college for many reasons, including the fact it was affordable, he had seen too many friends from high school return unsuccessfully from four-year college, and because his mom wanted him to stay nearby “to you know, help support, and that type of deal, and be the role model for my younger brother. So I end up just going straight into community college.”

Happy “My family life was hell.”

Happy, a former participant in the SAGE TRIO Student Support Services grant at RRCC, also agreed to participate in the interviews. She dressed festively for the upcoming Christmas holiday with a short green plaid skirt with red stockings underneath.

This was adorned with black boots, and a festive sweater top. She had beautiful long straight light brown hair and stood about 5'8" tall.

Happy was raised in Red Rock and lived with her mother until she was sixteen. Her mother struggled with substance abuse and was unable to provide a healthy or caring environment for Happy. Her father was an abusive alcoholic who died in prison from cirrhosis. Happy suffered significant abuse as a child at the hands of her parents and her mother's various boyfriends. "*My family life was hell,*" Happy stated. In fact she was emancipated from her parents when she was 16 years old. The only positive thing she could recall was that her grandparents, who were not low-income, paid for her to attend a private Catholic high school until she emancipated herself. She finished her high school diploma at a local public school. It appears her only influence toward a higher education came from the three years she was at the private school. At that school, she reported, "There was no, you're not going to college--it was expected."

Happy was unable to attend college right after high school as a result of not having an income to pay for it. She decided to wait until she was 24 and deemed *independent* in order to receive financial aid to attend college. In between high school and college, she worked various jobs, most focused on call centers. After living with a boyfriend whom she deemed "verbally abusive," she applied to Creek College, a four-year private college based upon her ex-boyfriend's degree achievement.

Because he had his bachelor's degree in theological studies and he had a wall of books about Jesus and God, and his favorite words were God fucking damn it, and that was the moment, I think when I snapped. And I said, you know what, if he can graduate from Creek College, so can I!

This “critical incident” was when Happy, at age 24, went to the four-year private college to learn about her options. Patton (2002) defined a “critical incident” as a participant’s expression of a moment that made a large impression on future decision making. This moment propelled Happy to begin the application process to Creek College. Despite her strong academic background, the advisor there recommended that Happy get started at RRCC in order to save money.

Orquidea “I really don’t care to be cleaning toilets.”

Orquidea was dressed in gray slacks and a loose fitting paisley colored top. She has dark eyes, black shoulder length hair, and stands at approximately 5’4”. She has a slight frame and speaks with what some might consider a timid voice. Though Orquidea was *not* born in Guatemala, she considers herself *from* Guatemala because “that was my language, Spanish was my first language, my food, culture, really is from Guatemala.” She was born in Texas and then later moved to a rural part of a central state. Her family relocated to the United States as her father was recruited to pastor a nearby community. She moved to Red Rock when she was 9 years old. She was raised with her parents and had no siblings.

Her high school experience was “fun.” She attended a local public school after not being selected to attend a nearby magnet school. She recalls being a mediocre student struggling with math and chemistry. What was difficult for her at her high school was that there was a very high dropout rate or transfer rate. She also felt that she did not fit in with any particular clique, rather spent her time talking with all different people. Nonetheless, she always knew that when she left high school she was going to attend

college. “That’s something that I grew up knowing, that I was going to go to school and once I graduated that I was going to on with my education.”

Her parents emphasized the importance of education. “My dad loves to read. Really, I think he has self-educated himself, and that’s something that I kind of learned from him.” Her mom was a big influence as well. Because her mother did not speak English well, and because she did not have a high school education, she often found herself cleaning homes. She would tell Orquidea, “I really don’t care for you to continue in my footsteps. You need your education so that you can have a better job.” Having spent summers helping her mother clean homes, Orquidea knew that was not the future she wanted. “*I really don’t care to be cleaning toilets, or being cleaning bathrooms, and cleaning for other people that have money.*” Though she intended to go to a religiously affiliated college out of state, she could not afford the tuition. Furthermore, she qualified for MW PROMISE, a statewide tuition scholarship, and wanted to take advantage of free education, “so I could start here (RRCC), and then go, move on to a university.”

Samantha “I always knew I was a survivor, I’m like a roach.”

Samantha, another former participant in the SAGE TRIO SSS program, met with me in the TRIO conference room on a chilly day after Christmas. She arrived with a very warm and genuine smile that went from ear to ear. Her short brown hair had a hint of red in it and reflected a very fashionable style. She was sporting black slacks, with a black blouse accompanied by a beautiful jacket that had black and purple circles on it. Her silver hoop earrings matched her silver necklace and completed her wardrobe ensemble. After an exchange of pleasantries by Samantha and myself, the interview commenced.

Speaking in a very soft and pleasant voice, Samantha described her childhood as very chaotic, unhealthy, abusive and dysfunctional. She was raised by her mother along with several siblings, with different men coming in and out of her mother's life. Her father was not in her life and in fact he was abandoned by her mother at the hospital after he had a brain aneurism. He died in the hospital not ever seeing his family again. Samantha dropped out of high school in the 10th grade. "I didn't really take school seriously then... I was basically in survival mode my whole childhood... Other things were definitely on my mind, besides school, school was just one more thing I had to do." During the time she was in high school she remembers one teacher noticing the academic potential in her. In fact when he told her that she should not be at that particular alternative school, she immediately thought "he was trying to say I was a freak." Her low self-esteem has definitely presented some barriers to being able to accept compliments. When she ultimately listened to what he had to say, she heard "you're gifted." It was those words that resonated with her years later when she decided to try college.

Prior to starting college, Samantha earned her GED through a social agency in Red Rock. At the time, she had a newborn baby, and in order to receive state assistance, the agency required her to get a GED. She was 19 years old when she took the GED test and did well in all subjects, with the exception of math. When asked why she got the GED, aside from the state mandate, given that there was no family pushing her to get it, she replied,

Because I knew that I wanted to do better for my daughter than had been done for me. I always knew I wanted a better life, I just didn't know how to achieve it.

When you don't see people around you achieve it, it's hard to know the steps to take to achieve it, even if you want to be different.

It would be years later when Samantha started college, after convincing her husband to let her attend. "I remember convincing him to watch the kids, like one night a week so I can go take a history class." She decided to try a community college, as it was the only college she "really knew about at first." Furthermore she felt "it just kind of makes sense, that this could be entry level." She was also fearful that she would not be admitted into a four-year college. After doing well that first semester at RRCC, earning an A in that course, she said "it was the first time I knew I was smart. Because *I always knew I was a survivor, I'm like a roach*, (laughed), I knew I could make it no matter what, but I didn't know I was really smart." After taking a few more classes, and receiving more A's, Samantha stated, "Once I knew I had the potential to do well in college, I wanted it, and I wanted it really bad!"

Mike "Don't let nobody tell you that you can't do it, cause you can."

Mike is an African American male who stands approximately 5'10" and has a stocky build. He was wearing the local state college hooded sweatshirt, referred to as a hoodie, and underneath has a black t-shirt on, accompanied by a pair of jeans and sneakers. When Mike smiled he brightened up the room. He also exuded a nervous laugh when asked questions, ultimately contributing to a very comfortable interview experience.

Like Marcus, Mike also grew up in the north part of town. He and his two sisters were raised by their mother. The only male role model he had was a step-father from 1996 to 1999. Despite the absence of a father, Mike felt that his mother provided a lot of

emotional support for his family. Mike attended two public high schools. He made the decision to transfer his junior year because he was no longer in athletics and wanted a fresh start after an emotional year in which both his sister and grandmother passed away. During his junior and senior year, Mike recalled becoming a better student “because it was time to get serious, really serious about college and everything, and of course you have to have the grades to get into certain universities.”

His mother was very supportive about him attending college. “She would always tell me, get an education...if you have the opportunity to go to college, go ahead and do it...*and don't let nobody tell you that you can't do it, cause you can.*” By the time Mike advanced to his senior year, he began to look at college as his future. In fact, when I asked why he wanted to go to college, he replied, “Oh man, I think I've always known I wanted to do it, just because I grew up with that thought in my mind that you need to go to college if you really want to be successful.” As to why he decided to start at a community college, he shared a variety of reasons:

I was always told that community college was a lot cheaper, so I said, I might as well go that route. I mean I've seen people go off to university their first semester and first year and they come back. So that was kind of a fear of mine. I just really did think, man I should just stay home. I just wasn't mature enough to handle that, so that's why I decided to stay home and go to a community college and actually do some things there, and finish things and then transfer.

Ultimately, Mike decided to start at RRCC based on a variety of factors, including the advice of a family friend, his fear of failing, the cheaper cost of attendance, and his desire to not take out a lot of loans the first two years of college.

Delisha “It was okay to not have a plan and to go to school to figure out what I wanted to do.”

Delisha is an African American female, a tad overweight, and stands about 5’8”. She wore a green t-shirt with her college logo on it. Over the t-shirt was a Navy Blue hoodie with the word Red Rock written on it. She had small elastic green and white headbands on along with square brown eyeglasses. She puts some hand lotion on as we get comfortable and begin the interview.

Delisha speaks in a very matter of fact fashion. She shared that she grew up in North Red Rock as well, and that her home consisted of her mother and her little sister. At one point, her mother’s boyfriend lived in the home. Her father was not involved in her life. Her mother was very supportive of the girls and was able to provide for them through her work. When I asked about school, Delisha recalled that she really liked high school, “I had a lot of fun for the most part.” She was also very involved with student organizations including, the National Art Society, the National Honor Society and was in the art and photography club. Although she did not receive the award, she remembers the pride she had for being nominated for a major student award. She feels her high school did a good job of promoting college to students and cited one counselor in particular for being very helpful.

He’s the one who, just really, you know kind of let me know *it was okay to not have a plan, and to go to school to figure out what I wanted to do before, you know just jumping into the four year university.*

In addition to the support she received from her counselor, she also received support and encouragement for higher education from her mother. “Oh, she valued it. She valued it a

lot, because she didn't go to college she wanted to make sure that I went to college and got further education, higher than just high school like she did." In addition to offering her words of advice, Delisha's mom demonstrated action by visiting the high school often, talking with the counselors, and signing Delisha up for MW PROMISE.

As to why she decided to go to a community college rather than a four-year college, she stated,

I didn't have a specific major and I didn't want to go to a four-year university and not have some type of idea of what I wanted to do, and another big thing was money. Four-year universities are expensive and if I can go to a community college and not pay out of pocket and get at least my basics done, that will give me some time to figure out what I wanted to major in and save money. And it was also in town still.

Cody "Who's going to catch the hot potato?"

Cody and I met out of state as he had relocated there three years prior for graduate school. When Cody meets a person, he tries to take it all in, as if each connection he makes in life is keenly important. He presents as a 5'9" African American male in his mid-thirties. He is heavy set and was wearing a pair of tan slacks with a blue plaid button up shirt under a blue sweater. He has some scruffy facial hair and an engaging smile. He speaks with a very slow and relaxed southern inflection.

Raised in a rural part of the state, and in a small community, Cody was the youngest child of seven in the family, and there was a twelve-year gap separating him from the next youngest sibling. When Cody was 10 years old, his mother passed away, and when Cody was 15, his father passed away. Given that he was too young to be on

his own, Cody moved in with his brother's family. When I asked if he ever felt like this new home was in fact "home," he stated,

I felt like it was a pit stop. Because the circumstances of going there, kind of sprung from what do we do now as a family? And there were some dynamics being, I guess, already gay or whatever, so there was kind of a charge with oooohhhh, *who's going to catch the hot potato*, I guess. Because, you know, there are a lot of issues with *him*. [Cody is describing here the fact that he was coming out as a gay man and his conservative Christian family was not quite sure how to handle the situation].

Despite this lack of feeling at home, Cody did well in school and based on a recommendation from his superintendent, was accepted into a very prestigious math and science residential high school located in another city. Cody said he wanted to go there because he felt like he would be "in a community, an accepting community. I wouldn't be the outlier." Though he excelled at the academic work, the pressure of coming out as a gay man caused him a lot of stress and emotional struggles at his new school. Despite the fact the school administrators told him he could do it, they also told him "to get it together, that is your cross to bear." This coupled with a feeling that his own family did not love him or accept him, caused him to have significant difficulties during his last two years of high school. "I felt like without that love and support, I felt basically no one would ever love and support me." Despite these worries, Cody did make it to graduation and recalls with great enthusiasm, being able to walk across the state capital for the graduation ceremony.

He credits a lot of his desire for education to his parents. He doesn't believe that his mother "intentionally" created an atmosphere for learning, "but she of course recognized the value of education." His father spoke often about the importance of education and would often tell stories about how he and his brothers were not able to go to school because they had to work "in the field, or work on the land in order to have something to eat during the year." It was not until Cody was around 10 years of age that he found out that his father was illiterate.

Even though he valued the words his father offered him and was an excellent high school student with remarkable grades at a private math and science high school, Cody did not transition immediately into college. He graduated high school in 1995, went back to live with his brother for a year, and then moved out on his own when he was 19 years old. During that time, he worked a variety of jobs, but mainly as a security guard. He attributed the academic break to the fact that he was suffering with depression as a result of the *coming out* process. During the eight years he took off in between high school and college, he learned to grow into himself, to find acceptance and love, and a community of people who supported him. He also learned that despite having a decent job, he "knew with education I could do whatever I wanted professionally." He ultimately chose RRCC because "it was close to the house, it was very convenient. At the time I was living downtown, and I didn't have a car, so I could just walk down the street and go to the Metro campus."

Focus Group

Two participants in the focus group, Greg and Becky, did not participate in individual interviews. The reason for this was that they were not able to meet earlier in

the month when individual interviews were being conducted. Furthermore, for comparison sake, I wanted to reserve a few of the participants for the focus group only. The other two focus group participants were Marcus and Ashley whose stories were previously described. None of the four focus group participants were in the SAGE TRIO SSS Program. This was purposefully done so that the participants did not know each other and in an effort to encourage trust within the group. Due to the group setting, there was variability in several questions from the individual interviews.

Greg “I liked school and I liked to learn.”

Greg currently is a college professor at RRCC. He is approximately 5’10”, slightly overweight, in his mid-thirties and has a very collegiate look. Though he is wearing jeans on this unseasonably warm winter day, he is also wearing a gray sweater with a purple colored striped button down shirt underneath it. He has on brown loafers, and black square eyeglasses. He recalls starting at RRCC immediately after high school as he “*liked school and I liked to learn.*” Though his parents did not have a college education, they always stressed the importance of him going. “They always told me that they wanted me to go to school because they didn’t have the chance to, so that I wouldn’t have to struggle like they did.”

Greg shared that as a high school student, he excelled in academics. When asked why he chose a community college, versus a four-year school, he stated in a very nonchalant and direct manner:

My parents told me I would be coming here because my original college plans did not pan out. And the scholarship money that I expected to get, I didn’t get. So it

was, come here or go nowhere . . . I honestly thought I was too good for a community college.

He reported that eventually he adjusted and learned to greatly enjoy his time at RRCC.

Becky “NO! I’m not gonna be left without an education.”

Like Greg, Becky participated in only the focus group. Becky is a mental health therapist at a nearby agency. She was dressed very professionally in black slacks and a pink plaid printed V-neck sweater. She had on a silver necklace with several charms, including a cross. Her shoulder length hair was brown and she wore silver hoop earrings. She carried herself in a very professional manner, and although she was respectful and very forthcoming, she appeared to maintain a professional boundary.

Becky was raised by two parents who loved her and supported her. She was initially set to start at a four-year college upon high school graduation but decided at the last minute that she did not want to attend. Instead she got married, had two children and lived a “good life” for many years until her marriage began to fall apart. After the divorce and working in the aircraft industry for a few months, Becky’s lawyer recommended that she go to college. She decided on RRCC. “Initially, I did feel like it was like a downgrade to have to come to a community college at my age.” Becky started at RRCC as a non-traditional student at the age of 42. Because she was raising two sons, many people in her family and her circle of friends encouraged her to get another job. But she stood firm and said,

“No. I need to get an education. I...had this, I guess because I felt like I had supported [her ex-husband], and he had an MBA and a great career and everything and then I was like, *NO, I’m not gonna be left without an education.*”

So while raising two boys, Becky started her academic journey at RRCC on a mission to have a career for herself and a means to provide for her children.

Summary of Family Backgrounds

Out of the 11 participants, 6 were raised by single mothers, one was eventually raised by a sibling, and 4 came from two parent homes (see Table 4). Most of the participants parents worked in the fast food industry or cleaned homes; all were in occupations where a lack of an education did not prohibit employment.

Table 4

Participants Development Environment and College Entry and Exit

Participant Pseudonym	Raised By	Parent Job	High School graduation year	Year Started at RRCC	Year Graduated from 4-Year
Steve	Divorced parents, raised by mother	Did not mention	2003	2003	2007
Ashley	Married Parents	Dad graphic artist; Mom unemployed	2003	2003	2008
Marcus	Single mom and maternal grandparents	Mom, Fast Food	2003	2003	2009
Happy (Non-Trad)	Mother	Mom-Unemployed	1999	2006	2011
Orquidea	Both Parents	Mom-Housekeeper Dad-Pastor	2000	2000	2005
Samantha (Non-Trad)	Mother	Various jobs	Dropped out 1993. Earned GED 1995	2003	2009
Mike	Mother	Mom-Fast	2006	2006	2011

		Food			
Delisha	Mother	Mom-Fast Food	2006	2006	2011
Cody (Non-Trad)	Both Parents Deceased-Then Brother	Worked a farm	1995	2003	2008
Greg	Both Parents	Dad-worked in the medical field. Mom-Bank teller	1993	1993	1998
Becky (Non-Trad)	Both Parents	Mom-secretary Father-Military	1977	2003	2006

Conclusion

This chapter provided a thick and rich description of the community college and its surroundings, as well as an in-depth review of the 11 participants. Each story was unique and provided a window into the decisions that would follow. Chapter V continues their stories by presenting the three themes that emerged from qualitative analysis of the data they provided.

