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## Discovering Self, Leaving Struggle Behind, and Setting Examples: Perspectives from First-generation, Minority Community College women on the Value of Higher Education

Antonia Sheel  
*University of Central Florida*



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DISCOVERING SELF, LEAVING STRUGGLE BEHIND, AND SETTING EXAMPLES:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM FIRST-GENERATION, MINORITY COMMUNITY COLLEGE WOMEN ON  
THE VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

by

ANTONIA MARIA WINSTON SHEEL  
B.A. Howard University, 2005  
M.A. Howard University, 2008

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the College of Education and Human Performance  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2014

Major Professor: Rosa Cintrón

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explored how first-generation, minority community college women who participated in a Student Success course understood their higher education experiences. The researcher used a basic interpretive qualitative methodology to uncover how the value of higher education was constructed within those discussions. Five purposively selected students participated in one-on-one semi structured interviews.

The participant's understandings were highlighted independently, reflecting a wide range of sentiments that were largely self-directed in essence, at times ambiguous and yet, complex in nature as the women made sense of their experiences. Through the use of thematic analysis, three dominant discourses about the value of higher education were identified as opportunity and defined as: 1) Personal Fulfillment and Intrinsic Motivation, 2) Financial Stability and College as Insurance against Poverty, and 3) Social Obligations: Breaking Stereotypes and Setting Examples.

The data coupled with researcher reflections serve as the basis for implications for Student Success faculty and administrators in the areas of pedagogical strategy, marketing, resource creation, and program restructuring. Lastly, recommendations were made for future research studies.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family – my mother, my father, and my husband. You have blessed my life immensely. Your love and support has truly carried me during this long journey. I pray that you are proud of the woman I have become. I love you.

To my students and especially those that inspired and participated in this study: You have truly made my life much richer by sharing a piece of yourselves with me. I pray that I have done the same for you. This research and the fulfillment of my dreams would not have been possible without your voices. Thank you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All glory, honor, and thanks to God!

“For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us.”  
-II Corinthians 1:20

Several times throughout my doctoral process, I have been reminded of the many sacrifices and deep love that has propelled me to this stage. I cannot help but think of what my father has always said and that is nothing we accomplish in this life is without the help of others. I have been helped in some divine ways throughout my formative years. God has truly favored through my relationships with family, close friends, and teachers. Their guidance has inspired and encouraged me when I thought the world would come crashing to an end. Yes, I am a bit dramatic. It is also through many of those divinely orchestrated relationships that I gained a voice, a confidence and grew into the woman that I am today.

My mother, Marcia Winston, planted a seed in my young, eight year old mind on the campus of Clark Atlanta University. I made a vow to her then that I would get my doctorate and thankfully I have been able to keep it. It would not have been without your encouragement and the many opportunities you provided me with that any of this would have been possible. My father, Mark Winston, has spoken prophetically over me several times in my life and has seen things for me that I could not begin to see. You have remained constant in your prayers and hope for me to grow and be above all happy and healthy in all of my pursuits. Thank you both. I love you dearly.

My extended Hornsby and Winston family and friends, your support has meant the world to me and I thank God for the lessons that I have learned from our relationships. Whether it was an email, phone call, text, care-package or visit, you have filled my life with so much joy, inspiration and love. I want to give a very special thank you to the Smith family, especially my second mother, Pamela Smith. You welcomed me into your hearts, prayed for me, and somehow always knew when both financial support and words of encouragement were needed. To my grandmothers Romona Winston and Betty Hornsby, my hope is that I have honored you and our family! From my undergraduate days at Howard until this moment, you have always been there for me. There is no way I can ever repay you for what you have sown into my life. To my dear uncle Richard Hornsby who despite a rocky start, accomplished your goals! You are a college graduate and well on your way to the best. An associate's degree down and your bachelor's and MBA/JD to go! I am rooting for you! To Dr. Meigan Fields, you have been such a great example and I thank you for helping me get to this point. You are a passionate scholar and advocate for your students and I pray to provide the same example to others. To my dear friends, Stacey Gates Watson who reminded me to let my light shine, Kelly Alexander, John-Marc Parsons, PhiXavier Holmes, Samika Boyd, and Brandi Lawrence Robinson, you all have no idea what you have meant to me. You all are of such character and forces to be reckoned with! I am inspired daily by your zeal for life and the difference you make in the lives of others. Thank you for helping to keep me sane and laughing hysterically along the way. To my siblings Adam, Amirah Bella, and Erica, I truly love you all. Thank you for reminding me that problems are only as big as I make them and that I could keep going and win at whatever I did! It has been hard being away from you all of these years, but you have continued to love me from afar and

that means so much to me. To the next generation, Pierce, Lillie Marie and Gabrielle Imani, your futures are so bright and I look forward to seeing all that you accomplish. The world is yours to conquer!

To my spiritual family at River of Life Christian Center, for the past four years I have grown so much in my faith and I thank you for helping me see who I am in Christ. I am thankful for being able to sit under teaching and fellowship with people who truly love the Lord. Thank you pastors, Drs. Marvin and Deborah Jackson. You are a true testament of God's faithfulness in life and marriage. Ms. Nola Williams, you became like a third mother to me in such a short time. I pray God blesses you for the many prayers you have offered and your faithful service to His church and everyone you come in contact with. Thank you for reminding us all that we are beloved and precious to the Lord. Antonio and Ranette Haynes, though we were only able to connect at the end of my time at the church, I feel like I have lifelong friends in you and look forward to our many visits with each other!