Chapter V

Themes

Listen to Mustn'ts, child, listen to the Don'ts.

Listen to the Shouldn'ts, the Impossible, the Won'ts.

Listen to the Never Haves, then listen close to me.

Anything can happen, child, Anything can be.

Shel Silverstein

Chapter IV provided a description of each participant and the educational institution under study. This chapter presents the themes that emerged from data analyses. An analyses, or as Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) stated, the “searching for patterns and themes” (p. 129) began after the completion of all transcription of the interviews. Furthermore, qualitative research utilizes an inductive process that builds patterns, categories, and themes as the data continues to emerge (Creswell, 2009). Creswell reminded his readers that the qualitative researcher is to be cognizant that the focus of learning is built on the participants’ meanings, and “not the meaning the researchers bring to the research or writers express in the literature” (p. 175). Each interview tape was transcribed verbatim within 24 hours of the interview. Each transcript was read, coded, and reflected upon over the course of time. Each participant was given a copy of their individual completed transcript, and the four participants in the focus group also received a completed transcript of that group. This practice, called *member checking* (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985) gave all participants an opportunity to make corrections or provide clarifications. Each of the participants was given a copy of their transcript through an email address that they identified as secure. There were no concerns noted. Review of the nine interview transcripts and the focus group revealed three themes that were related to the initial research questions.

Qualitative Themes

In the following pages, the first two themes will be described; they include (1) Walking Two Roads, and (2) Services Utilized to Overcome Barriers. All themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 5, and are subsequently supported with verbatim quotes from the participants. Two subthemes have additional minor categories, which are represented by bullet points. The final theme, (3) *Giving Back and Coming Full Circle*, is presented separately in Chapter VI. As a Native American researcher, I chose to utilize a Native American framework when conducting theme analysis. This will be evident in the names of the themes, as well as the evaluation of them.

Table 5

Themes and Subthemes Revealed Through Analyses

Theme One: Walking Two Roads	Theme Two: Student Services Utilized to Overcome Challenges	Theme Three: Giving Back and Coming Full Circle
Sub Themes (minor categories are represented by bullet points)		
Unique Experiences of LIFG students	Academic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty/ Mentor Relationships • Learning Communities/Study Groups 	Closing story of participants desire to give back to their communities.
Using education to escape the past	Math Struggles & Math Centered Resources	
Financial Management/Employment	Student Organizations	
Response to Struggle	Faith/Religion	
	Student Development Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial Aid • Academic Advisement • SAGE TRIO SSSS Program 	

Theme 1: Walking Two Roads.

The *Walking Two Roads* theme described the emotions, challenges, and journey that the LIFG participants encountered during their initial years at RRCC. The term *Walking Two Roads* is often used when Native American students must participate in two cultures, one of the dominant culture, and one of their tribal culture. This analogy will also be used to describe the experiences of the participants in this study.

Unique experiences of LIFG students.

Several of the participants talked about how their college experiences were different when compared to non-LIFG students. Both Marcus and Delisha shared how their mothers did not know how to help with the college process even though they wanted to help. According to Delisha, her mom would say, “I wish I could help you more with that, but I don’t really know how to do it.” Marcus added that when he thought about

being LIFG, it “made me humble, it in a sense [made me] yearn to do it, to embrace the struggle, to realize where I came from. To see just what I had overcome.”

As a non-traditional LIFG student, Cody expressed that his family was “very low-income,” and he knew several of his classmates had their tuition paid by their parents. He felt that perhaps those students “took it more for granted and weren’t as serious, I think, like how they approached study and work.” In fact he surmised that, unlike his experience, these students went straight from high school to college and that they

didn’t really have any pauses [time off between high school and college]. I felt like, sometimes they may have been . . . more advanced than me, in comparison, especially when it came to be able to have, to be fresh and navigate and maybe was as jaded as I was.

Ashley married a man she met at RRCC. This man came from a “pretty well to do household,” where education was valued. When contrasting her experience to her husband’s, Ashley shared,

If you ask me, so he kind of went to school because his parents kind of expected him to, and his dad kind of pushed it and said if you want to be the leader of the household and take care of your family you’ve got to get the education.

The value of education in her husband’s family was coupled with the knowledge base of what an education could provide, such as job security and job satisfaction. This was missing from Ashley’s home, as the value for education was not as strong, nor was the help in applying to college, even though her father had an associate’s degree. It is noteworthy to establish how the term *first-generation* affected Ashley. When discussing her new job, working as an assistant registrar at a local Christian University, she shared

with near tears in her eyes, how it feels “to just look at those students in their caps and gowns and relate to them and think that some of them are first generation.” In many ways it helps her to acknowledge the journey she continues to be on.

Unlike Delisha, Ashley, and Marcus, when thinking about being a LIFG student, Greg stated that he did not “think that ever crossed my mind...I didn’t ever think ever at all about being first-generation, and I don’t think I would have ever identified as a low-income student, which obviously I was.” Steve shared that even though he was low-income, and the high school provided information about opportunities for low-income students, he never learned about MW PROMISE, a method to pay for his four years of state college. He did not discuss in particular his experience as a LIFG community college student, but did share that his four-year college offered significant services that catered to him being both Native American and low-income.

For Orquidea and her parents, the term first-generation meant something entirely different. For them, the fact that she was also a first-generation American college student was exciting, as they had never had that opportunity in Guatemala. Orquidea reflected,

I think that was something that would make my parents proud, of seeing that their daughter, especially their only daughter, actually continue and finish and kind of be like *a first generation in the United States*, from really all her family and their family.”

The diversity and unique stories of the participants in this study is reflective of the wider experiences of LIFG students.

Using Education to Escape the Past & Present.

This sub theme emerged as participants made several references to wanting *out* of where they had come from, or wanting to be different from their parents. Two of the participants, Happy and Samantha, were raised in unhealthy and dysfunctional households and wanted to escape. Happy recalls it was in the 8th or 9th grade when she realized she wanted to be *different* than her mother. She said, “I can’t remember what we were arguing about, but I looked at her and said, you know what mom? I want to be better than you when I grow up. I want to have a life.” Samantha echoed the sentiment and when thinking about her relationship with her own children she said,

I wanted them to be proud of their parents, be proud of their mom, be proud of where they came from. I was always embarrassed by my mom, and I didn’t want them to feel that way about me, I wanted them to feel like I was a mother that they could be proud of. I wanted them to see the value in education. And I, I knew that if I... I had always seen smart people, like teachers, principals, counselor’s whatever, but it felt unobtainable to me. I wanted my kids to know that if their mom could do it, they could do it, that it was obtainable. Because I never saw this obtainable as a kid. *People like me didn’t go to college, we were good just to eat.*

Ashley and Marcus also shared a common thread. Although they both loved their parents and recognized their parents tried to support them, they also recognized language or actions that contradicted any positive praise. While Ashley’s father had earned his associates degree, he attempted but never obtained a bachelor’s degree. “He would always make excuses as to why he didn’t get it. And seeing where he was and I didn’t want to be there, it kind of was an effort to be opposite of my father as much as I can.” For Marcus, it was his mother who tended to irritate him. Instead of providing supportive

words, she would say that he would work his life living paycheck to paycheck. He often felt that his motivation to succeed was based on,

fear definitely, fear that she was right, that I couldn't save or that I would grow up living paycheck to paycheck and you know, and then anger, that she would tell me something like that. I know every time that she said it I would get mad and storm off, and ...exit the room as soon as she started talking that stuff. It hurt, I know I would cry from time to time, just because of the sadness.

As he spoke these words, Marcus looked down at his hands which were folded and placed on the table.

Orquedia, Becky and Greg shared that they all loved and admired their parents. It was their parents' encouragement to get an education so they did not have to work as hard and were not so financially strapped that propelled Orquedia and Greg to college. As Orquedia said, "I really don't care to be doing this (cleaning homes) for the rest of my life, and I wanted to have a better job." Greg shared that his parents also encouraged him and told him to go "because they didn't have a chance to, so that I wouldn't have to struggle like they did." Though Becky had the support of her parents, she waited until age 42 to attend college. However, she did recall that while in a tech program in high school she earned a certificate in secretarial skills. But as she said, "I didn't want to be the secretary, I wanted to have the secretary." Also watching her father struggle to have a "good long term job" affected her, "I mean he would just take menial type jobs," and she wanted to have a career.

An additional factor associated with LIFG students is the emotional *distance* attending college may put between them and their families, friends and community.

Several participants reflected on their abilities to talk about their educational achievements with friends who did not go to college or their immediate family. Ashley responded that she was hesitant to tell her parents, particularly her father, about what is going on in her life that is related to her education or employment. However, she does have her husband, grandmother and little sister to share with. Despite the support she has, it seemed she was disappointed that she cannot share with her father and learned to accept that fact, “just growing up I learned to be like oookay. And I wasn’t doing it for him, or other people, I was doing it for me!”

Samantha felt that not only could she not talk to her mother about her education, but that her mother was “pretty jealous,” and would say non-supportive things such as that she didn’t have the support and “she never had a husband to support her so she could go to college”. The reality was her mother had parents who had paid for her to go to college, but she dropped out. Greg provided a good word to describe his feelings about talking about education with his family, when he used the word “disconnected.”

Specifically, he stated,

I felt, and continue to feel a bit *disconnected* from a lot of my family, because there are relatively few of my family members, extended family members who went to college, and now, I’m working on my Ph.D. and it’s very difficult to get that connection with a lot of people, because so much of my life is all about higher education...I’m still a student myself, and that’s my whole world, and I don’t really have any relatives that have had those same experiences. So they’re supportive and nice about it, but at family reunions there’s not much to talk about.

This particular passage, said in the focus group, resonated with Becky.

Becky (asking Greg): Yes, do you feel like you have to shift gears?

Greg: No, I don't even try to do that. [pause] Maybe I should.

Becky: I do a little bit, but it's just a different world.

Researcher: Do you just not talk about your academic accolades?

Greg: No, and I don't get asked about it either

Becky: I don't want to brag or come off in that sense. They don't quite get it. I mean they're real nice about it and everything, but I don't think they get it.

Greg: I sometimes think that they might think that I think that I'm better than them.

Becky: Exactly.

Marcus shared that he tries not to “notice it, if they see me differently or if they feel a different way.” When asked if he has shared with his friends or mother about applying for his master's degree, he stated, “I do, but in the sense not to brag, just kind of straight to the point, I don't like to show my excitement, I guess I kind of limit showboating, oh I'm so smart, and I got this or that....” When asked what his mom and friends said about him applying for his Master's degree he stated,

I don't think she cares like that, I mean she wishes me well, but I don't think that she gets it. As far as my friends and things, I tell them I am going back to school but that is about it.

When the focus group was asked if they had a safe place to have conversations about their academic accolades, Marcus shared,

I feel more comfortable in this setting [the focus group with strangers who were also LIFG], than amongst others with the same criteria as me [friends he went to

high school with and who did not go to college]. For motivational reasons, I can talk to my brother about it, because we came from the same household, cause if I can do it, you can do it too type of thing. And if I do bring it up, like to other people, more than likely that's my motiv...that's the reason why, to motivate them, and to tell them where I struggled, I didn't think that I would be able to obtain a bachelor's degree, but I did it.

While Marcus spoke these words there was a lot of head nodding from the entire group who appeared to echo his sentiments.

Financial management and employment.

The ways that students managed to pay their way through RRCC varied. Most participants worked at least part-time, while some worked full-time. All received Federal Pell grants, and a majority took out subsidized loans; some took advantage of both subsidized and unsubsidized loans. A majority received scholarships (including in-state tuition waivers, and MW Promise). Table 6 provides specific financial details for each participant.

Table 6
Financial Management of Participants at RRCC

Participant	Loans	Scholarships	Employment
Steve	No	Yes	Part-time
Ashley	Subsidized Loans	No	Part-time
Marcus	No	MW PROMISE	Full-time
Happy	Subsidized Loans & Unsubsidized Loans	Yes	Varied, overall ³ / ₄ employment
Orquidea	No	MW PROMISE	Part-time
Samantha	No	Other/ Tuition Waivers	Part-time

Mike	Subsidized Loans	Tuition Waiver	Part-time
Delisha	Subsidized Loans	MW PROMISE/Tuition Waiver	Part-time
Cody	Subsidized Loans & Unsubsidized Loans	No	Full-time
Greg	Subsidized Loans & Unsubsidized Loans	No	Part-time
Becky	Subsidized Loans & Unsubsidized Loans	Yes	Part-time

Managing employment and schoolwork was something that all of the participants had to learn. However, it appeared that the non-traditional participants in this study had already learned strong time management skills. Whereas the traditional aged students expressed difficulties they had with initially learning how to manage time between college and work. For example, Steve (a traditional student) shared,

It was a different kind of time management, because your classes aren't scheduled like they were in high school so not you're done at 2:45 every day. I had some night classes, some early morning classes, so trying to juggle time management and knowing when to study and balance work, and all that...I just kind of had to learn how to do it.

Another traditional student, Ashley, managed to work twenty hours per week while keeping busy with her schoolwork and her time commitment to the Christian Baptist Ministry. A different traditional student, Marcus also worked full-time during his first few years in college, taking just one class each semester. He believed that by maintaining a job he was fortunate because he had a job waiting for him when he

graduated, unlike others who had to go job seeking. In his second year at RRCC, he increased the amount of his course work, while still maintaining full-time employment. He stated the reason he worked so hard was that he had motivations and wanted money. Nevertheless, all the hours worked put a strain on him.

It put tolls on me, like socially. I wasn't able to be in a relationship because I was working too much, women were saying, you know you never have time, you're always working. Yea I'm working, had this nice car, you know money at that time was worth a lot, had a value to me, it was important, because again, when I was growing up, I was wanting these things. And now I'm more mature, and I don't have so many materialistic things.

Marcus credited starting off slowly with classes as a reason he was able to manage a full-time work schedule, along with a full course load.

Another traditional student perspective came from Mike who shared that he worked twenty hours per week while in college full-time and also received Pell grants and a tuition waiver. However, he was not sure why he never applied for the MW Promise. For his first year, Mike worked at Wendy's, a fast food restaurant, and during his second year he worked as a tutor for the SAGE Program. He especially liked tutoring because it was on campus "I mean I could study, and do homework and whatever and also help other people in the room as work-study." Delisha had a very similar experience to Mike in that she also received Pell grants and tuition waivers and worked at both a fast food-restaurant her first year and as a tutor her second year. She enjoyed tutoring because as she put it, "When I tutored, that helped me because it reinforced everything that I was learning." Unlike Mike, however, she did receive MW PROMISE because her

mother took the initiative to sign her up for the program. Both Mike and Delisha shared that time management was a struggle, but also a necessary struggle if they wanted to be successful.

Response to the struggle.

Participants were asked to give three adjectives that may provide understanding about the journey they have taken, and are taking. Out of the eleven participants, ten described themselves in positive terms. Samantha was the only participant who was unable to describe herself as anything other than a “survivor,” “a cockroach.” “I know I’m a survivor, I’m a cockroach, I can pretty much get through anything. I definitely feel like a failure right now.” When asked how one was able to put the words “survivor” and “failure” in the same sentence she stated, “Cause you can survive but it doesn’t mean you’re successful. Anyone can survive pretty much.” After three requests to find something positive to say about herself, she stated, “I haven’t been there in a long time.” Despite this one negative self-evaluation, all other participants were able to provide positive descriptive words. The adjectives used by the participants are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7

Adjectives Participants Used to Describe Themselves

Steve:	Motivated	Logical	Intuitive
Ashley:	Resilient	Positive	Perseverance
Marcus:	Determined	Caring	Persistent
Happy:	Dependable	Hardworking	Disciplined
Orquidea:	Good Self-esteem	Helpful	Caring
Samantha:	Survivor		
Mike:	Hardworking	Loving	Focus

Delisha:	Caring	Outspoken	Hardworking
Cody:	Adventurous	Values Freedom of Conscious	Does Not Accept the Status Quo
Greg:	Effective	Collaborative	Collegial
Becky:	Determined	Happy	Capable

The majority of the words focused on traits related to being resilient and persistent. The three most reoccurring adjectives were (a) hardworking (cited 3 times), (b) caring (cited 3 times), and (c) determined (cited 2 times). Cody picked the most unique descriptive words, even if he did stray away from the strict definition of adjective, when he chose (1) adventurous, (2) values freedom of conscious, and (3) does not accept the status quo. However, after having spent time with Cody in the interview, it was clear to me that he marched to the beat of a different, perhaps a more holistic and humanitarian drum. Marcus also chose words that reflected his intent to look out for others. He responded “*determined*. Um,wow....I’m *caring*. I want to get in a position to help my friends; I don’t want to see my brothers not succeed.” After a long pause of contemplating, he responded, “I want to say strong minded, but that sounds like determined. When I get my mind on something, and I really want it, I go after it, *persistent*.”

Orquidea struggled a bit trying to find three adjectives and laughed nervously when she finally said, “This is funny ’cause I am very..., I have a *good self-esteem* about myself, but I have never been a person to boast about myself. *Helpful*. *Caring*.” Like Orquidea, Delisha also chose the word caring, but perhaps had an easier time finding her three words.

Hmmmmm.....Caring. Outspoken! And hardworking. ‘Cause I bust my butt in school. Oh man, hardworking because I’m the one studying for NCLEX’s while all my friends are hanging out and enjoying two weeks of freedom.

Just as Delisha attributed her adjectives to helping her become successful in school, so did Ashley. Her three adjectives were resilient, positive, and perseverance. She felt that these words helped her “get out there and broaden my network.”

With one exception previously noted (Samantha), the students in this study appeared to have healthy self-esteem, but all were aware of how hard they worked to get to the position in life they are today. Several of the students also spoke about *caring* (positive, dependable, helpful, loving, not accepting status quo, valuing freedom of conscious, collaborative, and collegial) and *responsibility* (motivated, intuitive, resilient, persistent, focused, effective, and determined) as being a part of them. These participants were well aware of how hard they have to work, and all appear to be committed to *giving back to others*.