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I must also acknowledge the help of key institutions and people who through little and some big acts of kindness have made my journey to the doctorate a wonderful one. Clark Atlanta University, Dr. Julian Niles and the famous goat on the rope project, the staff and program coordinators of the Morris Brown College Talent Search program, the staff of Emory Prep at Emory University, and my Howard University family, I could not be without you. I was blessed by having such rich pre-college and college experiences that helped set me on a path to my personal success. University of Central Florida and Valencia College, thank you for one of the best chapters of my life. Specifically, Sandra McCall, Allison Jefferson, Erica Mendoza-Moreira, Althea Robinson, Judith Montilla, Lillian Ramos and Leah Mitchell, you truly make the College of Education and Human Performance run. Every student is blessed to have you working behind the scenes. I appreciate you for all the ways you stepped into my life and helped me when I needed it most. Drs. Chip Turner and Leonard Bass and Ms. Anna Saintil, the students of Valencia are fortunate to have such committed people as you advocating for them.

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Finally, my beloved husband, Jarritt Ahmed Sheel, you have not only been a dream come true in my life, but many prayers answered. I always say, I am blessed above women to be married to you - my best friend, confidant, and lover. You have taught me how to laugh (a lot) and envision a bigger and brighter future than I ever have before. Your unwavering support, prayers of encouragement and delicious meals truly sustained me through this process. Most days I cannot fathom where you garnered the strength to do half the things you do for our family. Yet, each day you greet me with a smile and a kiss and assure me that I can go out and do it all! My days and life are much sweeter because of you. Your faith in God, commitment to your art, and gentle spirit inspire me. God has truly shown me how much He loves me by bringing us together...Five years strong and a life-time of adventure to go. Your journey is now beginning and I promise to give you my all so that you too will be who I know you always were, Dr. Sheel. I love you, I love you, I love you, I do.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*A story is a whole, and the parts that make it— the action, characters, scenes, sequences, Acts I, II, III, incidents, episodes, events, music, locations... – are what make up the story. It is whole.*  
-Syd Field (1994, p. 9)

### Background of the Study: Developing the Backstory

As one of the premier screenwriters of the twentieth century, Syd Field's contribution to the film world is his near paradigmatic view of how to establish and develop the acts of a film. Ultimately, it is through the acts of the film that the primary character grows or remains stagnant and the overall story is developed. I was introduced to Field's (1994) book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* as a Master's student while dissecting films and writing my own stories. Several years later as I come to the end of my doctoral process, I am again reminded of Field and how like his film structure, this dissertation research is organized in such a way as to provide the reader with the key elements to tell the stories, share the experiences, and highlight how first-generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course perceive and ultimately construct the value of higher education in their lives. More specifically, the introduction chapter and the information provided within, the review of the literature in chapter Two, a discussion of the methodology in chapter Three are akin to Field's establishment of the plot set up, confrontations part of the first two acts of the story. Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven serve as the third act, the resolution. Within these acts you will find many points, struggles, and triumphs. I refer to film metaphors throughout the work to

help tell the women's stories as well as my own story as a student/researcher contributing to this document.

Before I share the women's experiences and understandings, I must start at the beginning with a bit of backstory, my experiences, and how this research came about. During my first teaching experience of a Student Success course at Valencia College (VC), I became acquainted with several of my students in deeply personal ways. I connected with them, many of whom were first-generation young women from ethnically diverse communities. Through our discussions and their journal entry reflections, I realized their stories were wrought with emotion, very real, and powerfully compelling as they shared their ups and downs and confusion as they navigated their initial collegiate experiences. I admired them because like a film's leading protagonist, they emerged victorious to begin their college career. My past students like the women in this study, sometimes scared, sometimes very confident, saw their first steps at the community college as the beginning of an opportunity for themselves to have the future they wanted. More than that, the community college and the Student Success course itself, represented a state of equilibrium or stasis in their journey as it challenged them to confront their ideas about what it meant to be a new college student.

The more I reflected on the significance of what my students shared, I wanted to hear and learn more formally from them about their college experiences, their experiences in the Student Success course itself, and about the value of higher education in their lives. Moreover, I realized then how much their stories not only needed but deserved to be told, sadly knowing how often discussions of their experiences and perspectives were overlooked in traditional higher education literature. While the young women in my classes had taken a different path than my own, we

each saw ourselves as the heroine in our own life's story and saw higher education as part of that path to long term success. Like the quote that began this chapter, there were and still are many parts or elements that contribute to the story of our lives. Through this research I attempted to encapsulate the essence and layers of those elements as lived, chronicled realities. Thus, while the primary focus was on documenting the voices of the women, my personal reflections and scholarly literature also played a supporting role in the overall framing of this dissertation research.