Theme 2: Student Services Utilized to Overcome Barriers.

This theme was developed as responses from the first and second research questions were answered. Specifically, these two research questions were looking at the services, strategies, motivations or other resources students credited for their success at a community college.

Academic.

The first sub-theme of the *Services Utilized* theme included support services that centered on academic resources. The two minor categories of this sub-theme were (a)

faculty relationships, and (b) learning communities/study groups. The first minor category to be addressed is *Faculty and Mentor Relationships*. This sub theme was a bit of a surprise finding as the aforementioned literature review did not identify significant faculty relationships as being a retention method for LIFG community college students; this apparent conflict will be further discussed in Chapter VII.

Faculty and mentor relationships.

Steve emphatically stressed the positive effect that faculty had on him. When thinking about one faculty in particular who helped him define his major he said,

Now it's people like that, very good teachers along the way, that have shown me that I can do something that maybe... they think outside the box, maybe they reach you a little bit differently, but they show you and validate you that you can do something that you humanize you, that you have the ability to do.

Ashley identified two faculty members she felt were very helpful to her. One was an English composition faculty member, and the other was a member of the math faculty. It was the patience that her math professor demonstrated that really helped Ashley. "But I will say that my college algebra teacher, um, I let her know that I struggled with college algebra and she was so patient with me." Though he stated he had very positive experiences with all RRCC faculty, Marcus also felt especially appreciative of the support he received from a specific math teacher.

Tony Nelson, yea, he was real passionate about his math, mathematics, and he was, I remember, he you know, I was struggling at times, and I was able to stay after class, and I was able to email him, and call him and reach out. You know contact by phone. Just, he wanted everyone to pass his class, to succeed. He didn't

want to see us fail. If he thought that we were failing like we were doing bad on a test, he would say, come talk to me, tell me what is going on? Are you getting this? He would encourage us.

Happy felt that the teachers who taught the honor's classes were especially talented. She specifically spoke of one faculty member for whom she felt deep respect, He knows his stuff....He's hard, edgy and scary and pompous. There is just something... cause you know when someone is reading off of cliff notes, versus, that is another thing about the Honors Program, you are taught by someone who has a Ph.D.

Orquidea shared that she found a lot of help from faculty as well as from RRCC staff that she worked with as a work-study student. Samantha felt that faculty at RRCC had a strong influence on student success, "They definitely have the power to inspire you, or to make you feel like you shouldn't be there."

Delisha also credited her success in math to a specific instructor. "Yeah, math I became really good at and I think that is because I had a great teacher." As she recalled this teacher, she focused on his dedication to his students and to his sense of humor. She also cited a humanities instructor who positively impacted her.

She was, she was one of a kind, she was really interesting, and she really made sure we knew it was good to be diverse, as far as not focusing on specifically on what your major may be but to broaden out and to open your eyes.

Like Ashley, Cody was able to recall an English composition teacher and his Spanish language instructors as being incredibly important in his academic journey. Cody recalled writing a paper, in his own style, in one of his first courses at RRCC "and the

professor really appreciated it. And he said, ‘you know what? I think you really have a future in writing’ and that felt great!” When asked if that recognition was important, Cody eloquently responded in a soft voice, “Yes, certainly. And it felt great to have someone who is in the field to kind of confirm something I was passionate about.” The other instructor who impacted him was his Spanish language instructor. This instructor required a component of service learning (volunteer work) in the Hispanic community. Cody used his Spanish language skills in the courts as an interpreter.

I would say that it took me beyond, I guess, the in-classroom experience. It developed me, I guess as a citizen, and kind of showed me about challenges that are actually going on in the community. It helped me to be engaged in the actual issues that were going on in the community. It developed my social and professional skills.

Greg shared that he “felt empowered by several faculty members, and college staff members, who I got to know during my time here.” He was greatly influenced by their support, feedback, and dedication to teaching.

Learning Communities.

The smaller sub theme of Theme 2 was addressed by two participants, Mike and Delisha, who both took part in an academic learning community. Because learning communities are cited in the literature review as being an element of retention, they are addressed here, albeit, briefly. Mike shared that he thought the learning community was challenging, however, very rewarding.

Probably one of the toughest courses [was] humanities . . . but I learned a lot, and then we also got to do fun stuff like go to the opera and then do other types of events and stuff cause it was part of a learning community and everything.

Delisha also enjoyed it, but more for the group atmosphere.

It was great because all of the people in the class were in the SAGE Program, so there were people that I was familiar with, and it helped to be comfortable to get up and talk in front of them, because the humanities expected you know your stuff and be confident. It was definitely a good experience because a lot of people struggle in school with being confident, speaking up and being able to do it amongst people you were already familiar with was very helpful.

Though learning communities were only briefly addressed, it is important to note that of the two people who participated in the learning communities, both felt it was rewarding and helpful in their development.

Math struggles and resources and developmental education.

According to the Achieving the Dream Initiative (2004), approximately 60% of community college students will take at least one developmental education course. The positive outcome is that almost 68% of these students will pass their writing courses, and 71 % will pass their reading courses; however, only 30% will pass all of their developmental math courses (Community College Research Center, 2004). Nonetheless, overall the completion rate for developmental education students is less than promising.

According to a brief prepared by the Community College Research Center (2004):

Degree completion for remedial students is also rare. Less than one fourth of developmental education community college students in the NELS (National

Education Longitudinal Study) sample completed a degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment. In comparison, almost 40 percent of community college students in the NELS sample who did not enroll in any developmental education course completed a degree or certificate (p.2).

Out of the 11 participants in this study, 10 individuals took developmental math at the community college, and one reported starting with Writing I and Reading I (the beginning level of developmental education). Even when participants were not addressing developmental math specifically, they did specify the overall stressful nature of having to take math. At RRCC the lowest remedial math course is Basic Math. It is followed by Beginning Algebra and then Intermediate Algebra; those who are successful are then considered ready to take College Algebra. This College Algebra course is a requirement for over 80% of the associate degrees at RRCC.

Ashley reported that she started with Basic Math. She was not shocked at this, as she had struggled with math and science while in high school.

Yeah, I was just so lost when it came to math and I just needed to start from the bottom. And that was frustrating, it came so easy to some people, I just struggled so much with it. Luckily RRCC has a great math lab, math and science lab, and when...if I wasn't at my part-time job, I was in the math lab.

In fact, Ashley cited that the utilization of the math lab was what helped her overcome the math barrier.

Unlike Ashley, Marcus was astounded, and very discouraged that he had to take developmental math class. Even though he knew he was not the only student to have to do so, he felt discouraged. "I know I'm not the only one, but I was pretty good in math in

high school, so it was kind of discouraging, especially when I found out I had to start with BASIC MATH!!” Even though he had to take two developmental math courses, he credits a strong teacher for his success.

Oh yeah, he was real passionate about his math, mathematics, and he was, I remember, I was struggling at times, and I was able to stay after class, and I was able to email him, and call him and reach out.

Orqueida readily admitted her disdain for math, although she was typically a good student. At RRCC she tested into beginning algebra and found the first class to be okay as it was self-paced. From there she was successful in passing the remaining math classes, despite her dislike of the subject matter. Samantha was not as fortunate as Orquieda and even though she, too, “did not like math,” her mathematical journey was much more challenging. In fact, she stated that often it made her cry. “Like when I’m trying to get through math classes, I would go to the bathroom and cry and be like, if I could get through childhood, I can get through this.” Samantha reported that she had a documented disability called math Dyscalculia, which made it difficult for her to comprehend math. Though she utilized the math lab and the SAGE tutors, she was not successful in math. And even though it was considered a disability, there were no services provided to her through the campus Disabled Student Resource Center. Despite Samantha’s difficulties in math, she performed extraordinarily well in all of her other classes and used her 4.0 grade point average to motivate herself, although math remained a very difficult challenge. As she shared,

When I started thinking that I had a mathematical learning disability, I started feeling like I was hitting a lot of brick walls, and it made me kind of mad. It made

me mad, not just for myself, but it made realize that if I have this minor learning disability, how hard it must be for people that have real disabilities to get help. And to be honest, with that issue, I don't feel I got any help until I got to the SAGE program. Everywhere else it was just a brick wall. Nobody really cared about that. It was either you sink or swim. And it didn't matter how hard I tried.

Although she initially preferred transferring to a social work program at a local four-year college, Samantha ended up transferring to a school for a human relations degree that did not require math.

Mike was the only participant who indicated that he took all developmental courses his first semester. He started with Reading I, Writing I, Basic Math, and College Survival (a three credit developmental freshman orientation course). When asked why he persevered despite the odds that said he wouldn't, Mike responded,

I was always just taught to, you know once you start something, finish it. So my persistence was that, to just finish it, even though those classes were just tedious, but eventually I would get past it.

Delisha also took several developmental math courses. "I didn't really feel like I was prepared for math. I mean, I graduated from high school so that's why I had to take some remedial math classes when I left so that I would be prepared to take college algebra."

Like Marcus, she also attributed her success in math to an instructor.

Yeah, math I became really good at and I think that is because I had a great teacher...my math teacher, he kind of kept me grounded, because you know he would crack a lot of jokes in class, and you know, lighten the mood, and

sometimes a good joke in the middle of a stressful situation can lighten everything.

Student Organizations.

Membership in a student organization, the third subtheme in theme number two, offered great opportunity and companionship for four participants. Ashley was involved initially with the drama club, but decided to spend more time with the Baptist Christian Ministry (BCM) group because, “I was really gung ho about BCM.” Happy was very involved with student organizations and served as both the president of the Student Government Association, and the honor’s society group Phi Theta Kappa. She also received tremendous support from the RRCC Honor’s Program, which offered her academic challenge and academic scholarships. Both Delisha and Mike held leadership roles in the SAGE Student Association, and also participated in a leadership-training program supported by the RRCC Student Government Association. Delisha felt the experience helped her develop into a leader.

That helped me feel like a leader, because people would come talk to me, and that helped me to get more involved on campus as a whole. I could talk to different people. They were familiar with my face, so people on campus knew my name and knew who I was.

None of the other participants recalled being part of a student organization. Cody shared,

Well, it did not seem like a good use of my time at the time. Um, you know having...working, studying and going to class, didn’t really think I had time for student orgs and I wasn’t really sure what student orgs were about in college.

Faith and religion.

Though no specific questions were asked of participants about their religious affiliations or support, the subject naturally emerged with four participants. Ashley found a lot of support on campus through a group called the Baptist Christian Ministry (BCM). “I was worried, I was concerned, about you know what kind of friends I was gonna find, and [inaudible] and I saw a poster for the BCM and immediately knew that I had to get involved.” She became very involved in this group and felt that it gave her the spiritual support and guidance that she desired. Marcus shared that he did not become very faith dependent until he transferred to his four-year college, but at that time faith and religion, “gave me, more of my motivation, that was definitely one of my motivational factors, to encourage me.” Becky also felt that she got a lot of support through her church, especially while going through college as a single mother. Orquidea’s father was a pastor, so she was always very influenced and empowered by religion.

We really can do everything through Christ, that you know gives us the strength, and that for me has really been something that, yes cause we have, anything in anybody’s life, if it’s in relationships or school or work, family, whatever it is, there’s always problems, there always good things, but there’s always problems, and that knowing the scripture, has really helped, you know, realize yea, that’s true, can’t forget.

College student development services

Generally speaking, students used a variety of services in addition to the three to be explored more closely: Financial Aid, Academic Advisement, and the SAGE TRIO SSS Program. Steve shared that one of the few resources he used was the library. Ashley quickly cited the math lab and indicated she spent a lot of time in there. She did use the library on occasion, but not on a consistent basis. She did speak of using the writing lab,

and also an advisor a “couple of times, just to try to figure out what I wanted to do, what type of degree I really wanted to get....” Delisha cited not using many of the programs, and that “SAGE was the main one that I used when at RRCC.” Cody recalled using academic advisement and career services. Becky recognized an advisor and financial aid as being a big support to her. Marcus also recognized one particular advisor and also the “the fitness center. I was there a lot. It was a great outlet, it helped distress, I went after class or before class to relax and do my own thing.” Cody used career services to help figure out what “job openings were available on campus. I remember they were always very nice, and they would actually try to pull up some scenarios, where they thought I would be good at.”

Financial aid.

Ashley reported a good experience with financial aid and FAFSA, since “once I figured out how to do a FAFSA, I kind of just did it all on line. Um, I’m pretty independent; I can easily figure things out, like tasks and things.” While in the focus group, Becky credited financial aid for her success “because without that I never would have been here, so that was a big part of it.” Marcus laughed and added, “I utilized FAFSA. FAFSA helped out a lot, kept me in tune with everything”. Delisha responded,

Financial aid process was simple because I went through SAGE, who all did financial and stuff and if I had any questions I could go and talk to the counselors, and they would pretty much tell me anything that I needed to know.

Cody’s experience with financial aid was impersonal because “with financial aid, it seemed like a chore to go there. It was one of those things that you dreaded, ’cause it

was sort of like next, what's your number, you felt like just the next in line." Happy shared this sentiment and laughed while she added, "Oh my god, you gotta to talk to at least six people just to get the right answer!" Despite some of the negative experiences with financial aid processes, all students agreed that without the support of financial aid, they would not have been able to attend college.

Academic advisement.

Although Mike recalled using academic advisors only to learn "about certain things as far as transcripts," academic advising was the most often cited service for other students.

Becky used the same academic advisor during her entire time at RRCC.

I went to the same advisor, I really don't know why I did that, but I got her the first time, I think her name was Melody, and I just went to her every single time. I would wait or whatever, I never saw another one. And I think that really helped me with consistency, 'cause I had the degree plan and I would literally cross off each class, like I had a mission and I was gonna get out of here.

Becky also cited the advisor from the human services division as being a "great influence and support," to her. Similar to Becky, Samantha also used the advisor for Human Services as a resource, "I remember her, you know, she was just really supportive about it....She helped me to make those (credits) work to get me into CYLAS, (four-year school). So she was really instrumental in my transfer." When speaking more specifically about his advisor, Marcus recalled that he relied on one advisor "named Diane and I still remember her to this day. I recommended my little brother go to her." Cody saw whichever academic advisor was available but did recall liking one in

particular. He felt that “they kind of took a little bit of my direction, as far as what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go. They really helped with the transfer process.” Ashley felt the advisors were “really encouraging in explaining to me the different associate degrees they offer.”

In contrast, others cited advising but did not seem to use them as a core support. Happy stated, “I maybe saw the advisors three times here. I just tried to Google everything and ask other students who had been here a while.” She also used the SAGE Program for assistance. Although Orquidea worked in the advisement office as a work-study student, she “really didn’t use any of them [academic advisors].” She stated that she would “just learn the skills that I needed to be in the office.” Greg shared that he “rarely remember[ed] going to advisement. I just sort of did it on my own, or got some faculty members to help me.” Since Greg worked on campus, he felt he had access to more support from faculty and staff. Steve shared he only went to the advisor when he was getting ready to transfer. Despite the numerous references to academic advisors in the literature, only two students reported that they relied heavily on the academic advisors, although four students did report a positive experience with them. This disconnect with academic advising, although it is considered to be a critical component of retention, will be explored in Chapter VII.

SAGE TRIO SSS program.

Of the four students who participated in the SAGE TRIO SSS program, all cited major use of the program. Happy stated, “They offer the computer lab, they offer the tutoring, which I didn’t need any of that, but it was nice to know that it was there.”

Samantha shared that she sought out the program for help with math. “I was pretty determined to conquer that somehow. ’Cause I felt like I had worked way too hard to now just give up. I had to find a way, around me, I worked through it.” She also liked the workshops that were offered,

I remember the etiquette one. I don’t remember everything in the etiquette class, but I remember enough that now when I’m in that position, to put the napkin on my lap, and kind of wait to see what everyone else is doing too, and um kind of carefully pull the bread... so there are a few little things I remember.

Mike was introduced to the SAGE program while still in high school. He was appreciative of tutoring, study groups, and supplemental Pell that they could apply for, “and then of course we would go on trips, float trips and stuff.” Delisha felt that “the biggest thing that it offered to me was information about school, counseling, guidance, um, tutoring services.” However, she also appreciated “the extra hand on your back to kind of guide you in the right direction because I wasn’t as familiar with college as someone who say, parent went to college, because mine didn’t.” These four students appeared to be grateful for the additional support they received through the SAGE program.

Theme 3. Giving Back and Coming Full Circle.

Numerous evaluations of the transcripts indicated an overarching theme of community, giving back, and helping others. Participants shared their love for their families and friends, even when they were unable to talk to them about their academic journey. They talked about wanting to help others aspire to have a higher education, and

the majority of the participants have found themselves working in the helping professions: teaching, nursing, research, counseling, and social work. The prevalence and importance of this theme led to a separate chapter (Chapter VI) that will provide a more in-depth look at the participant's current state of mind, their reflections of their past, and their hopes for other students like them.

CHAPTER VI

Giving Back and Full Circle

Some succeed because they are destined to:

Most succeed because they are determined to.

Author Unknown

The participants in this qualitative study were unique, and each had something different and valuable to offer to the knowledge of LIFG students. However, what they had in common is their persistence, resilience, and desire to give back to the community from which they came. "*The wheel is come full circle, I am here,*" (meaning what goes around, comes around) are famous words written by William Shakespeare in his play *King Lear*. In the Native American community, there is also use of this expression; however, it means a cleansing, a catharsis, a healing and a desire to share some of the knowledge and experiences now held. Although only one of the participants in this study was Native American, all participants spoke of their concern for others who would follow behind them, as well as their desires to help others, including their friends and family. It was also important to them to be viewed as the same caring person they always had been, prior to starting college. The term full-circle, for the purpose of exploration in this study, is to consider where the students have come from, and returned to. For each participant, this chapter highlights their current endeavors, reflections on their persistence, advice given to them, and advice they want to share with others who follow in their footsteps.

Additionally, a brief exploration of the focus group will include their overall feelings toward commencement ceremonies and the artifacts they chose to bring to the group.

Steve: It's Important & Greatly Overlooked

Since his graduation, Steve is very successfully engaged in work with *Drug Court*, an alternative court for drug offenders. He credits his job to working with the local county drug court while working on his bachelor's degree. "The same day I got my cap and gown, I also got a job offer." He was relocated to another state to work on a more specific project regarding parolee work and is now looking at options for getting his Master's degree.

While recognizing that he has advanced more quickly than most, Steve reported that he does not often reflect on his success. When asked to think about what motivated him, he said,

My thought process has always been you just got to get through it and do the best you can, and that's the best you can really expect or want. . . I never once asked myself "can I do this?" It wasn't a question of that. It was, "Yeah I got to do this, how are we going to get through it?" . . . I guess I have never stepped back to evaluate how I got through it, I just made myself do it.

Steve also credits a lot of faculty advice and support in helping him in his journey, including one of his instructors from RRCC who served as "kind of a catalyst for me." Specific words that will always resonate with him and provide him drive include "No one can ever take your education away from you, you always have that." When asked what advice he would offer future LIFG students at RRCC, he shared that he is currently mentoring a young woman at RRCC.

I'm trying to be that support for her and help her with her resume. Of how she has to present herself of what she needs to say, what she needs to do, to set herself apart from everyone else.

It appeared that he is committed to helping her be successful and is trying to demonstrate the things that were effective for him during his journey.

Every student was given the option to provide *final thoughts*. After some consideration, Steve shared that

It would be nice if there were more programs at the high school level that let students know what opportunities are out there, whether it's funding, whether there are specific opportunities out there for LIFG students.

The other thought he shared was the need for more success stories, and more programs for LIFG students, and for Native American students. He said,

I don't think I never took the time and actually thought about my situation up until receiving your letter and actually understanding what you were looking at.

It's important and greatly overlooked, the more I think about it.

Steve's persistence, belief in himself, ability to take advice from others, and his strong work ethic, appear to be influential in his professional and academic endeavors.

Ashley- You're Going to Do It for Yourself

Since her graduation one and half years ago with her bachelor's degree, Ashley has been employed by a local Christian University in a Student Services office. She plans to go back and get her Master's degree.

Reflecting on her past and where she is now, Ashley feels very content and proud.

I am just proud of where I've come from, where I could have ended up, and where I could be today. But for me personally, I would be a little let down if I hadn't persevered. I would be kind of upset with myself.

As she spoke, she sat up a little taller and let a modest smile take over her face. In thinking about advice that someone once offered her that resonates with her today, she landed upon a story about her grandmother missing a chance to work for the Secret Service many years ago. Since that missed opportunity, her grandmother has always "encouraged me to take risks, and don't be afraid to do something outside the box."

Advice that she would offer a young woman who resembles her background when she started at RRCC came easy and was shared in a firm and confident voice.

Don't give up! It's gonna be hard and you're gonna have doubts and fears, but you can do it. You're not going to do it for your mom, your dad, or your whoever. *You're going to do it for yourself.* And 4-5 years is going to pass by whether you're in school or not. In 4-5 years from now are you going to look back and think, I should have got that degree, I would have been graduating now!

The final piece of information that Ashley wished to share with me, for the purpose of my research, was the difficulty she had leaving her little sister behind in a bad situation. Even though she wanted to "lead a good example" for her, it did not make the journey easier.

Marcus "And Don't Let Nobody, The Haters, The Naysayers, Don't Let Them Discourage You, Because They Will."

Hard work has been part of Marcus's makeup for many years. In fact, over the years many of his friends have defined him as a workaholic, and he has admitted that,

“Yes, it put tolls on me, like socially.” He credits his desire to work hard to his mother and two mentors from his job with the city. The mentors provided him with a lot of advice, respect, and support. Over the years of their mentoring, Marcus had the opportunity to come to their homes, watch their children, house sit, and take part in family celebrations with them. Through these events he learned to desire the things they had.

At one point I finally realized that I can get these things. He [John, the mentor] did fine when he grew up, they [his mentors] just worked hard, they didn’t steal they didn’t rob; they just worked hard for what they had.

A reflection about his friends makes him glad that he chose the road of hard work and education.

Looking back at my friends in north Red Rock, and seeing they don’t have any education, outside of high school and saying what made me do what I did [he reflects on why he was able to persevere and what separated him from his friends]. My mom was super strict as a kid so I was able to kind of stay out of trouble and not be exposed to a lot of the things that they were exposed to while growing up.

Marcus maintains his work ethic till this day; however, over the years his maturity has changed his desire for materialistic things.

Right now, I only work 40-50 hours a week, one job. I work for Youth Services of Mid-Western City. I’m a supervisor now at 26. Working for social work, you’re not going to be rich, but my job, my career path, and social work is

rewarding in itself. The way I feel when I leave my job it compensates for the money I dreamed of making back then.

His career path is not the only place Marcus finds himself trying to influence people and to make a difference. When he spoke of his two good friends from high school he became a bit emotional.

I feel, I just don't know, maybe disappointed, because I know the potential that they have, they're both great persons. I would hire them, because they both work hard. They do have jobs and they have had them for a long time, and have good work ethics, and it's just like wow, I don't know why you didn't want to go back to school, or why you don't desire school.

He responded that the only time he talks to his friends about school, he "hopes it motivates them," yet, he still has not told them he plans to go away to a nearby city for a master's degree in social work this coming fall.

I am very proud of myself. Looking back on this interview, you know you don't take a trip down memory lane all the time like this, and see where you came from, and you know, I tell young people my testimony and my story, to encourage them, let them know I have been where you are from, I grew up in the same hood you live in now, and I paid my dues; just keep moving, I just kept my feet moving.

As a spiritual man, and a man of strong work convictions, he provided two observations: He would not be so grounded without his spiritual foundation. He found the following passage helpful along his journey. "*Proverb 3:5, Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding and always acknowledge him and he will direct*

your path.” The second advice he takes to heart daily is a quote taped to his bedroom mirror that says, “*The key to success is hard work, dedication, and learning from failure.*”

Advice that he would give to another young black man who may be contemplating beginning college is abundant.

You can do whatever you put your mind to, or whatever you want to do, and don’t let nobody, the haters, the naysayers, don’t let them discourage you, because they will. They’re gonna be people out there “why you’re doing it?” They don’t really care why you’re doing it, and don’t want you to do it. You gotta do what makes you happy. And that’s the goal. Nobody can make you happy except yourself.

He wished to thank the people, including classmates along the journey, for the help they offered. But as he summed up his thoughts, he returned to his mother, “I just wanted to make my mom proud. I just want to show her that she was wrong.”

Happy- I’m Good Enough, I’m Smart Enough and Gosh Darn It, People Like Me!

At the time of the interview, Happy was not satisfied with her current employment situation. She had worked so hard in college and was yet to see the rewards of her effort. As she shared, “I’m not going to say that education is a bad thing, but I am gonna tell some 24-25 year-old-girl, especially if she is making \$14-\$15 dollars an hour, do not quit your job!” This advice is framed on the fact that \$14-\$15 dollars an hour was the salary Happy was making before she quit in order to return to school. At the current time, Happy is working part-time at a retail store and was seeking full-time employment.

As part of her overall experience and her desire to give back to others, Happy felt that she had learned so much about how to be successful in college that she is writing a

book called *The Idiot's Guide to Surviving and Going Back to College*. It will include “all those helpful hints that they don't tell you. Like walking past scholarship and applications and checking it every Monday.” Happy informed me how she is committed to helping other people be successful.

Honestly, if I ran into somebody that was sincere, I would grab her hand and just take her, if she is low-income I would take her to you guys (SAGE), and take her to the bursar, you know...I don't know about the advisors, but I would definitely tell her about *ratemyprofessor.com* and *Chegg*. Cause College can be affordable.

Her current situation of searching for employment caused her to be cynical when thinking about the multiple degrees she worked so hard to earn. When asked to give some words that were used to inspire her, her cynicism showed up again when she bellowed, “Don't give up! You're fired! Get back to work!” Happy suffered with major depression and other forms of mental illness and struggles trying to maintain her mental health. Despite the “breakdowns,” she did persevere and remain resilient because as she affirmed, “I had to be.” Along the way if she caught herself “being like my mom,” she would try to change her direction to get back on a more positive and healthy road.

Orquidea- Todo Lo Puedo En Cristo Que Me Fortalice

After receiving her Bachelor's degree Orquidea worked a few odd jobs; however, after a year she was successful in landing a job at a local college in a position called *New Student Intake*. She is particularly fond of this position because she feels that she is able to assist new students, especially LIFG students. Another positive aspect of this position includes being able to help Spanish-speaking students. In this position, she feels she is

able to influence students and speak to them at their level, in both English and Spanish, so that they understand how the process works.

'Cause I know it is a lot of information, and working in a college or university, we get so used to how we talk and how we say stuff, that we forget that the other person it's the first time they are hearing everything.

Reflecting back to what a shy person she was as a student, she is pleased in knowing she has increased her confidence so that she can better help the students she is charged with assisting. She credited her newly found confidence to teaching Sunday school at church.

That I really think helped, 'cause even though I was more of a shy person at school, what really helped for me to develop was at church. Being able to be like a Sunday school teacher, singing in the choir, leading something, that helped and because then you, you have to learn to be social with all different kinds of people.

When she thought about why she was so successful as a student, and persistent in her journey to be a *first-generation American* college graduate for her family (as well as a LIFG student), she indicated that it was because she was a *responsible student*. When asked what that meant, she replied,

Responsibility is really realizing, ok I'm signing up to enroll in this class, that means I have to show up to class, on time, pay attention to the instructor, take notes, read the book, keep up so that way whenever an assignment or the tests come I hopefully know what I am doing.

Advice that she was once offered that resounds with her till this day is taken directly from the Bible. As she hesitated, and appeared to be searching for the right

words, she said, “That’s funny because I can remember that in Spanish; it is, “*Todo lo puedo en Cristo que me fortalece.*” After she wrote this passage down for me, she informed me that the translation is “*I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.*” She affirmed to me her genuine belief in the *Bible* and belief that for herself knowing the scripture has “really helped realize that’s true.” Words of advice that she would offer to new students is to make connections, “Yes, connections. They are very important. Mentors are important. Get out of your comfort zone.”

Samantha- You Wouldn’t Survive In My World

Despite not being able to get her bachelor’s in Social Work due to her math disability, Samantha did graduate with a bachelor’s in Human Services. She is now employed full-time working with a nursing home.

I always wanted to make a difference in other people’s lives, help other people that had gone through the same kind of stuff I had gone through. Or even elderly, you know, it’s kind of a safe place for me to work, because it doesn’t bring up any of my own issues, it’s all about them, and helping them, and that is really good for me.

Though she enjoys her job, Samantha is still in a very stressful place in life. She is not as close to her children right now as she would like to be, and since her divorce is working hard on gaining back their love and trust. She also continues to struggle with low self-esteem and does admit to seeking help for it, along with her depression.

She still has a difficult time giving herself accolades for all she has overcome. When asked why she was resilient, she said,

I kind of feel like a failure at this part of my life. 'Cause for me, a measure of my success is reflected in my children. [She is unable to acknowledge her resilience, and states it is because her relationship is strained with her children.] But logically, I made it through my bachelor's and that's pretty good.

Samantha had a hard time recalling words that have motivated her along the way. However, she still holds onto a memory of one of the first people who believed in her. The 9th grade teacher who dressed differently than the other teachers and who saw the uniqueness in each student.

I just remember, he said to me, "you're really gifted you shouldn't be here." And I remember at first I kind of got offended because I was used to being the poor kid that would go from school to school. At first I thought he was trying to say I was a freak, and then he started saying you're gifted. And it kind of stuck in my head all those years later when I decided I wanted to try college, remembering what that teacher said to me. That was 9th grade.

The beauty of positive words spoken over twenty years earlier are what continue to motivate Samantha. Advice she would give to a woman with a similar background as herself and starting college is reflective of the tumultuous life she has had.

I tell her not to give up, to keep doing it, to keep doing it her way, whether it's one class or three classes, I tell her if she is married to hide some money. Always have some money hidden that her husband knows nothing about. Remember no matter what, that she needs to get that degree, 'cause that degree is what is going to help her later, as far as to get a job and provide for her kids, no matter what's going on, whether she's married or not married.

Samantha could not see the beauty in herself. Though she knew she was better than what a “freak” is, she still considered herself a “freak.” When asked if there was anything that she wanted to share that would contribute to the research, she addressed the following,

I know foster kids kind of think like this too, but like if somebody is kind of looking down on you, like they think that you’re not good enough to be there, I would kind of get that attitude, like you wouldn’t have survived where I survived. I mean you think you’re so whatever, but let’s switch places. You don’t know where I come from *you wouldn’t survive in my world*. But I can fake it and make it in your world Watch.

Mike -Finish What You Start

After receiving his degree in Mass Communication Broadcast Management, Mike found a three-month internship with a local television station in a nearby city. However, “as of right now, no I am not working in broadcast. I will eventually. Just waiting for more jobs to open up.” He is currently employed with Fed Ex and UPS as a receiver of packages. He is happy with his current jobs and feels confident that he will find himself employed in the profession that he prepared for academically. He credits his success and persistence in obtaining his bachelor degree to the desire to finish college. “Why was I successful? Because I wanted to finish. I wanted to make something of myself, and to, of course, be the first person in my family to complete college.”

And what did he feel when he made it to the end?

I was joyful because it was an accomplishment that you know, it took a lot of hard work and time and energy, but it was well worth it at the end. Because you

completed what you started and then on top of that, you were able transfer out to a university.

When asked if there was any advice he was offered that assisted him, he went back to the advice his mother gave him to take advantage of the opportunity for education and advice to “*finish what you start.*” With a big smile on his face, it seemed apparent that Mike is proud of himself and his hard work. His desire for others to follow in his footsteps comes through his passion when he offers advice.

I would just tell him, “Hey, I was in the same position as you when I started.”

When I started college I had to start taking developmental courses cause [my] ACT scores and everything [were low]. Just tell them, say, “Hey, I understand that this is probably going to be a little tough, just for you to start off with, but at the end of the day man, if you look at the end goal man, it will be well worth it.”

Having graduated with his four year degree the previous semester, Mike is well aware of the long journey it can often take a student to get through college, especially if they have to take numerous developmental education courses.

Delisha- Having That Willpower to Not Be a Quitter

In the six weeks after Delisha participated in an individual interview with me, she took and passed exams that allowed her to gain a job as a Registered Nurse in the Intensive Care Unit of a hospital. She reported loving her new job!

Delisha intends to get her master’s degree one day, and realizes that her educational journey is still an unfurling path. But she took a few moments to consider what has made her so resilient so far, especially in a field as challenging as nursing.

I always knew that I was smart, it's just hard to adapt from things that used to be easy to the kind of things that are difficult, and changing the way you think as a person. And change is different and scary sometimes. Once I decided that was what I wanted to do, I just had to do it.

Her tenacity is exemplified in how she completed a challenging degree, her qualifying licensure exam and obtained a job within one month of graduating from nursing school.

Advice that has been given and which she often utilizes came from her mother:

She is the one that always just tells me that she believes in me and she knows I can do it. Parents are the most biased people ever, "You're the best, you can do anything you want," you know-- biased love. Sometimes that's all you need, is just some biased love.

Words of advice she would offer another young woman who may follow in her shoes, include,

I would tell her to find some kind of support. If you don't have it at home from a parent or a loved one, find somebody else, a friend in class, or a faculty member, or a student support services at your school. Find somebody that you can talk to that's gonna give you good solid advice. Because I think the biggest thing you need is someone that can kind of just keep you grounded and give you a directional push or shove in the right direction.

The final thought offered by Delisha on what would help my research on LIFG students included accessing support. "I think this was the biggest thing for me was having that extra hope and support, even if it's just from family."

Cody- Listen and Seek Out Great People

Cody heeded the words of advice offered to him by a previous practicum supervisor and left Red Rock in order to pursue his master's degree in a new state. His experience at his new college and new home state was very positive. A reminder of his reasoning for leaving Red Rock was given by Cody when he said "if I wanted to hold hands with my boo [his romantic male partner], I want to be able to hold hands with that person, and feel a little more comfortable doing that...My life kind of outweighed that consideration." After gaining his master's in social work, Cody landed a job at a university. He is now in charge of overseeing minority programming and grant development at a four-year catholic college.

I think that all the things that were called the truth, or the way it is, had caused so much pain, that it prompted me to finally critically think and question everything that I was told, and put it through the lens of my experience, what my gut had told me [He was questioning the value system of how he was raised, and how being a gay man dedicated to equality and justice for all made him desire more.] And because the values that I had sought out, built, and embraced made just having a job, not a possibility, that wasn't an option. [He wanted a profession, not a job, and that required a higher education.]

The words of advice that have stayed with him over the years are perhaps, the most unique and interesting, that I heard throughout this process, and were shared through a story.

It was a cab ride that I took in Red Rock, and I talked to him about travel. And I told him [the cabbie] I would really love to go to Rio, someday, seems like so sunny and fun. And he said, "why don't you go?" And I said well, I can't, you

know, it's too hard, it's there, it's uncomfortable. He said, "there is really no reason you can't go. If you decide you really want to go, you can go, and you wouldn't worry about anything else, you would just go." So I remember that when I get afraid of doing things. But this guy didn't even know me, and he was like what the hell is wrong with you?

When asked him what he would tell a young black, gay man, who was considering starting college, after waiting seven years after high school, he shared,

I would tell him first, one thing that you can stop doing right now, and say you are not going to do again, and forgive yourself if you do it, is take it personally.