## Act I: The Setup

*Act I, the beginning, is a unit of dramatic action... [it's] the most important part...because you have to show the reader who your main character is, what the dramatic premise of the story is, and what the dramatic situation is.*

-Syd Field (1994, p.10)

In its nearly 400 year history, American higher education institutions have served multiple roles in the lives of individuals and society as a whole (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 2005; Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Countless studies (Engle, 2007; Engle & Lynch, 2009; Knox, Lindsay, & Kolb, 1993; Pitre & Pitre 2009; Porter, 2002) have documented the effects of college in the lives of students. Many of these studies examine how obtaining a credential beyond high school provides a lifetime of economic and social advantages for those who participate. Conrad and Dunek (2012) suggest that a shift in the United States' economy from a national, industry-based one to a more global economy driven by innovation and knowledge production has fueled an even greater demand for higher education. As such, the desire to gain access to higher education has become nearly a universal theme, a sort of rites of passage for students. Recent college enrollment figures reflect this, whereby approximately 21 million students attend one of the nation's close to 7,000 higher education institutions (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). This number reflects a 32 percent increase in the college-going population between 2001 and 2011 alone (Snyder & Dillow). As the population continues to grow, these figures are expected to increase by an additional 15% by 2020 (Snyder & Dillow). Among the different types of higher education institutions, community colleges are expected to play a key

role in the education and workforce development of approximately five million more students by this time as well (Whitehouse, 2009).

### Community Colleges and Student Success Programs

Community colleges have historically been seen as gateways to success for students because of their open admissions/access policies (Boggs 2010; O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2008). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (2010), approximately 45% of all first time freshmen attend a community college. Many of these students are first-generation and from minority communities (Nomi, 2005; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Despite being hailed positively as a vital component to the college completion challenge, community colleges have also been seen as revolving doors as students enter and quickly leave them (Clark, 1980; Dougherty, 1987; Pincus, 1984). This presents a challenging issue particularly for many first-generation students who face significant barriers and often lack the social and cultural capital as well as academic preparation necessary to make a smooth transition into the college environment (Oldfield, 2007). O’Gara et al. (2008) note the struggle to provide education to all community college students is probably best reflected in the completion rates of community college students with only 28% of them finishing or completing their program of study within six years of enrollment. Thus, finding ways to keep students engaged in their educational and career paths has been a significant concern for community colleges across the nation.

Student Success programs and courses have been implemented to help address this problem. Several studies (Stovall, 2000; Winn & Armstrong, 2006) have brought attention to the

effectiveness of Student Success courses in helping with college student persistence because they address issues relating to college resources, making transitions in college, academic planning, career development, and life management skills. As with my personal experience teaching the Student Success course, it provided students with important information and moments where they could reflect as they assessed their goals and thoughts about higher education while they got acclimated to the college environment and collegiate expectations. It also provided a platform for students to reflect on the value of higher education in their lives. Beyond these benefits, Student Success courses have been praised for being key predictors in contributing to a student's overall success in college. Students who complete the course are more likely to complete a degree (Stovall, 2000; Winn & Armstrong, 2006; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). O'Gara et al. (2008) suggest as community colleges seek ways to improve rates of degree attainment, Student Success courses offer important strategies for students trying to achieve this goal. Further, as Hope (n.d.) suggests, Student Success courses serve as powerful tools for helping students shape their identity as college students.

The information provided in these sections will help the reader place the forthcoming problem statement, significance of the study, conceptual framework, research questions, and the researcher reflexivity statement offered within this chapter in an appropriate and supported context.

## Problem Statement

*“Coming from bad situations can make beautiful outcomes.”*

*-Tashaun*

Tashaun, a first-generation college student in one of my Student Success courses faced many challenges to enroll in the community college. Despite this, she saw her experiences as a student at Valencia and the knowledge she gained in the Student Success course itself, as a bridge between the path she had been on and the new route she desired to take to become college educated and ultimately, a college graduate.

Like Tashaun, many other students have viewed attending college as a way to carve out a new path in life. Brock (2010) notes while the number of students going to colleges and universities has significantly increased over the last several years, there will be continued growth since a post-secondary education remains one of the most important determinants in labor market success. Figure 1 illustrates the consistent increase in college student enrollment between fall 1960 and fall 2011 at all public and private institutions.

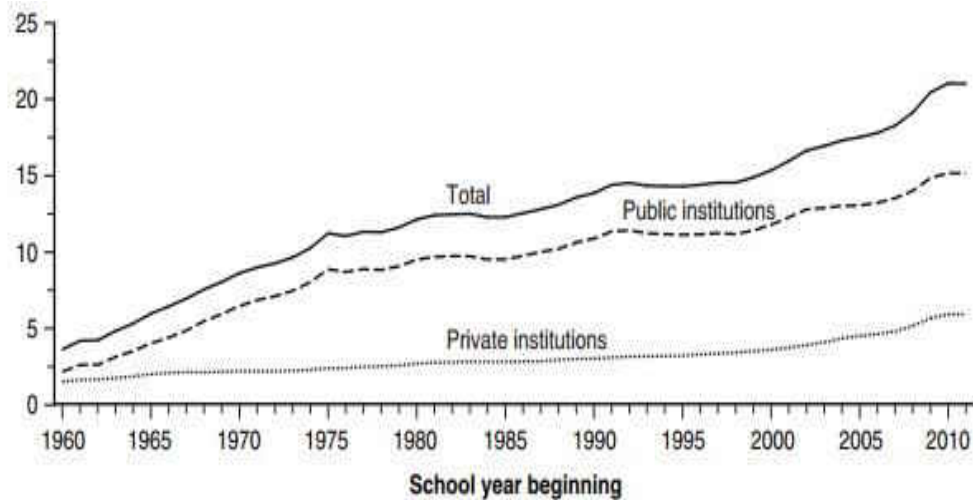


Figure 1. College enrollment in millions for fall 1960 through fall 2011

Source: Snyder, T. D., & Dillow, S. A. (2013, December). *Digest of education statistics: 2012* (NCES 2014-015). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

This steady increase is also reflected by the number of students attending community colleges. The total fall enrollment at community colleges increased from 5.7 million students in 2000 to 7.1 million students in 2009 (Baum, Little & Payea, 2011). Figure 2 illustrates increases in community college student enrollment between fall 1970 and fall 2009.



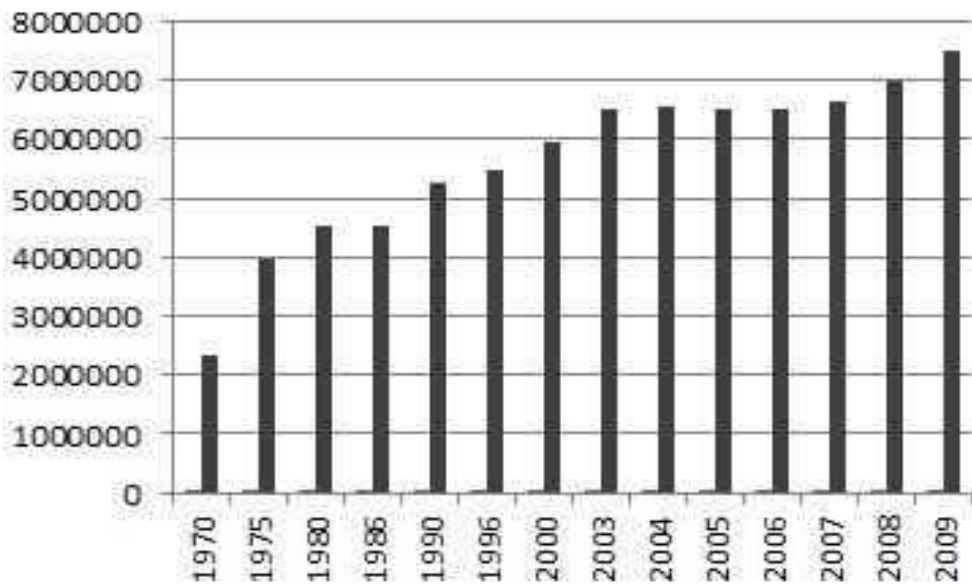


Figure 2. Community college enrollment in millions for fall 1970 through fall 2009

Source: Snyder, T. D., & Dillow, S. A. (2011, April). *Digest of education statistics: 2010* (NCES 2011-015). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

During my dissertation defense, two key points emerged about this figure. The first dealt with explaining the possible reason for stagnation or flat enrollment between the years 2003 and 2007. My response referenced more stable economic times during those years. It was during the economic collapse in America in 2008 in which there is slight increase in community college enrollments, followed by a more significant increase in enrollments in 2009. The second point was in regards to securing a more current figure that reflected those increased enrollments. Though I was not able to secure a current figure (in the time to meet university deadlines) that reflects changes between 2010 and 2013, I was able to secure data provided by the AACCC (2014) which reflects that community college enrollments have steadily increased since 2009; with

approximately 12.8 million students enrolled in credit or non-credit programs at community colleges across the United States.

As community colleges continue to play a large role in educating and preparing large droves of students in the coming years, they will also serve as the primary entry point to American higher education for many students from first-generation and ethnic minority communities (Nomi, 2005). According to AACC (2014) 36% percent of all community college students are first-generation. Further, fall 2012 data reveals that Hispanic and African American students made up 19% and 14% of those who attend community colleges respectively. Figure 3 highlights the distribution of community college first-generation students and their peers by race/ethnicity. It also compares this distribution to their peers whose parents have a moderate level of post-secondary education (MPE) and those whose parents have high levels of post-secondary education (HPE). Fifty-three percent of Hispanic community college students are first-generation followed by 43% of Native American Students and 41% of Black or African-American students. Due to time constraints associated with university deadlines and requirements, it was determined that these last figures would remain in the dissertation research, though I acknowledge there may be other images to capture more current data to represent these sentiments.