People's bullshit is their bullshit. If you were somebody else the bullshit would continue, with or without you, so be you. Do not apologize for being anything, apologize sparingly, and apologize to those who deserve your apology, learn the difference. You are incredibly bright, know that. And you are here to serve others, but make sure to take good care of yourself. And, listen and seek out great people. See out those good people, there are great people out there, seek them out. Talk to them, relate to them on a person-to-person level. Because they recognize that we are all here doing our own thing. They are not going to judge you. You will find so many good people, people who get it, in your life.

Having gone through very difficult years while in high school, it appeared that Cody found an inner peace and positive belief in himself.

Focus Group- I'm So Very, Very Thankful to RRCC, Because It Did, It Laid My Foundation

As indicated previously, Greg and Becky did not participate in individual interviews. What is known, through the fact sheet and the focus group, is that Greg is now employed at RRCC as a faculty member and is currently working on his dissertation to obtain a Ph.D. from a private local college. Like Greg, Becky completed a fact sheet and also participated in the focus group, allowing me to determine that after graduating from RRCC Becky graduated from one of the local four-year colleges at the age of 43 with her bachelor's degree in social work. She then obtained a master's degree in marriage and family therapy and passed a national licensure exam to become a licensed marriage and family therapist. She is now employed with a local non-profit mental health agency.

Focus group questions that were very similar to those in the individual interviews produced similar findings and were included in previous reports of data; however new data emerged from additional questions added.

When you see a challenge, when you note change is coming, you....fill in the blank.

Ashley: Pray...I try not to guess what God wants, because it's always wrong, but I just pray whatever is going to happen that I have the strength. ...I kind of get excited too. I kind of like a challenge.

Becky: I have to start coming up with a plan, like if this happens and this happens, and that way I don't get all bent out of shape over it. I got alternatives, if this happens I'm gonna do this, or this, I'm always trying to figure out, you know, what's gonna be next or how I'm gonna do it. ...I kind of thrive on it.

Marcus: I also pray. But I pray for wisdom. Just to know to make the right decisions, and then I consider it as much as possible. I hope. I worry. I wonder. Wonder what's gonna happen next. I'm excited too.

Greg: I get a bit excited, because I get bored with the everyday and the mundane. I kind of stay flexible and not worry too much with anticipating alternatives, I just deal with it as it comes, and it's just a chance to improve myself.

Whether they are praying, getting excited, or making a plan, what is apparent is that none of these participants indicated they would *run*, *stress*, or act in any matter that did not include optimism and strength.

What did you observe from your parents that made you realize that you wanted something different? And when did you realize that education may be part of the means to make it different?

Marcus: That's easy. My whole life, growing up and seeing my mom working in fast food, and her having a *dead end job*, for me I realized I'm not gonna limit myself to working in fast food, you know that's a dead end job. Probably in high school, when I was working at restaurants, I was like "ah, this is what my mom does for a living? Nah." And um, I just kind of knew I had to have an education to go past that.

Ashley: Probably seeing my own parents *struggle*. My dad has Associates [degree] but he still could never find a good job, or keep a good job. And I also worked fast food in high school and realized this is my future if I don't get an education.

Greg: My parents both had good jobs for their education that they had, and they were in those jobs for many years, but we still *struggled* financially. And they always told me that they wanted me to go to school, because they didn't have the chance to, so that I wouldn't have to struggle like they did.

Becky: They *struggled*. My mom was a secretary and I can remember, actually I went to Tech, during my senior year in high school, so I did that and had that certificate, and that's kind of how I started off with my first job. But there was something about that I did not like. Having to, I don't even know how to say this, I didn't want to be the secretary, I wanted to have the secretary.

Ashley, Greg and Becky all used the word *struggle* in their responses. Though Marcus does not say the word *struggle* in his answer, he implied that her job was a struggle by using the term *dead end job*. All participants saw the struggles of their parents as due to not having a higher education, and they used this as an extrinsic motivation.

After discussing the *struggle* and other issues that resonated in both the focus group and individual interviews, the participants were asked to discuss their commencement ceremonies. Greg shared that he had almost 15 family members attend his RRCC ceremony, but less at his four-year commencement. When asked how he felt at the RRCC ceremony he said,

At that time, I didn't think much about it honestly, 'cause I only at the last minute decided to walk. I wasn't really sure that I wanted to walk because I was going to (four-year college), and so I thought why do I need to walk?

However, the anticipation of his doctoral graduation gets him excited!

I am kind of anticipating the next one, and I am maybe a year and a half out, and I'm thinking, in some ways, just thinking about it now, I don't care if I don't have anyone there because this one is just about me. My doctorate is all about me. My master's was because I got to get a job, I know the job I want and I need a master's. I don't need this degree to get the job that I want, I already have the job that I want, it's, it' is exactly all the intrinsic reasons we talked about before, this is to prove that I can really do the big one, make it work. And the really nice gown, and the velvet strips [he laughed while stating the last sentence acknowledging the vanity in wanting to wear such a fabulous robe]!

Ashley did not go to the RRCC graduation, "I kind of had the same feeling as Greg did, that my next graduation will be the big one, I'm not done, I'm gonna keep going." When she did make it to her four-year graduation she remembers that it was especially extraordinary because it was also coincided with her one-year wedding anniversary.

Becky was also *conflicted* about whether she should attend the RRCC graduation, "but I did go, didn't really make a big deal of it, didn't really tell too many people." However, when she graduated from her four-year college she did celebrate and in attendance were many people including her children, siblings and friends.

At MWSU I felt like I finished, I had a deal about going to MWSU 'cause that is where I was going to go too originally. I had a deal kind of connected to that MWSU thing, so I felt like I finished something.

Unlike Ashley, Greg and Becky, Marcus did go to the RRCC graduation ceremony and was excited to go.

I sure did go to RRCC commencement! And I felt opposite of them. I was excited! I worked hard and I was going to walk across that stage regardless of it was RRCC or not, and so I went. Mom, grandma, cousins, were happy and excited. Went to WOHALI ceremony, that one was different experience than RRCC. That one made me feel, I don't have the words to describe it. To walk across that stage, have a bachelor's degree, I mean I just think about it and it makes me "feel bubbly inside." That one made me feel...I mean it was like, ...[searches for the right word choice] *just goal reaching*, I mean it was an achievement, I had reached a plateau, that many people don't get to reach, or, and I reached it and it made me feel "bubbly" [Laughs].

Of the four participants in the focus group, two had earned Master's degrees, including Greg who was working on his Ph.D. Becky expressed interest in earning a Ph.D. Marcus was in the midst of applying for his Master's degree, and Ashley had plans to get her master's degree.

Reflect on where you came from and where you are going.

Marcus: I feel ...satisfied. I feel a sense of happiness. I feel I have personal growth I guess and [am] developing to almost the person I want to become. A couple of tweaks I need to work out.

Ashley: I just think about how the other side is really good, and what I'm doing now, I am a part of someone else reaching the same goal [referring to the fact that she works at a college and enjoys helping students reach their goals].

Greg: the life that I have now, in no way resembles the life I thought I would have when I first came to school here. It's much better than I could have imagined

and even though I was not proud, I'm proud that I have a part of it [part of the RRCC memories & degree]. And as long as commencement is every year, I really do love going to commencement and I love walking in with faculty members and getting to sit up on the side and I love watching students come into Pomp and Circumstances. It really does get me.

Becky: When I look back at that, when I started, I feel like I was in a fork in the road, start school and finish it, or just get a job and deal with it. So I mean that's my first thought is that I was at a fork in the road and my next thought is, I am so thankful. It completely changed me. I'm so very, very thankful to RRCC, because it did, it laid my foundation, it gave me this solid foundation that I could do it [um hums from Ashley and Greg in confirmation]. That goes with me in everything that I do professionally.

This brief synopsis of their overall satisfaction with their college experience was supported by several artifacts. Pictures of the participants' artifacts are included; however, names of colleges and students have been marked through to protect the anonymity of both participant and institutions. Participants were asked to describe what each brought.



Figure 4. Ashley's Artifacts.

Brought associates degree. First *Dean's Honors* certificate. I didn't do well in high school, I thought I was going to be a failure. Also last semester dean's honor roll, extra push into WOHALI. Acceptance letter from WOHALI, first letter from them had been a denial. *Dean's Honor's Roll* letter from WOHALI. Letter of Tuition Waiver/Theatre Scholarship. Letter of acceptance into a summer show, Downtown Country, as a performer.

Greg overlooked the email asking participants to bring an artifact; however, when asked what he would have brought that "made you proud, about your time at RRCC," he ventured, "Honestly I would get the bound volumes from the time that I worked on the student newspaper here." I then asked him what he was feeling.

Very proud because a lot of that work was not just, you know articles that maybe I wrote, but articles that I edited and they would represent the work of staff people that I helped to sort of manage and direct and give story ideas to and work with, so it is more of a managerial administrative accomplishment, and at that age and that every two weeks we put out a newspaper.



Figure 5. Becky's artifacts.

Becky brought a grocery bag of multiple artifacts, including *Honor Cords*, Medallions, and Tassels. “This (RRCC tassel) led to this (MWSS tassel) led to this (CYLAS University) and this is my hood. But I do believe that this (RRCC tassel) was my great start.” When asked which one was the most important, or provided the greatest impact, she responded, “Probably is the RRCC tassel, I was incredibly proud to get the Master’s, but in some odd way, I feel this was probably the most work, kind of getting in the swing of things.”

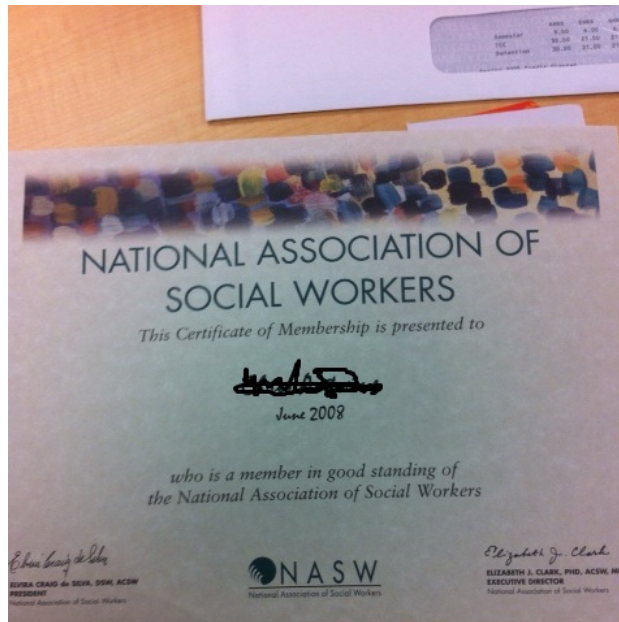


Figure 6. Marcus' artifacts.

The first artifact Marcus showed was his RRCC Transcript. He laughed as he said he picked this because “That just showed me that I wasn’t dumb. I made awesome grades and I was just able to complete all the classes with good grades and a good GPA.” The other artifact he brought was his certificate of membership to the National Association of Social Workers. This association gave him a real sense of importance. “I really am professional now, I got a title, it just made me feel, a sense of accomplishment in professionalism.”

Overall, the focus group was successful in both confirming findings from the individual interviews and in exploring new themes. Each participant appeared to be very proud to speak about his or her experiences, struggles and successes. They also appeared to have found comfort being able to express their experiences of LIFG college graduates in a supportive environment without having to hide the pride each had for his or her accomplishments. This goes back to the term *relatedness* discussed in Chapter II, which

refers to connecting with others in a real and genuine manner (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This relatedness is a component of SDT which will be explored in more depth in Chapter VII.

Chapter Summary

This final chapter of data presentation described the current state of the participants, specifically their employment, successes, and future endeavors. It explored their persistence, advice given to them, and advice they would offer students with similar LIFG backgrounds. Conclusions, discussion and research recommendations are presented in Chapter VII.

Chapter VII

Well for some you know it comes so easy
And for others seems its bread in their bones
But I still danced to the beat of a different drum
Then the one I heard at home
I will always dance to the beat of a different drum
For the warrior has come home

Song Lyrics by Bill Miller

Summary, Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that supported eleven LIFG transfer graduates of four-year institutions in their persistence at the community college level. The purpose was guided by five research questions that sought to determine what levels of motivation they utilized as they navigated through college, including what student support services they made use of at the community college and four-year college. The previous two chapters separated the data into themes that had corresponding narratives supporting them. The intent of the narratives were to assist in situating the story of each participant within his or her own cultural, gender, class, and age specific experiences (thick rich descriptions on each participant provided in Chapter IV). By presenting my data in this fashion, I believe I was able to provide a road map to understanding decisions the participants made that influenced their decisions to attend

college, graduate from college, and for some, to continue the educational journey past the Bachelor's level.

The five research questions, as outlined the proceeding chapters, were satisfied by four major themes, including sub-themes and minor categories, presented in the previous two chapters. Using the format given by Bloomberg & Volpe (2008) I defined the the terminology I used as a measure of alignment of participants findings with research findings (see table 8).

Table 8

Terminology to Align Participant Findings

All participants = 11 Participants

An overwhelming majority = 9 or more participants

A majority = 7 or more participants

Some = 4 or more participants

A few = 2 or more participants

Implications of the findings will be addressed using the themes listed in Table 9.

However, it will be preceded by an analysis of the connection to the literature.

Table 9

Themes Implicated in the Findings

Theme One: Walking Two Roads	Theme Two: Student Services Utilized to Overcome Challenges	Theme Four: Giving Back and Coming Full Circle
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Connection to the Literature Review

The literature review showed there were several suggestions, or best practices, for working with LIFG students. Community college strengths were listed as locations, lower-costs, open-door admissions, and the ability to provide vocational training, especially in a volatile market where quick response to local industry employment needs can be provided (Dougherty, 2008; “College Retention Rates,” 2011). Additional strengths included developmental education and diverse academic offerings. These strengths were confirmed and articulated by an overwhelming majority of the participants when they were asked why they attended community college. Ashley indicated convenience and location as the reason she chose RRCC. Marcus concurred with Ashley, but also emphasized the more affordable tuition. Happy thought it was a good place to get her general education requirements out of the way, and Orquieda knew she could go to RRCC for free with her in state tuition scholarship. Mike cited his lack of maturity and cheaper attendance as the reasons he went to RRCC, whereas, Delisha wanted to gain direction into deciding on her academic major before transferring. Cody cited that it was clearly convenience, as he could walk down the road to the Metro Campus. Greg was informed by his parents that he was going to RRCC, and Becky chose it simply based on location. The reasons cited by the students for choosing a community college clearly support current literature.

Some of the criticisms of community colleges, provided by the literature, included too many vocational versus educational skills, a “watering down of the curriculum,” being “subject to the whims of business and industry,” and perpetuating the gaps between the have and have not’s” (Levin et al., 2010, p. 38). These criticisms or deficiencies were

did not emerge within the participant interviews; as they are more than likely concerns cited by researchers of higher education, rather than students.

Information previously provided, as expressed by several researchers (Bergerson, 2009; Engle et al., 2006; Mitchell, 2008), was that first generation students who are given stronger parental expectations and strong support from parents are more likely to succeed in college. This finding was supported by only *some* of the participants, including Steve, Mike, Delisha, Orquiedea, and Greg. The other participants cited not having the emotional support they needed from their parents. In the group who did have support, it was emotional support, rather than practical or financial support. An appropriate representation of this finding came from Delisha's mom, who wanted to help her with college, but did not have the skillset. As she told Delisha "I wish I could help you more with that, but I don't really know how to do it." The "that" in this scenario was help with financial aid, school application, etc.

Current literature said that first-generation students often start college with lower high school grade point averages, standardized test scores, and critical thinking skills, and often have lower achievement scores than their non-first-generation peers (Davis, 2010; Engle et al., 2006; Mitchell, 2008; Thayer, 2005). Though this research did not request data regarding participants' grade point averages, or standardized test scores, I learned that the *all but one participant* had to take at least one developmental math course and one participant had to take all the developmental classes offered.

Research Questions One and Two

The first research question asked: *What community college support services, strategies, motivations or other resources do low-income, first-generation students who*

started at a community college, credit for their persistence or graduation within six years from a four-year college?; whereas, research question two asked: *What community college services did the students use to remove barriers or to work around them?* These two questions can be answered simultaneously as they are both dictated by student support services available at the community college. A cursory glance at the literature review provided in Chapter II indicated the following student services as being critical to student success:

1. Picking the correct academic major (Nitecki, 2011).
2. Academic guidance and counseling (Karp et al., 2008).
3. Intrusive advising and mentoring, integrated support services (Tinto, 2010)
4. Learning Communities and structured-first year programs (Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 2010).
5. TRIO Federal Grants, Student Support Services (Balz & Esten, 1998).
6. Financial assistance including MW PROMISE (Mendoza, Mendez & Maccolm, 2009; MW Promise, 2009).

Out of these six “critical” student success recommendations, three were reflected in greater detail than the others by the participants. The three services most often cited by participants included, (1) academic guidance and counseling, (2), TRIO Federal Grants, including Student Support Services, and (3) learning communities and structured first year programs. The fourth, which was also the only critical factor supported by all participants, was the influence of faculty on student retention.

Academic guidance and counseling.

Academic guidance and counseling was used in a variety of methods for the research participants. All of the participants indicated using advisement through either the college advisement office, the SAGE Program, or through the human services program. Purnell and Blank (2004) indicated that poor academic advisement can serve as a detriment to graduation. The fact that only three participants (Marcus, Becky and Cody) cited regularly using advisement causes concern about how the importance of academic advisement is communicated to students, or perhaps that it is a finding in the literature that, at least in this study, was not supported.

TRIO Federal Grants, student support services.