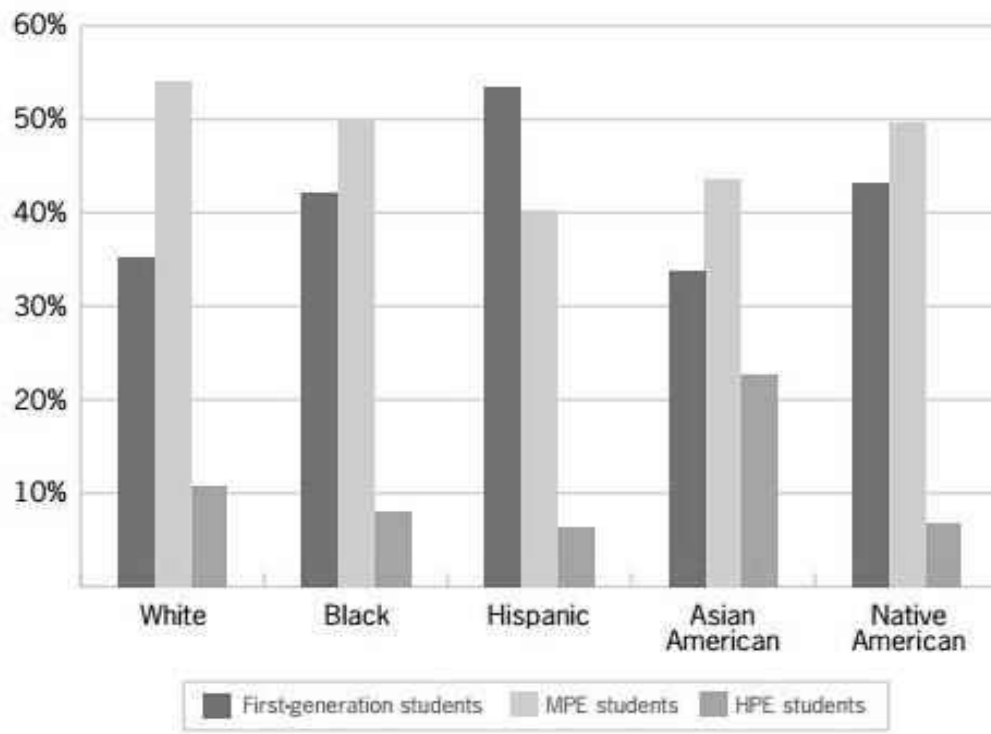


Figure 3. Distribution of first-generation community college students by race/ethnicity

Source: Nomi, T. (2005). *Faces of the future: A portrait of first-generation community college students*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Community Colleges.

In addition to large proportions of community college students being from first-generation and minority communities, they are also more likely to be women (Nomi, 2005).

Figure 4 shows the gender distribution of first-generation community college students and their peers.

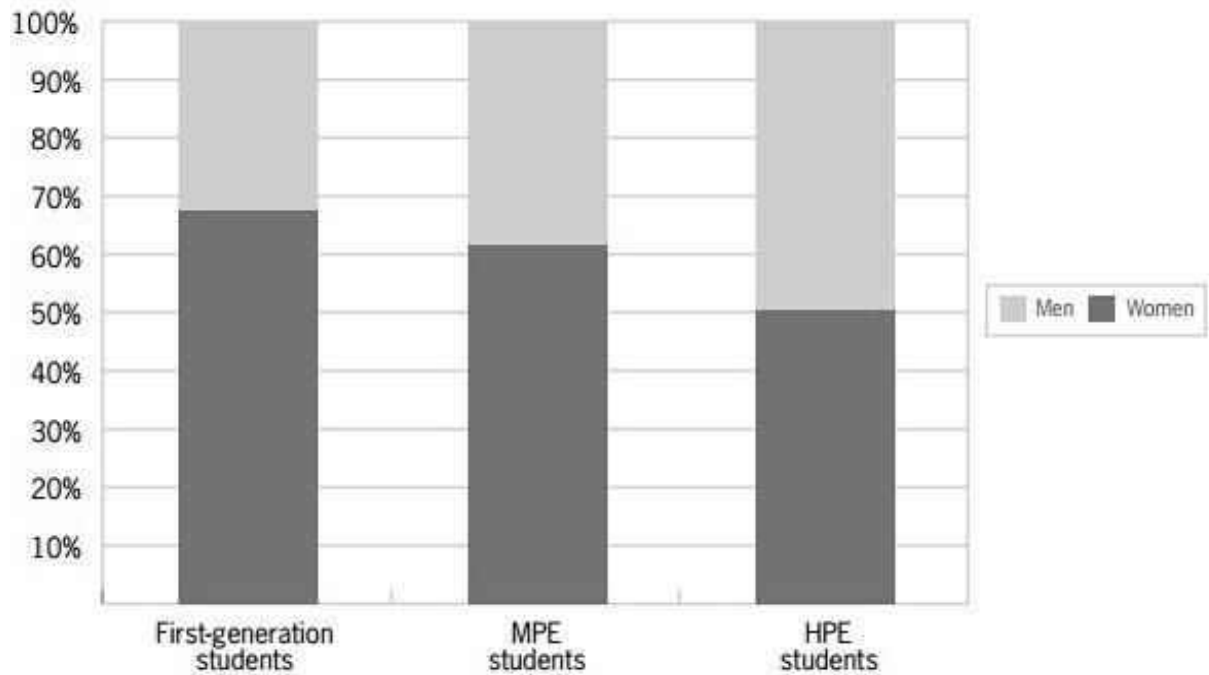


Figure 4. Gender distribution of community college students

Source: Nomi, T. (2005). *Faces of the future: A portrait of first-generation community college students*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Community Colleges.

While there is a profundity of literature on first-generation students (Engle, 2007; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Nomi, 2005; Oldfield, 2007; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Thayer, 2000) as well as on Student Success courses and programs and community colleges separately, there is very little research looking at these elements together and none looking at how participants in this course perceive the value of higher education or experience the course itself as it relates to establishing their college student identity.