There were four participants of the 11 who were members of the SAGE TRIO Student Support Services Program at RRCC. The literature review highlighted a study completed by Chaney et al., (1998) that indicated students who utilized TRIO Student Support Services were retained 8% higher than eligible but non-participating TRIO students. All 11 participants would have been eligible to be a SAGE participant, based on LIFG admission criteria; however, the program was not funded at RRCC until 2005. By 2005, many of the participants in this study had successfully transferred to another college. For the four participants who were members of the SAGE Program, their experiences appeared to have been heightened, as they reported extensive use of the program services. Samantha shared that she sought out the SAGE Program “because I wanted to succeed and those were resources that could help me succeed.” Happy shared that even though she used the SAGE advisors, she did not utilize all of the services too often. Offering TRIO SSS programs, which include academic advisement and academic

learning communities, provided an opportunity for LIFG students to have the additional support they need.

Learning communities and structured first year programs.

Only 2 of the 11 research participants (Mike and Delisha) participated in an academic learning community or in a structured first year program. These communities increased retention by 5% at community colleges and 10% at four-year colleges (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Reasons cited for the success of these communities included peer learning, peer support, connections to campus services, and faculty mentoring. Furthermore, in addition to increased retention, grade point averages improved (Stevenson et al., 2005). Delisha confirmed the peer support when she stated, “It was definitely a good experience because a lot of people struggle in school with being confident, speaking up and being able to do it amongst people you were already familiar with was very helpful.” Most of the participants were not aware of what an Academic Learning Community was as RRCC does not offer such communities outside of the SAGE program; thus, there is a loss of opportunity to increase retention and to assist in building peer learning and support, as well as faculty mentoring.

Faculty support.

A finding of this study not clearly identified in the literature review as being critical to the success of LIFG community college students was faculty involvement. All 11 participants credited faculty with being helpful in their efforts to graduate from RRCC. An overwhelming majority of participants took developmental math courses, so it was no surprise that math faculty were most often cited as being extremely helpful. As Ashley said, “I was just so lost when it came to math and I just needed to start from the

bottom. And that was frustrating, it came so easy to some people, [but] I just struggled so much with it.” The only participant who did not take a developmental math course was Cody; however, he also reflected on the importance of faculty.

I would say it [faculty relationships] was very successful in helping me to develop as a whole student. I would say that, particularly, Tina Pena introduced me to a lot of the service component, and help me to integrate my learning to making a difference in the community.

This study suggests that faculty support should be included in the vast amount of research on LIFG community college student because communication between faculty and student can be a tool of retention. This relationship can be supported and identified as a learning opportunity in structured first year programs.

Self-Determination Theory

The third research question was focused on the theoretical framework of this dissertation and will be discussed in great detail. The specific question was: *What intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors did students utilize?* The theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was examined using three sub-categories of Extrinsic Motivations, Intrinsic Motivations, and Autonomy and Sense of Belonging, all components of SDT. Another category examined earlier, in Chapter I, was the concept of amotivation. This concept posited that amotivated people “either do not act at all or act without intent-they just go through the motions (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). None of the 11 participants in my study indicated amotivated actions, as they were all able to identify the intent of why they went to college and why it was important. Also stated in Chapter I was the fact that this study intended to uncover whether the skills successful students

utilize are more naturally aligned to the utilization of intrinsic skills or extrinsic skills. The literature indicated (Mitchell, 2008) that first generation students were more likely to be using career mobility (extrinsic skills) while second generation students were more likely to use personal growth (intrinsic skills) as a reason for college degree attainment. This finding did seem to correlate with the participants in my study; however, a new finding not addressed in the literature review was that while the participants in my group were all initially ignited by extrinsic motivations to attend college, it was their acquired intrinsic skills that fueled them through degree completion.

The following discussion will demonstrate the different motivations students utilized and will reveal how participants ultimately persevered using their intrinsic skills. Furthermore, it is important to note that unlike the research presented in Chapter II, which indicates that almost 50% of LIFG students drop out in the first year, the participants in this study persevered through bachelor degree attainment, and for a few through Master degree attainment. An examination of what services and resources were utilized will unfold in this chapter.

Extrinsic motivations.

Defined in Chapter II, extrinsic motivation is “the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). The outcome is usually a tangible outcome, indicating that the satisfaction comes not from “the activity itself but rather from the extrinsic consequences to which the activity leads” (Gagne & Deci, 2005, p. 331). Within this study, the participant’s extrinsic reasons for attending college included needing it for a better job, because parents told them to, career

advancement, and financial reasons. Steve wanted an education for a job. “I would say after high school you really have to have a degree to have a meaningful, not just a job, but a career.” Orquieda shared, “I knew that to get that job, I would have to...then you have to continue your education to be able to have a degree that will open those doors for you.” Cody shared a similar sentiment when he said, “I knew I would have a chance at a job that would pay more. I certainly wanted a better paycheck. I knew to get the check I wanted, college was the way to get it.”

Marcus wanted to keep up the appearance of doing well since many classmates he knew at his high school were going to college. He shared, “Of course you wanted to seem somewhat successful, so you went to college.” Despite the fact Happy reported that 97% of her graduating class at the private high school went onto college, she did not, as she did not have the means to pay for it. She was 24 years-old when she started at RRCC, and her extrinsic motivation was because it did not seem fair that her boyfriend at the time could, and she could not. In fact, she said, “I snapped. And I said, you know what, if he can graduate from (private four year school), so can I!” For Happy, after arriving at RRCC, it was the experience of meeting an outgoing and ambitious classmate that motivated her. She also found motivation and inspiration from outstanding faculty who helped to cement her passion for education. When talking about the Honor’s classes she stated, “It was challenging, it was fun. Those were my best classes.” Greg simply stated his extrinsic motivation was “my parents told me I would be coming here.” Becky shared her extrinsic motivation was because her divorce attorney “said you need to enroll yourself in school,” and because she wanted to see if she “could actually pass a class.”

Ashley never really had a plan for college, and when her grandmother presented her with one, she said, "I just thought I wanted out... I just don't want to stay here any longer. I wanted to get out of my house, my parents, my house. It just wasn't a good situation, and I wanted it over with." Samantha perhaps found her extrinsic motivation from a faculty member at RRCC. She recalled this faculty member telling her and another student after class one night, "From the beginning of your education, to the end of your education, you will change so much. You will be a different person." This resonated greatly with Samantha. "I remember thinking; I want to be a different person. I didn't like myself, I didn't like who I was. I felt like a waste. And I wanted to be a different person than who I was." For Samantha, the way to do that was through an education.

Yes, I saw education as a means to do everything. To make a better life, to be an example to my kids, to make sure that they make better decisions when they grow up, to be able to feed my children, it's the key; I mean that's how I viewed it.

Within extrinsic motivations, research indicates that there are multiple levels of associated behaviors. As examined in greater detail in Chapter II, these four behaviors included (1) external regulation, (2) introjected regulation, (3) identified regulation, and (4) integrated regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Based on the findings of my participants, it appears that the majority of them utilized integrated regulation which is defined as occurring when "identified regulations are fully assimilated to the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into congruence with one's other values and needs" (p. 73). Many of the participants initially expressed that they went to college because it was "expected," "to have a meaningful, not just a job, but a career," "I knew I would have a

chance at a job that would pay more,” “of course you wanted to seem somewhat successful, so you went to college,” and “my parents told me I would.” However, somewhere along the way their utilization of extrinsic motivations was slowly overcome by intrinsic motivations.

Intrinsic motivation.

Defined in Chapter II, intrinsic motivation is “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore and to learn” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). Unlike extrinsic motivation, there is no promise of a reward, so the participants in this study were persisting to extend themselves. For the participants in this study, their intrinsic motivations ranged from, the inherent value of education, drive, determination, and to the joy of learning.

Mike’s intrinsic motivation was “to be the first person in my immediate family to complete college.” Delisha said she “really just wanted better for myself.” In fact, she was able to consider the future and said in five or six years from now, “when I’m sitting in my nice happy job, when I’m not depressed going to work, I’m gonna be thankful that I got up out of bed [and went to class] cause I was always scared that I was going to miss something.” Delisha was also driven, and inspired, by her mother. Her mother had expressed over the years the importance of hard work and education. Because her mom always worked in a fast food job, they both agreed they wanted better for her. Though perhaps this was an initial extrinsic motivation, it eventually became an intrinsic motivation as Delisha eventually adopted this goal as her own motivator, and not her mothers.

You know, I wanted to be able to do something that I enjoyed doing. I wanted to wake up every morning and not hate my job. I wanted to be able to go to work and be happy. And make money doing it, and be comfortable, you know I think that is what is the most important thing for me. It's not about being rich, and it's not about being glamorous, I just want to not feel like the roof is caving in on me.

Samantha surmised her intrinsic motivation was based on proving people wrong who did not believe in her, "kind of like an um, screw you!" She reflected how to her dysfunctional family she always felt like the "freak," despite how well she was doing.

I was going to school, so I'm a good student, or look I got a decent job, you know and I was still the freak no matter what I did, so there's definitely, even when I have to be around them now, I definitely had an attitude, kind of a screw you attitude. I mean you all think I'm nothing so I do kind of get this attitude when I get around my family, like I'm not better than them, but definitely use it. Just watch me. I'm the freak? Well let's just see the freak graduate from college.

Steve once heard from a colleague of his that "No one can ever take your education away from you, you always have that." Now that he is starting an MBA program, he holds onto that sentiment. He is also using pride as a motivator when he exclaimed,

That's something that when I started RRCC and MWU with my GPA, I was very proud of myself, that I was able to accomplish that and no one is ever going to be able to take that away from me.

Steve reported that he has always gravitated towards the positive. "Yeah, rarely am I destructive in my thinking that I can't do something, or that I'm not gonna, that it's not

worth it and give up.” These gravitational pulls towards the positive are woven throughout this section on intrinsic motivations. For example, Ashley shared that her intrinsic motivations came from her desire to one day be able to provide for her family.

I thought getting a four-year degree would help keep me out of that situation that my parents were in. You know maybe I wouldn't have to be on food stamps; maybe my kids wouldn't have to be on the Angel Tree. I could provide for my family. Not have to bounce from job to job to another job, you know.

Marcus shared a motivation similar to Ashley's,

I would say just my drive and determination. Ah...and my just my wanting to get out from where I came from, to not live a life like I grew up, and you know the type of life where I had to struggle.

As a young man in high school and in college, Marcus contributed financially to the household. He also kept a private account for himself, which one day his mother found out about. As Marcus told this story, his voice quivered and a look of sadness and disappointment came over him.

And she would say, you know numerous times, you black so you not going to be able to save any money, you gonna pay bills and die, that's what life is about. Paying bills and living from check to check, I hate to use a strong word, but I dislike that saying to this day, and I... and that told me [explaining how he interpreted what his mother was telling him], you don't think that I could save money and so that made me a little stingy, a little tight, you know as far as, you know going out there and just being careless with my money. And that kind've

helped me, because I was like I want a good job, so I have to struggle, you know I have to finish college so I can get a good job.

When asked what he felt when he heard those words, he expressed,

Fear, definitely, fear that she was right, that I couldn't save or that I would grow up living paycheck to paycheck and you know, and then anger, that she would tell me something like that.

Marcus used this experience along with the support of two mentors to provide him with the intrinsic motivation he needed in order to be successful. Perhaps it was because his mentors saw "something in me that I didn't see in myself," that inspired him. "I just saw a different world, that didn't see growing up at home, within my family." His mentors taught him about saving money, and Marcus took their advice and invested in savings bonds. "It was definitely an eye opener," to see a different world and to value money that enabled Marcus to keep marching.

Happy credited the environment in which she was raised for giving her the tools of persistence and intrinsic motivation to persevere.

I think it was the way I grew up. Having to basically, I mean from the time I was six years old my mom taught me how to use the gas stove, and using the washer and dryer, and I have been making my own Spaghetti O's and doing my own laundry ever since.

Orquidea, Cody, and Greg shared that the love of learning is what continued to provide them the intrinsic motivation to be successful in college. Orquidea expressed,

I think really just knowledge, knowing more. I like learning. It's interesting to learn. I don't think we ever stop learning. It's beneficial to me. And then if it's going to be beneficial for me, if I can then be a blessing for the people that are around me, being able to share that, or encourage them, and be like I was able to do it, or you can do that, don't think it's not something that you can't do or you can't learn. I think that it is really more something of a goal for myself, of being able to ...get more education.

Cody also shared this motivation and stated,

[I] loved learning. I just simply loved being a student. Ah--reading, ah--discussing, um what I was learning, or what it was I was kind've digesting. And it was great to see, it was great to tell people too, you know, I'm going to college. That identity, there's something comfortable in that, cause at least you're something, sort of like a status.

Greg's common motivation with Orquidea and Cody was the fact that "I liked school and I liked to learn." In addition to a love of learning, Greg also shared that he had a work ethic. "I don't quit things." He continued,

I shouldn't state never, I remember a couple of times in my doctoral program when I said I'm out, I'm done. But it just took a little bit of figuring out how I'm going to get something done, as opposed to can I do it, or do I want to try.

Becky shared a similar motivation as Greg's when she said, "I don't quit. Like if I start something I will finish it. Like whether it's a sewing project, or whatever, if I start it, I won't let myself start the next one till I finish it." Mike had a variety of intrinsic reasons

for graduating from college. “One of my biggest mottos is once you start something, you need to finish it.” He went on to share how he made the decision to be in college and so it was a “respect thing,” [respect to himself] to finish. And although he shared being a first-generation graduate as an extrinsic reason, he also felt it was an intrinsic reason.

Why was I successful? Because I wanted to finish. I wanted to make something of myself, and to, of course, to be the first person in my family to complete college and everything.

He also shared, “I feel that challenge is a motivation for me...there’s an incentive behind everything so you want to work hard and I become motivated to actually do what I have to do.”

Despite the support that some participants had, there were other participants who not only lacked support but also had family and community members trying to “pull them back in crab bucket.” This is what Ryan and Deci (2000) call an antagonistic environment, or an environment that is antagonistic toward positive individual development. Quotes provided respectively by Marcus and Samantha, such as “you black so you not going to be able to save any money, you gonna pay bills and die, that’s what life is about” and “ [I] never had a husband to support [me] so [I] could go to college” demonstrate an antagonistic environment. Despite the antagonistic environment some of these participants were raised in, they persevered by leaning more heavily on their intrinsic motivation skills, and by relying on supportive words from mentors, and teachers.

One final component of intrinsic motivation is the notion of *relatedness*, which refers to connecting with others in a real and genuine manner. For many of the participants in this study, it appears that when it came to talking about their education and their advancing social mobility, the concept of relatedness came into play through being part of student organizations, the SAGE Program, or through connections with staff and faculty. However, when it came to talking about such successes with their peers or family, there was often a disconnection. For example, Marcus aptly summed up this concept by stating, “I feel more comfortable in this setting [the focus group with strangers who were also LIFG], than amongst others with the same criteria as me [friends I sent to high school with and who did not go to college].” When it came to discussing academics with family, most of the participants agreed that it was best to just not talk about it. Becky summarized this well when she shared, “I don’t want to brag or come off in that sense. They don’t quite get it [her educational advancement]. I mean they’re real nice about it and everything, but I don’t think they really get it at all.”

Belonging, Autonomy, and Competence

Belonging, Autonomy and Competence are three additional basic needs that are related to SDT. For the majority of the participants, these attributes appeared to be present, and in fact Samantha appeared to be one of the few who did not have a high level of confidence. However, she did feel a sense of belonging at RRCC and perhaps that is what she leaned on as she navigated through the college.

Happy reported a sense of belonging that was probably due to her being part of several student organizations, including the Honor’s Program and the SAGE SSS TRIO Program. As the President of Student Government, and of Phi Theta Kappa, she had

office space on campus. She also had an on-campus job with the Campus Security and Police. Additionally, she was deeply connected to several of the Honor's Program faculty members and gained a sense of belonging through them.

Delisha and Mike both had a sense of belonging as members of SAGE SSS TRIO and as tutors for the program. Delisha shared her thoughts that tutoring with SAGE required that she share with others, which enhanced her feeling of belonging. Mike credited the learning community for helping him to develop a sense of community. "Everybody was just in one [same boat], and they all wanted to say, 'We got to get through this course, it's gonna be tough, but we're gonna buckle down, were gonna study, were gonna do things necessary to get by.'"

Greg felt that "initially, no" he did not feel autonomy or a sense of belonging at RRCC, "but after that first semester then I did feel that I belonged here." When asked what changed he said, "I just felt comfortable with the *rhythm* of college." He also attributed his sense of belonging to

the fact that I got a job working in the Metro Campus Library and I got involved in the Honor's Program, and then again, working for the student newspaper, those things really gave me that sense of belonging, and helped me feel like I knew the place because I knew so many people who were on staff and it began to make sense to me.

For Marcus, this feeling did not come until closer to the end of his time at RRCC, "it was when I saw that I was making good grades, going at my own pace, I felt a sense of belonging then." This was the opposite for Ashley, who responded, "I felt I belonged the first day I walked in." She attributed that to the smaller classroom sizes, which reminded

her of the rural high school she attended. She also attributed to the Baptist Christian Ministry (BCM) group. “I was a part of the BCM from day one stepped on campus. That really helped me feel comfortable and get involved.” Once Becky was able to get past the “downgrade” of a community college at her age she “almost initially felt comfortable.” This feeling was solidified for Becky when she got in the Human Services program.

Once I got into that, and knew the professors and did all that, I was completely comfortable. I kind of felt like I got my rhythm and figured out what I was gonna do...and the human services was a huge influence on my experience here.”

Ultimately, much of Becky’s support came from RRCC faculty and staff, as most of her friends were busy with “their professions or with their kids, or working.”

When considering why it took him a while to develop a connection at RRCC, Marcus posited that it was perhaps because he was never involved in any on-campus activity such as an organization, a program, or a job. In regard to not feeling a sense of autonomy, he felt it may be “because I still lived at home. Um, with mom, so to me I was in extended high school... I worked, you know full-time, but it’s, I didn’t really feel like a grown-up until I finished RRCC and moved out.” In fact, he and Steve were the only two participants who were not part of any organized group at RRCC, and were the only two who were unable to express a strong sense of belonging or autonomy while at RRCC. Like Marcus, Steve also lived at home with his mother, and perhaps that contributed to him also feeling like RRCC wasn’t “different than high school. Um, I saw all the same students that I went to high school with.”

Research Question Four

The fourth research question for this qualitative study was: *What off-campus support did students cite as supportive to their degree attainment?* Outside of faith, family and friends, and perhaps, even the comfort of employment, the researcher failed to get congruent answers to this question. While this question was asked in the focus group, it did not yield many findings. Becky shared that her support came from campus. In fact, she stated,

I felt like I had so much support here (RRCC) that off campus, most of my friends were either in their profession or with their kids, or working, um, so as far as off campus, [she can't recall too much off campus support and in fact can only think of on-campus friends] maybe I had been in school for a while, maybe got a few friends who were in school, there were probably a few friends or a church group for singles.

The implication of this slim finding is that LIFG community college students are often very dependent on their college for the support that they are unable to access elsewhere. When students are the only ones in their family with college experience, it is not likely they will be able to get the help or the guidance from home, and therefore, will often feel that they cannot get help, versus, knowing to ask for it at school.

Research Question Five

The final research question asked in this qualitative study was: *What services most often cited as support mechanisms at the community college were also utilized at the four year college?* An interesting finding about this final research question was that there

appeared to be an increase in student organizations related to academic majors as a way to increase financial scholarship opportunities and professional networking.

Marcus, who had been one of the few participants who never joined an on campus student organization at RRCC, finally joined a few at his new college. However, he was very pragmatic about the reason he joined and stated it was because “I knew it would look good on my resume.” He continued to use the same services he used at RRCC but did so with more confidence. It appeared that most of the students joined or became closely aligned with services that supported their majors. As students entered their four-year college, they all declared an academic major giving them more reason to be affiliated with organizations, faculty and financial opportunities associated with their disciplines. For the majority of the participants, the rewards of their academic major allegiance came at the four-year college. Mike echoed Marcus when he shared that he, too, joined professional organizations at TEO [his four-year college] as a means of professional advancement.

I got connections to different people. For work contacts and stuff. Utilize those people, 'cause you know, obviously when you graduate from college and everything [you may run into them again in an interview].

Making connections, enjoying the experience, and financial and professional opportunities were the reasons that most of the participants joined organizations related to their academic major. However, even though the students still utilized financial aid, and limited academic advisement, they did not seem to seek out additional support services. Delisha speculated that the reason she did not continue with the SSS TRIO program at TEO College was related to her feeling independent.

I want to say the reason why I didn't is because I felt like I got as much support as I needed when I was here [at RRCC]. So I didn't feel like I needed to go and be part of another one.

As the students developed, gained confidence, and grew into their professional academic majors, their desire for support decreased, while their desire for affiliation with professional groups and organizations grew. This transition is tied directly to the *belonging and competence* traits of SDT and indicates a strong correlation between the path of LIFG students and SDT.

Implications and Recommendations for Community College Practice

Services most often utilized by LIFG community college students were services that they “had” to use, such as financial aid and academic advisement. However, services that students most often cited as being important to their development were the use of faculty, student organizations and the TRIO Student Support Services program. The positive faculty relationships that participants discussed were not equitably discussed in the research. Community college practitioners need to address the scarcity of this connection by enlisting faculty administrators to help foster such relationships. Furthermore, a thicker discussion of these relationships can be addressed in the aforementioned *structured first-year programs*.

Another specific area recommended for inclusion in the structured first-year program is teaching a set of SDT-related skills to students as a mechanism to increase the likelihood of graduating. Deci et al. (1991), indicated that these skills would include “promoting in students an interest in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence in their own capacities and attributes” (p. 325). Students, who have not had an opportunity

to build their self-confidence, and the joy of learning, will find these skills to be beneficial to their education. Stone, Deci, and Ryan (2009) believe that humans want to grow and, given direction and understanding for the necessity of project completion, will more than likely rise to the occasion. It would be a good practice for a community college to begin to implement.

An additional recommendation for community college practitioners is to stress the importance of students deciding on their academic major earlier in their educational path so that they can sooner join organizations affiliated with their major. By belonging to organizations students will feel a deeper connection, or as defined in SDT; *belonging, competence, and autonomy*, which is credited with increases in retention. For some of the participants in this study, joining student organizations did not occur until they transferred to a four year college, and at that point organizations they joined were related to their major. Even students who had been active in student organizations at the community college level chose to only participate in major related student organizations once they entered the four year college.

Given the call of President Obama's *American Graduation Initiative*, it is imperative that some of these recommendations be put in place in order to increase by five million the number of community college graduates by the year 2020. Given the President's initiative and the financial support set aside to aid in this endeavor, it appears that now would be a good time for community colleges to implement several of these recommendations.

Implications and Recommendations for Community College Policy

Given the influx of students entering and leaving the community college doors on a daily basis, it is difficult to implement policy that will necessarily provide the same effect on all students; as this study demonstrated, even students categorized as LIFG are quite diverse in their needs. Sixty-one percent of all RRCC students indicated that they are University Parallel, meaning they intended to finish their two-year degree and then transfer to a four-year college for a bachelor degree. Within this population, one specific recommendation is to require the completion of a *structured first year program*. Another recommendation is to require a new student orientation that addresses several of the findings in this research, including; (a) faculty relationships, (b) choosing an academic major early, (c) joining student organizations, and (4) joining TRIO Student Support Services programs, if eligible. As students enter their sophomore year of college (defined as 30 or more earned college credits), they can be required to attend another orientation that not only reiterates the aforementioned findings, but also addresses new recommendations focused on the graduation process at the community college, and the transfer process to a four-year college. Furthermore, in this digital age, it is very easy to send periodic emails to students addressing best practices for student success, which may give students who have higher levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations an opportunity to practice some of the suggestions.

Though the development and practice of these skills would require some time, the outcome would feasibly be a larger graduating class, greater revenues for the college, and greater transfer rates to the local colleges, thus increasing the economy of the local community of which they serve.

Implications and Recommendations for Theory and Future Research

This qualitative study is beneficial to community college and four-year college educational professional researchers. It provides thick rich descriptions of participant experiences and then it juxtaposes the findings with current research. Much research has been published about the best retention models, and barriers that can impede graduation of LIFG students. There is not enough research that uses SDT as a theoretical lens when examining why LIFG community college students *are* successful. A deeper understanding of SDT in this context is warranted for future research. This researcher recommends that this project will be used as a catalyst for future research on the ability to determine if SDT, particularly, intrinsic motivations, can be taught to students, or if it is a matter of environment versus biology.

Study Summary

The results of this study on LIFG community college students support many of the findings from the literature review. Participants in this study agreed that they had to use several services such as financial aid, the library, and advisement; however, they also shared that the usage of other services/retention methods had a greater effect on them. Services they most often cited as being critical in their success were; (a) faculty relationships, (b) working on campus, (c) joining student organizations, and (4) joining TRIO Student Support Services programs.

When considering the theoretical lens of SDT, participants in this study initially used extrinsic motivation skills to enter college, however, it was their eventual development and dependence on intrinsic skills that helped move them towards graduation. Using terms such as “love of learning,” “rarely destructive in my thinking,” “my drive and determination,” and “I don’t quit things,” demonstrated the tenacity and

resilience of the participants. What was particularly interesting is that many of their extrinsic motivations came from wanting to prove other people wrong about them. Samantha wanted to prove she was worthy, not a “freak,” as her family often described her. Happy felt that it was not fair that her boyfriend at the time could attend Creek College, a private four-year college, and therefore she set out to get her own education. Marcus attended a high school where many people went to college so as he shared, “Of course, you wanted to seem somewhat successful, so you went to college.” The combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic skills were beneficial to students, as they navigated their way through RRCC, and ultimately on to the four-year college they chose to attend. Greg, Becky, and Cody each earned an additional (Master’s) degree, and Greg is working on his doctorate degree. Marcus plans to begin his Master’s Program in the coming fall, and all but one of the remaining participants planned to complete master’s degrees.

The outcomes of this research provide a rich contribution to the topic of success of LIFG students in obtaining a bachelor's degree. In a society where the economy is a frequent topic of discussion of the Federal Government, the attainment of a post-secondary degree in order to meet the cost of daily needs (food, transportation, electricity, gas) increasingly becomes of critical importance.

The conclusion indicates that though perhaps the stories of my participants are not unique they are however important when considering how policy and practice is interpreted by this segment of students. The best practices for college success are not being utilized often enough by these students. If we know that meeting with an academic

advisor, developing faculty relationships, or faculty orientation classes are critical to students success, then why are *suggested practices* not put in place as *required policy*?

Requiring students to meet with an academic advisor once a semester will not cause a significant strain on the student and the outcome for the entire population will result in a greater percentage of retention. However, for the college, this requirement would necessitate the addition of academic advisor positions at a time when community colleges are under considerable financial hardship.

An alternative is to consider developing faculty relationships as this requirement would not cause a large financial strain on a college as it can be implemented through course syllabus, faculty training, and through required office hours. Requiring a freshman orientation course is not nearly as cost effective from the student perspective, or the institutions perspective, and it will most likely be met with resistance from students. However, students also resist math, but this is a required component of a college education. If a course is proven to increase retention and positive outcomes for college enjoyment and success, should it too not be required?

Despite the additional financial burden these recommendations may put on a college, the potential outcomes will outweigh the cost. Greater retention will help to assure a stronger community, a student who is most likely to be employable, and thus likely to pay back student loans, and debts, and perhaps, even increase alumni given. Finally, it will help to meet the calling of *President Obama's American Graduation Initiative*, of having highest proportion of college graduates in the world.

Final Reflections

Chapter I provided an opportunity to discuss reflexivity, or as Patton (2002) stated “The qualitative analysts owns and is reflective about her or his own voice and perspective” (pp. 494-495). Throughout this dissertation, I had many opportunities to think about the stories of my participants, as well as stories that I own. I would be remiss if I did not thank my Aunt Jane and Uncle Lester for the three years I lived with them, and for all the wisdom my Aunt continues to give me. During this time (7th grade to the beginning of 10th grade), I learned to value education, responsibility, and hard work. My Aunt and Uncle raised me, along with my cousin Kelly, in a healthy and loving home. Within the short time that I lived with them, I learned a lot of valuable lessons, and I must question if the lessons I learned from them helped me value education even years later.



Figure 7. Shows picture of researcher’s Aunt Jane, Uncle Lester, and Cousin Kelly at Kelly’s high school graduation, 1985. Picture demonstrates the importance of education to this family and the fact that this value remained with researcher.

It was not especially important to my mother if I graduated high school, or went to college; so obviously, something of my experience with my Aunt and Uncle remained and resonated with me when I became college age. This belief would align with the notion posited by Ryan and Deci, (2000) that perhaps I went to college for extrinsic reasons (to escape my chaotic and unhealthy home environment), but that it was my intrinsic motivations (the joy of learning, wanting to advance) that propelled me to keep going. As I began to see the rewards of learning that my Aunt and Uncle spoke of, I desired to keep going, even though by earning an associate's degree I had surpassed any and all expectations of me.

Unique to my community college experience was the fact that this particular community college offered residential halls and housed mostly students from New York's five boroughs, Long Island, and several surrounding cities. Having lived on campus, I made several close relationships that have maintained to this current day. In fact, even faculty relationships that I developed were rewarded by supportive instructors accompanying me to various award dinners and "teacher recognition" in the dorms. One such instructor was Professor Eileen Eichler, the accounting teacher who worked with me after class, and on her own time, as she saw potential in me. To this day, we keep in touch; I am honored to call her friend, and I am thrilled that she plays a significant role in the life of my son, Mateo. Figure 8 shows a picture of our latest visit in November 2010, in New York City.



Figure 8. Picture of an inspirational Professor from SUNY Farmingdale to researcher, Professor Eileen Eichler and researcher's son, Mateo Munoz, in New York City, November 2010.

In November 2010, at the start of this dissertation, a group of students from SUNY Farmingdale (my community college) planned a reunion in New York to celebrate our successes and the people who encouraged us along the way. This reunion served as a motivator for me as I went through the dissertation process, and allowed me to have a very respectful and authentic approach when working with my participants. One of the biggest highlights of the reunion was the fact that Mr. Woodberry, my mentor and friend and Educational Opportunity Program Counselor, surprised us all with his attendance, despite the fact he had a hip replacement surgery three days prior (see Figures 9&10).



Figure 9. Mr. James Woodberry (the Educational Opportunity Program Director at SUNY Farmingdale) and me in 1990. He encouraged me in the early 1990's to not stop at the associate degree level.



Figure 10. Mr. James Woodberry and me at the Farmingdale Reunion in 2010. This picture was snapped shortly after I arrived. We both cried when we saw each other. He was and remains an inspiration to me and so many people he impacted.

For Mr. Woodberry, the opportunity to see us all together was as important as going to his daughter's wedding. He impacted us in immeasurable ways, and in return, with our various successes, we did the same. The pride Mr. Woodberry had in his eyes for me, and for my friends, will have a long lasting impact on me. It is people like Mr. Woodberry, and the various faculty mentioned by research participants that tend to have the biggest influence on LIFG students.

One final recommendation for future research includes completing a longitudinal study where participants in this research can be revisited to learn more about their current perspectives on their community college experience. However, that is outside of the scope of my specific research. Nonetheless, a recent visit with my SUNY Farmingdale college family provided an opportunity to visit with them about their experience. On a beautiful night in Groveland, Florida in early April, 2012, five of us alumni and our families gathered together to celebrate my impending graduation, our successes, and our long lasting friendships.



Figure 11. Picture of Herman Garcia, Ramona Muñoz, Dionicio Collado, Carmen Morales-Rodriguez, and Israel Rodriguez. Group gathered April 2012 to celebrate our friendships and remember our beginnings at SUNY Farmingdale.

Conversation abounded around a large camp fire about our experiences. Several theories resonated about why the experience was instrumental in our lives. The majority of the findings are articulated below in bullet points.

- Experiencing and appreciation of cultural diversity.
- Finding a “family” that many were missing.
- Finding support from people who had similar family experiences.
- Feeling a sense of independence, freedom, and healthy futures which were dependent on our own actions.

When asked to write down their specific recollections on why they believe they were successful, the following stories emerged. All of these responses, along with two additional friends who did not join us at this gathering, are SUNY Farmingdale LIFG alumni and bachelor degree holding (or higher) friends. Their stories, which echo many of the experiences of this study’s participants, seem a fitting close for my dissertation research work.

Herman Garcia

Besides my parents, y'all [friends from Farmingdale] the reason I've been able to have such a wonderful and successful career. It wasn't my high school friends, Dowling College or Virginia State University; it was the unforgettable memories I

was able to have with all of you. It was the good times and bad, the times we laugh together and cried, it was the support we all gave each other, but best of all it was the love we had for each other. We all were the brothers and sisters some of us never had. So Mona, to tell you the truth, I thank every one of you, who I was able to share all those 3 unforgettable years. I miss those days, but I look forward and pray the Lord on continuing friendship and future memories.

Arlene Arnell Klein

At this point in my life [when she first got to Farmingdale], I was numb from the gravity of the seriousness of my situation. Alone, scared, sad and disposed of. On the outside I was told I was smart, confident and strong. Well, I had to be or at least make believe I was so I could survive. I had to take care of myself because nobody else would. Then I had this wonderful RA that was one of the nicest people I have ever met, who had and has gone thru just as much if not more than I had. And she always had a smile for everyone even if you knew she didn't have a good day. (See picture below). This is something I have kept since the day it was taped to my dorm room door.... It kept me positive and made me smile when I didn't want to go on anymore. (Long after I left Farmingdale). It's those silly little things, which keep you going when your family is NOT there for you when you need them. You become your own family. Friends become your family.



Figure 12. Picture Arlene received from Resident Advisor and saved as a motivator.

Ninnete Rodas

It was the people I met who made my student life the best there at Farmingdale.... That is why coming to the college reunion on 2010 was the best time of my life, because I got to see all of you... the crazy trips we all took [camping trips while in college] were so much fun!

Carmen Rodriguez

What made my experience at Farmingdale fulfilling were the friends I made in being a part of LASO [Latin American Student Organization]. Everyone had the same goals, we were a family. The counselors were awesome. Also the fact that it was a small campus made it a better experience.

Israel "Izzy" Rodriguez

There are two people I can honestly say I can tribute my success. First I want to thank God for giving me his strength, wisdom, and placing people in my path that encourage me to do well in school. Having friends that had the same desire and dreams to accomplish something that many of us thought we couldn't achieve.

Second, having the opportunity to meet my best friend. She was the person who has helped me emotionally and has always encouraged me to do well and supported me when I was in doubt [He is talking about his girlfriend at the time, and now his wife for over 20 years].

The words that resonate from my dear friends, over 20 years since we left SUNY Farmingdale, include friendship, family, fun, memories, wonderful and awesome. Below is a *Wordle* created by pasting the aforementioned passages into a program that develops art based on repetitive words formulated through their passages. Though our experience came from having an on-campus living experience, there is also the common theme of us having to depend on campus support and resources, which for us came from each other. Furthermore, the majority of us met each other either through the residence halls or the LASO student organization. Much like the eleven participants in this research, on-campus support provided the assistance we needed in order to stay in college. It may be easy to posit that it is more difficult to provide supportive services to commuter college students, however, the findings of the research indicate that it is critical.



Figure 13. Wordle generated from frequently occurring words from passages of classmates at SUNY Farmingdale.