### Significance of the Study

There are significant challenging social conditions that exist for many students, especially for first-generation, minority students whose college enrollment and completion rates continue to lag behind their white peers (Engle & Lynch, 2009; Pitre & Pitre 2009; Santiago & Brown, 2004; Ward, 2006). In 2006, 44 percent of whites between the ages of 18 and 24 were enrolled in college compared with 32 percent of African-American and 25 percent of Hispanic students (Brock, 2010). While community colleges have long been seen as doors of opportunity helping to close gaps in educational and economic aims, they have also been seen as revolving doors when they are unable to help students successfully complete their goals. Student Success courses employed by community colleges play a pivotal role in assisting students as these courses uncover key areas relating to academic and career planning and social integration into the college campus. Together, these elements contribute to overall student persistence. Addressing how first-generation, minority women perceive the value of higher education in their lives within this context not only gives voice to their lived individual experiences and realities, but also provides insight into potential policy implications or areas of consideration for the courses/programs and institutions that work with similar populations. Moreover, there is little known about the effectiveness of Student Success courses and the perceptions of students taking them, and few to no studies about them in settings outside of traditional universities, such as at the community college level (Hope, n.d.). Further, the existing literature on Student Success courses tends to examine them quantitatively by comparing relationships between participation in the course and various student outcomes (Winn & Armstrong, 2006; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). This research will help to address those gaps in the literature as well. Finally, while literature on

first-generation students has explored areas such as college choice, pre-college expectations, high school to college transitions, and the effects of college experiences on persistence in quantitative measures at four-year institutions, this qualitative dissertation addressed the perceptions and experiences relating to the value of higher education directly from first-generation, minority community college women; placing their all too often missing voices at the center of the discussion on the value of higher education.

In my personal teaching experience, I found that the Student Success course provided a sort of “reality check” for students about the intricacies of the college completion process and fueled conversations about what college really could offer them, “life after” the degree and why going to college was so important. By conducting semi-structured interviews with first-generation, minority women who participated in a Student Success course and illuminating their perspectives, I was able to: 1) document the way they understood, described, and essentially constructed the value of higher education in their lives, 2) better understand the various factors and influences that inspired their educational journey, 3) uncover how participation in a Student Success course informed their identity as college students including their understandings and experiences during their first year of college, and finally, 4) document their future goals. Being able to identify, document, and present their perspectives through this study had significant meaning to me as the researcher because of my connection to the sample, the course itself, and my personal lived experiences of which I discuss in a formal researcher reflexivity statement later in this chapter.

## Definitions of Terms

It is important to establish clarity for future reading and reference as to how key terms were defined and used throughout this study. As such, I have provided those definitions and also provided clarifications in the form of a discussion on assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

*Student Success* – There is no one definition for student success in the literature as there have been many conceptualizations to describe what often constitutes student success in relation to the goals of two primary and distinct groups: students themselves and higher education institutions. These conceptualizations however, generally involve student retention, examinations of ‘drop outs,’ or student departure and factors that contribute to overall student persistence (Braxton, 2000). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) assert while there is no specific blueprint for defining what constitutes student success, there are best practices institutions themselves can implement to ensure students reach their goals while also ensuring strong institutional outcomes.

*Student Success course* – For the purpose of this study, Student Success courses will refer specifically to those courses offered by community colleges that help students “acquire information, skills, attitudes and behaviors needed for college success” (Stovall, 2000, p.47). Important to note is that although varied at higher education institutions across the country, they are generally offered to first-year students and generally approach the curriculum in a way that provides information about college resources, transitioning into the college environment, life management skills and in many instances career development planning (Stovall, 2000, p. 47).

*Community college* – Through their open admissions and access policies, community colleges have historically been known for their role in expanding higher education to the general

masses (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). They offer associate degrees, certificates, and many are increasingly adding bachelor degrees (Boggs, 2010).

*First-generation college student* – These are college students in which neither parent has received more than a high school education (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). Because of this, much of the literature on first-generation students often describes them as lacking the social and cultural capital in the form of knowledge, skills, education, or other advantages that make the transition to college a smooth one (Oldfield, 2007). During my proposal defense, an interesting point was made by Dr. Rex Culp, one of my committee members. He noted that it may be important to include within this definition, college students who may have grown up or been raised by a person other than a parent, such as a grandparent, close relative, or parental figure who had not received more than a high school education. This proved to be important in this study as one participant was raised by an aunt and uncle.

*Ethnic minority student* – There are varied conceptualizations of what may constitute a minority student. For the purposes of this study, a minority student refers to a student that identifies with what has historically been determined to be a racial or ethnic minority community in the United States. This definition proved to be an area of contention during my proposal defense as well and became even more complicated when I began to search for supporting materials to reflect how I had come to conceptualize the term. I recognize the controversy surrounding the word ‘minority’ and the negative connotations often associated with it when speaking of racial or ethnic groups. It is not my intention to minimize the participants in this study in any way by using this term that is often used colloquially and in academic literature to describe people belonging to non-white racial or ethnic groups. Thus, for the purpose of this



study, an ethnic minority student refers to one who belongs to a group which has historically been excluded or marginalized in America based on their racial or ethnic background. The United States Census provides a listing of these racial and ethnic categories based on definitions provided by the United States Office of Management and Budget. Therefore, those who self-identify as belonging to any of the following racial or ethnic minority groups were considered for this study: Black (or African American), Asian American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders or Hispanic or Latino ethnicities (regardless of racial identification) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 ). Please note that specific descriptions of how the students self-identified is discussed in Chapter Four as part of each participant profile.

*Perceive* – The way in which the women in this study understand, become aware, think about, and/or regard matters related specifically to their experiences.

*Discourse* – According to Burr (1995) a discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images stories, statements that in some way together produce a particular version or way of representing a thing. Burr suggests that there may be a multitude of alternative versions of those things available through language and as such there may be different discourses, each with a different way of representing that thing to the world.

### Assumptions

The assumptions upon which this study is based include:

1. The conceptual framework of social constructionism provides the foundation and lens through which to view how first-generation, community college women who participated in a Student Success course perceive the value of higher education in their lives. This

conceptual framework assumes the participants constructed meaning about the value of higher education based on their social experiences and identities.

2. The guiding research questions as well as interview questions as part of the interview protocol were sufficient to garner meaning and develop appropriate codes from which discourses were identified and discussed as part of the findings of this research.
3. The study participants spoke their truth about their experiences during our one-on-one semi-structured interviews. They were interested in sharing their unique perspectives on higher education and their personal experiences as students at a community college and as participants in a Student Success course.

Beyond these assumptions, it is important to recognize the potential weaknesses in the study. Therefore, the following section discusses the limitations and delimitations of the study.

### Limitations

1. As the researcher, it is important to note that I was employed as an adjunct instructor of Student Success at Valencia College, the community college where this study took place. As such, I was reflexive in writing and demonstrated transparency throughout the study, especially when describing recruitment, data collection, and data analysis procedures (Glesne, 2011).
2. As a study that focused on a specific population who participated in a course at a community college, the findings cannot be generalized to the populace. It is important to note however, that was not the aim or intention of this study. Instead, the findings of the

realities of the women in the study provide insight into their world and served as the basis for the implications and recommendations section of this research (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000). Moreover, the findings of this study prompted additional, in-depth research that could not be explored or elaborated on due to the scope and time-table associated with this dissertation research.

3. As a purposive sample, the study was limited in the type of information that was collected (Creswell, 2002).

#### Delimitations

1. The participants in this study were limited to student participants of only one community college, Valencia College in Orlando, Florida, and more specifically only those that participated in a Student Success course. Further, due to complications during the recruitment process, the final participants in this study were ones who had participated in one of my past Student Success courses.
2. The study participants were limited to first-generation, minority women who completed a Student Success course within one academic year. As such, the participants took the Student Success course in either the fall 2012 or spring 2013 semester.

## Conceptual Framework

Traditional frameworks such as Astin's Involvement Model (1979) and Tinto's (1975) Interactionist Theory have been used to describe how the student and the institutional environment interact with one another to form and reform student attitudes, behavior, and ultimately commitments to the institution. Although exploring college student success, persistence, retention, or development in this way is important, these models have largely been based on the perspectives of White, middle class males at traditional four-year universities (Harper & Patton, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Further, frameworks such as Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) or Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefaniec, 2001) place gender and / or race at the epicenter of the research, often treating these attributes of students monolithically. Considering this, I decided to draw upon social constructionism as a conceptual framework for this study because it considers others' experiences, voices, identities, and realities. Further, it is a framework from which those realities can be looked at independent of trying to fit them into pre-made or fixed meanings and categories.

### *Social Construction of Reality*

Social constructionism has been used to describe and understand how people construct meaning about themselves and the world around them. Andrews (2012) suggests social constructionism as a framework originated as an attempt to come to terms with the nature of reality. Researchers (Baran & Davis, 2006; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995; Gergen,

1999; Lock & Strong, 2010) in media studies, sociology, and psychology have attempted to define it. In their seminal work on the social construction of reality, sociologists, Berger and Luckman (1966) explored how people make meaning of things, how they construct knowledge, and ultimately how and why those constructions are important for society. Specifically, in their discussion about social life, they argue that humans create and sustain all social phenomena through social practices. More specifically, Berger and Luckmann view society as existing as an objective and subjective reality. In the objective reality, knowledge is institutionalized and controls human behavior by setting up predefined configurations or patterns of conduct. The experience of society as a subjective reality is achieved through primary and secondary socialization. The socialization process takes place through interactions with others who mediate the objective reality of society and make it meaningful in the way that is internalized by individuals.