Family, friends and experience are what make up my Farmingdale memories. I had to make a family of friends in order to survive. As much as my family loved me, they did not know how to support me. I drove myself to college in my 1978 AMC Concord, accompanied by my 12 year old brother Brian who helped me carry my limited belongings up the stairs to my new dorm room, along with my best friend Deborah Fertig. Despite leaving and never returning “home,” I never forgot my siblings, all six of them; Sammy, Jenny, Donna, Wesley, Brian and Zachary. I loved them at all times, even though we chose different paths. Each and every one of them visited me at Farmingdale, from Zachary at age 4 spending the weekend, to Jenny celebrating her 16th birthday with me, and to Sammy, introducing her new daughter Rebecca to me. They were proud of me. Though my education often played a divide in our relationship, I always knew that they were proud. This sentiment was echoed from my friends at Farmingdale, to the participants in my research. Family is important, and friends are critical. You make the best of what you can on campus and learn to develop relationships with staff, faculty, and classmates; because at the end of the day, they are the ones who help you through.

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Appendix A

Invitation to Participate letter

September 4, 2011

Dear :

My name is Ramona Munoz and I am a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University. I am writing to invite you to participate in a study of low-income, first-generation students who began their education in 2003 at a community college and who graduated from an Oklahoma four-year college with a bachelor's degree by August of 2009. From this study I hope to learn which support services low-income, first-generation students use and which motivational factors contribute to their ability to stay in community college, transfer to and graduate from a four year college. This information may prove to be helpful both to future students and to community colleges.

For the purpose of this research, *first-generation* is defined as a student whose parent(s) or guardian(s) have not obtained a four-year college degree. *Low-income* is defined as students who come from families with income at 150% or less of the federal poverty level. Based upon the above criteria and a review of your college records, you have been identified as a potential participant. Agreeing to participate in this study means I will conduct an hour long personal interview with you at your convenience. You will also be given the option to participate in a focus group. Prior to finalizing the study, I will give you the opportunity to review notes from your interview to make sure your thoughts and comments were accurately captured and recorded.

Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. No identifying information about you or your interview will be released without your knowledge and permission, or published in my dissertation or related articles. If you decide to participate you are free to stop your participation at any time.

I would greatly appreciate you taking 5 minutes to complete the enclosed interest form and return it in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Ramona M. Munoz, LCSW

918-691-5037

Ramona.munoz@okstate.edu

Title of Study: Low Income and First Generation Community College Students:
Reflections on Their Success

_____ I am interested in participating in your study.

_____ I am **not** interested in participating in your study.

The best day(s) and time(s) for my interview is (please write in your preferred times):

Day	AM Time	AM Time	PM Time	PM Time	PM Time
Sunday					
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					

Name: _____

Cell Phone: _____

Email: _____

Preferred method of contact (circle one): **Phone** **Email** **Text**

If you have chosen to participate I will contact you to arrange an interview. Prior to the interview, I will provide you with a detailed consent form that further outlines the details of this study. If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me either by phone or email. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Note: Please return this form in the self-addressed envelope, or if possible, by scanning the form and returning it via email at Ramona.munoz@okstate.edu.

Contact Information:

Ramona M. Munoz, LCSW

Ramona.munoz@okstate.edu

918-691-5037

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT

- Project Title:** Low Income and First Generation Community College Students: Reflection on Their Success
- Investigators:** Ramona M. Muñoz, MSW, LCSW
Advisor: Kerri Kearney, M.B.A., Ed.D.
- Purpose:** This study focuses on exploring specific strategies and services that supported persistence at the community college level for students who are both low-income, first-generation and transferred to, and graduated from a four-year institution (receiving a bachelor's degree).

Number of Participants

Approximately 8-10 participants will participate in this study. Members asked to participate were requested because they met the aforementioned requirements.

- Procedures:** If you agree to this study, you will be asked to participate in either (1) both an individual interview and a focus group, or (2) just a focus group. In addition, all participants will be asked to fill out a short survey, along with a "face-sheet" which will collect demographic data.

Risks of Participation:

There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

- Benefits:** There are no individual benefits to being in this study.

- Confidentiality:** In published reports, identifying information will be omitted. Research records will be stored securely and only approved researchers will have access to the records.

Confidentiality will be maintained except under specified conditions required by law. For example, current Oklahoma law requires that any ongoing child abuse (including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect) of a minor must be reported to state officials. In addition, if an individual reports that he/she intends to harm him/herself or others, legal and professional standards require that the individual must be kept from harm, even if confidentiality must be broken. Finally, confidentiality could be broken if materials from this study were subpoenaed by a court of law.

Compensation: You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this study.

Contacts: If you have concerns or complaints about the research, the researcher conducting this study can be contacted at:

Ramona M. Munoz, LCSW
Oklahoma State University
Graduate Student
918-691-5037
Ramona.munoz@okstate.edu

Kerri Kearney, M.B.A., Ed.D.
Oklahoma State University
Dissertation Advisor
405-513-2043
Kerri.kearney@okstate.edu

Contact the researcher if you have questions or if you have experienced a research-related injury.

If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact Dr. Shelia Kennison, IRB Chair, 219 Cordell North, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu.

Participant Rights: Participation in this research is voluntary and subjects can discontinue the research activity at any time without reprisal or

Appendix C

Demographic Face Sheet for Research Study

Date: _____ **Place of Interview:** _____

Pseudonym: _____ **Code:** _____

Your gender: male _____ female _____ **Your age:** _____

Current marital status (circle one): Single, never married Married
Divorced Widowed Civil Union Cohabiting

How do you define your race or ethnicity: _____

Educational level of parent(s)/guardian(s):

Mother/guardian: _____

Father/guardian: _____

Circle if you received the following while attending the community college:

Pell Grant Subsidized Loan Unsubsidized Loan OHLAP/OK Promise
Tribal Scholarship Other Scholarship Concurrent Enrollment

Circle if you participated in any of the following programs:

Upward Bound Educational Opportunity Center Student Support Services
OHLAP Gear UP Concurrent Enrollment Other: _____

Did you graduate from high school? Yes (what year) _____ No _____

If you did not graduate from high school, what year did you stop attending? _____

Did you earn a GED? Yes _____ No _____ If so, what year: _____

Year you began community college: _____

Which community college did you attend: _____

What four-year college did you graduate from: _____

Did you attend any other colleges other than the two listed above: yes _____ no _____

If so, which college(s): _____

What year did you graduate with your bachelor's degree (month & year): _____

What was your academic major? _____

Are you currently in college? yes _____ no _____

Do you plan to earn a Master's degree? yes _____ no _____

How would you describe your current employment status?

Employed full time Employed part time Unemployed / Looking for work
Student

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Comments to elicit rich narrative responses (Warren & Karner, 2010, p. 157).

Emphasize no right or wrong answers.

You are doing fine. That is so helpful.

This may be a complex question, so please take time to think about it before you answer.

This may sound similar, but it is a different question.

Probes and Notes for Researchers

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
Notes for Researcher: Where did you grow up, your family, siblings, and family occupation.
2. Please describe your academic background before starting at the community college.
Notes for Researcher: How did you do in high school? Did you finish high school? Did your family advocate the importance of college?
3. How did your high school prepare you for college?
Notes for Researcher: Were you a strong student in high school? Did you have specific study habits? Did you have high school counselors who promoted college?
4. What influenced your decision to start at a community college?
Notes for Researcher: Was it cost? Convenience? Academic preparedness? Looking for intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivations.
5. How would you describe your first year at community college?
Notes for Researcher: Was it a challenge? An easy transition.
6. What challenges (if any) did you encounter? How did you attempt to resolve them?
Notes for Researcher: Looking for intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivations.
7. As you navigated through college, what “support” did you get from home/your loved ones/support system?
Notes for Researcher: Looking for experience of first-generation student.

8. How did you pay for your tuition at both colleges? Did you have to work?
Notes for Researcher: Looking for experience of low-income student.
9. What student services did you access at the community college?
Notes for Researcher: Looking for specific services (advising, SSS, financial aid)
10. Can you think of any unique/unusual programs or orientations you may have participated in during your time at the community college?
Notes for Researcher: Trying to determine if they participated in TRIO, a Learning Community, Honors Program, Student Orientation, etc.
11. What community college services do you feel were the most influential in your ability to transfer to and graduate from a four year college?
Notes for Researcher: Looking to determine if specific services had a long lasting effect.
12. Did you continue to access student services at the four year college? Were these the same or different types of services than what you used at the community college?
Notes for Researcher: Once the skills were gained/accessed at CC, did the student still need services at 4yr?
13. Did you ever feel that you were aware of your own perseverance skills?
Notes for Researcher: You may have seen other people with the same attributes as of you who were not able to succeed at finishing school.
14. What motivated you to persevere in school?
Notes for Researcher: Trying to see if it was intrinsic or extrinsic motivations.
15. Were there ever any words of advice that someone gave you that particularly influenced you?
Notes for Researcher: Trying to see if SDT can be taught?
16. If you were to give me three adjectives to describe yourself, what would they be?
Notes for Researcher: Trying to determine if they view themselves as resilient. Do they use words that indicate intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivations.
17. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me? Did I overlook anything that will help me understand the motivations of first-generation & low-income students?

Appendix E

Data Summary Sheet for Researcher Use Only

Date: _____ **Place of Interview:** _____

Pseudonym: _____ **Code:** _____

1. What were the main issues or themes that emerged in this interview?
2. Summarize the information obtained on each of the interview themes or topics:

Academic Preparation

Community College
Experience

Challenges & Skills Used To
Overcome Them

What Services Utilized

First-Gen Experience

Low-Income Experience

APPENDIX F

IRB Modification

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Monday, December 05, 2011 Protocol Expires: 10/13/2012
IRB Application No: ED11180
Proposal Title: Low Income, First Generation Community College Students: Reflections on Their Success

Reviewed and Processed as: Exempt
Modification

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s) **Approved**

Principal Investigator(s):

Ramona Munoz 1139 S. Louisville Tulsa, OK 74112	Kerri Shutz Kearney 315 Willard Stillwater, OK 74078
---	--

The requested modification to this IRB protocol has been approved. Please note that the original expiration date of the protocol has not changed. The IRB office MUST be notified in writing when a project is complete. All approved projects are subject to monitoring by the IRB.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

The reviewer(s) had these comments:

The modification request to expand the recruitment procedures to include email and Facebook contact and to provide a \$10 gas gift card as incentive is approved.

Signature :


Shelia Kennison, Chair, Institutional Review Board

Monday, December 05, 2011
Date

December 2, 2011

Dear TCC Alumni:

My name is Ramona Munoz and I am a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University. I am writing to invite you to participate in a study of low-income, first-generation students who began their education in 2003 at a community college and who graduated from an Oklahoma four-year college with a bachelor's degree by August of 2009. From this study I hope to learn which support services low-income, first-generation students use and which motivational factors contribute to their ability to stay in community college, transfer to and graduate from a four year college. This information may prove to be helpful both to future students and to community colleges.

For the purpose of this research, *first-generation* is defined as a student whose parent(s) or guardian(s) have not obtained a four-year college degree. *Low-income* is defined as students who come from families with income at 150% or less of the federal poverty level. Based upon the above criteria and a review of your college records, you have been identified as a potential participant. Agreeing to participate in this study means I will conduct an hour long personal interview with you at your convenience. You will also be given the option to participate in a focus group. Prior to finalizing the study, I will give you the opportunity to review notes from your interview to make sure your thoughts and comments were accurately captured and recorded.

Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. No identifying information about you or your interview will be released without your knowledge and permission, or published in my dissertation or related articles. If you decide to participate you are free to stop your participation at any time.

I would greatly appreciate you taking 5 minutes to complete the enclosed interest form and return it in the enclosed stamped self-addressed envelope. As an incentive to participate in this study, I am offering a \$10.00 QT Gas Card to participant who partakes in my interviews or focus group. Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Ramona M. Munoz, LCSW
918-691-5037
TCCdissertation@gmail.com
Ramona DissertationEdd Munoz



Title of Study: Low Income and First Generation Community College Students: Reflections on Their Success

_____ I am interested in participating in your study.

_____ I am **not** interested in participating in your study.

The best day(s) and time(s) for my interview are (please write in your preferred times):

Day	AM Time	AM Time	PM Time	PM Time	PM Time
Sunday					
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					

Name: _____

Cell Phone: _____

Email Address: _____

Preferred method of contact (circle one): **Phone** **Email** **Text**

If you have chosen to participate I will contact you to arrange an interview. Prior to the interview, I will provide you with a detailed consent form that further outlines the details of this study. If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me either by phone or email. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Note: Please return this form in the self-addressed envelope, or if possible, by scanning the form and returning it via email at TCCdissertation@gmail.com.

Contact Information:

Ramona M. Munoz, LCSW

TCCdissertation@gmail.com

Ramona DissertationEdd Munoz

918-691-5037



INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: Low Income and First Generation Community College Students: Reflection on Their Success

Investigators: Ramona M. Muñoz, MSW, LCSW
Advisor: Kerri Kearney, M.B.A., Ed.D.

Purpose: This study focuses on exploring specific strategies and services that supported persistence at the community college level for students who are both low-income, first-generation and transferred to, and graduated from a four-year institution (receiving a bachelor's degree).

Number of Participants

Approximately 8-10 participants will participate in this study. Members asked to participate were requested because they met the aforementioned requirements.

Procedures: If you agree to this study, you will be asked to participate in either (1) both an individual interview and a focus group, or (2) just a focus group. In addition, all participants will be asked to fill out a short survey, along with a "face-sheet" which will collect demographic data.

Risks of Participation:

There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Benefits: There are no individual benefits to being in this study.

Confidentiality: In published reports, identifying information will be omitted. Research records will be stored securely and only approved researchers will have access to the records.

Confidentiality will be maintained except under specified conditions required by law. For example, current Oklahoma law requires that any ongoing child abuse (including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect) of a minor must be reported to state officials. In addition, if an individual reports that he/she intends to harm him/herself or others, legal and

Okla. State Uni. IRB Approved <u>02/11/11</u> Expires <u>10/12/12</u> IRB # <u>ED-11-18</u>

professional standards require that the individual must be kept from harm, even if confidentiality must be broken. Finally, confidentiality could be broken if materials from this study were subpoenaed by a court of law.

Compensation: Participants will receive a \$10.00 QT Gas Card for participating.

Contacts: If you have concerns or complaints about the research, the researcher conducting this study can be contacted at:

Ramona M. Munoz, LCSW
Oklahoma State University
Graduate Student
918-691-5037
TCCdissertation@gmail.com
or on Facebook. Search for **Ramona DissertationEdd Munoz**

Kerri Kearney, M.B.A., Ed.D.
Oklahoma State University
Dissertation Advisor
405-513-2043
Kerri.kearney@okstate.edu

Contact the researcher if you have questions or if you have experienced a research-related injury.

If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact Dr. Shelia Kennison, IRB Chair, 219 Cordell North, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu.

Participant Rights: Participation in this research is voluntary and subjects can discontinue the research activity at any time without reprisal or penalty. There are no risks to participants in case of withdrawal from the research. If the



researcher receives a large participation pool not all participants will be selected to participate and their participation may be terminated.

Elements of Consent:

Your name will not be linked with your responses. Please initial all of the following options you consent to:

- _____ I consent to being interviewed and/or participating in a focus group.
- _____ I consent to filling out the "face-sheet".
- _____ I consent to having my information be included as part of published research.

Audio Recording of Interview & Focus Group

To assist with accurate recording of participant responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. Please select one of the following options.

I consent to audio recording _____Yes or _____No

Signatures:

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Signature of Participant

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant signed it.

Okla. State Univ IRB Approved 12/5/11 Expires 10/3/12 IRB # ED-11-18
--

VITA

Ramona Marie Muñoz, LCSW

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: *LOW INCOME, FIRST GENERATION COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: REFLECTIONS ON THEIR SUCCESS AND MOTIVATIONS*

Major Field: Higher Education-Educational Leadership

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2012.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Social Work at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri in 2000.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Hotel Management at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York in 1994.

Experience:

2010- Present	Director of RISE/SSS TRIO Program at Tulsa Community College, Tulsa, OK
2005-2010	Academic Counselor for RISE/SSS TRIO Program at Tulsa Community College, Tulsa, OK
2002-2005	Comprehensive Home Based Services for Family & Children's Services, Tulsa, OK
2000-2002	Assistant Director of Admissions, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University, St. Louis, MO.
1995-1998	Director of Akwe:kon and Student Services Specialist, American Indian Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.

Professional Memberships:

2005- Present	OK Chapter of National Association of Social Workers
---------------	--

Name: Ramona Marie Muñoz, LCSW

Date of Degree: May, 2012

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: *LOW INCOME, FIRST GENERATION COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: REFLECTIONS ON THEIR SUCCESS AND MOTIVATIONS*

Pages in Study: 220

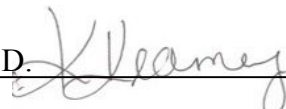
Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major Field: Higher Education-Educational Leadership

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the factors that supported low-income first-generation (LIFG) transfer graduates of four-year institutions in their persistence at the community college level. Specifically, this study focused on students who started at a community college in a Mid-Western State and graduated with their bachelor's degree from a Mid-Western State college within six years. Purposeful sampling was used to collect participants for this study. Nine participants were interviewed individually, and an additional two participants (for a total of 11 participants in the study), along with two returning participants partook in a focus group. Data sources included the transcribed interviews, focus groups, observations, and artifacts brought by participants to the focus group. Self-Determination Theory was the *a priori* theoretical lens that guided the development of this study's design, data collection, and analysis process.

Findings and Conclusions: An analysis of the interviews, focus groups, field notes and artifacts resulted in identifying three themes for this qualitative study. The themes included (1) Walking Two Roads, (2) Services Utilized to Overcome Barriers and (3) *Giving Back and Coming Full Circle*. A Native American lens was used when defining themes. Additionally, a comparison between the literature review and the research findings indicated that the most often touted mechanisms of retention are not required by most colleges and therefore, are not often used by LIFG community college students. Furthermore, the one resource all the participants cited as being helpful in their retention was the use of faculty, and yet, this was not a mechanism that was overly cited in the literature review.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Kerri Kearney, M.B.A., Ed.D.

 4-23-12