### Assumptions of Social Constructionism

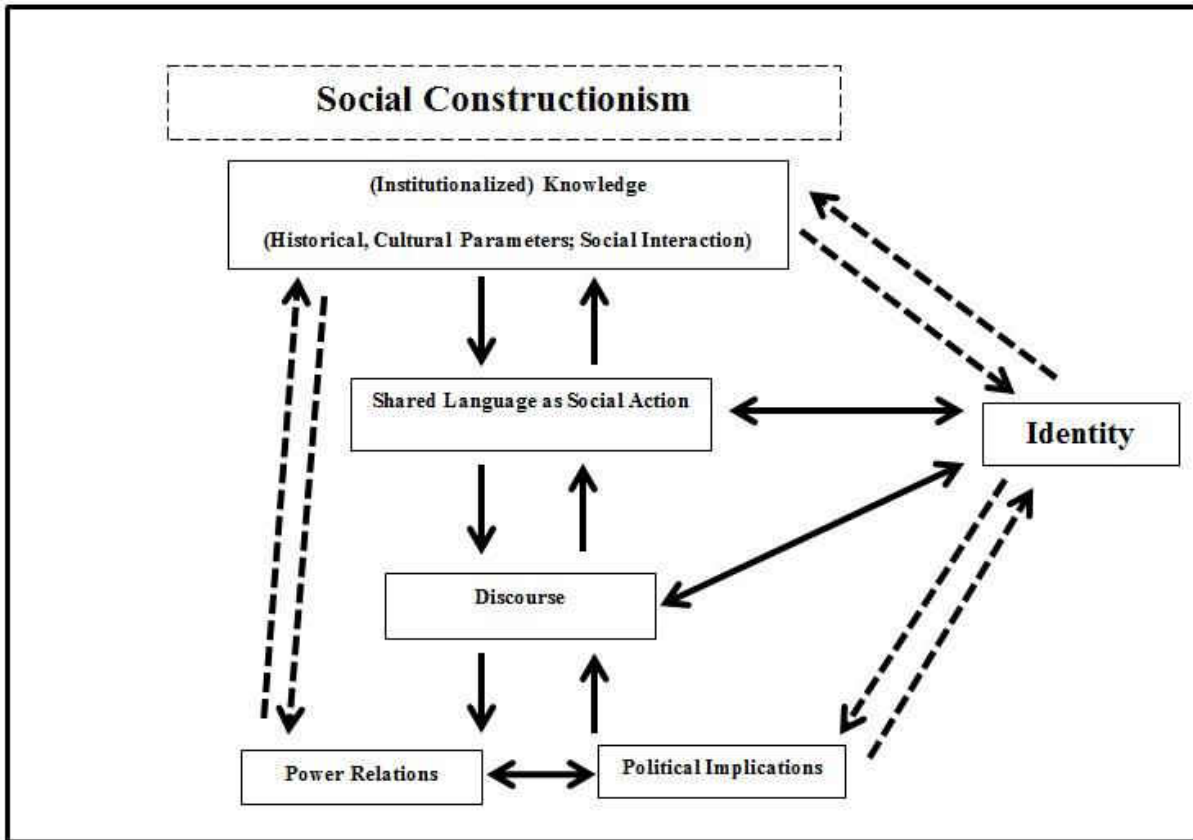
Burr (1995) offers four assumptions of the social constructionism framework or social constructionist view of the world. These assumptions involve a desire to understand the lived experience from the perspectives of those in it, an interest in knowledge as it relates to history, culture, social processes and interactions, and an examination of language. I have highlighted these assumptions and their descriptions in Table 1. I have also provided a specific description of how the assumptions were applicable in this study in bolded, italicized font.

Table 1  
*Assumptions of Social Constructionism*

Assumption	Description
1. Critical Stance Towards taken-for granted Knowledge	<p>One should take a cautious approach to how the world appears to be. There are multiple ways to knowing and understanding.</p> <p><i>In this study, the perceptions and constructions offered by the first-generation, minority community college women are acknowledged as their unique perspectives and ways of knowing as a valid lived experience.</i></p>
2. Historical and Cultural Specificity	<p>The way we understand and give meaning to things varies and has its basis in time and cultural-related factors.</p> <p><i>In this study, there are significant challenging social conditions for first-generation and minority college students. There is also a national demand for students to participate in higher education.</i></p>
3. Knowledge is Sustained by Social Processes	<p>Interaction and exchange between individuals are significant for sustaining knowledge.</p> <p><i>In this study, there is a desire to understand how and in what ways social interactions and experiences influenced the young women's responses about the value of higher education. Further, there is a desire to know how participation in a Student Success course helped to inform their identity as college students.</i></p>
4. Knowledge and Social Action Go Together	<p>Accepted knowledge requires some kind of social action. Language as social action manifests as people express themselves. This also contributes to common or accepted discourses and identity.</p> <p><i>In this study, the women will share in their own words how they perceive their experiences. These expressions will reveal the larger discourses on the value of higher education present in their discussions.</i></p>

*Note.* This summary of assumptions and its relation to the study is based on Burr, V. (1995). *An introduction to social constructionism*. New York: Routledge.

To date, there has been no visual representation of Burr's (1995) assumptions that address the interconnected relationships between the assumptions including institutionalized or accepted knowledge, language as a shared action, discourse, identity, and power relations. While these elements are represented on their own line, they are also connected, as reflected by the double arrows. They work concurrently as one constructs "reality," develops an identity, and makes meaning of things. Creating a figure helped me to more thoroughly think about meaning making and how people come to understand themselves and the world around them.



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Figure 5. A model of social constructionism

*Note.* This figure is my original conceptualization of social constructionism based on Burr, V. (1995). *An introduction to social constructionism*. New York: Routledge.

The first assumption of this conceptual framework implies we should take a critical stance toward understanding the world. Said differently, this assumption acknowledges there are multiple ways of knowing or understanding. As such, social constructionism “invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world” (Burr, 1995, p. 3).



Social constructionism as a conceptual framework is therefore in opposition to positivism and empiricism in the traditional sciences in which research experiments and observation are conducted as determinants of accepted knowledge or truth. In this way, social constructionism acts as a form of social criticism because as this first assumption suggests, one should be apprehensive about how the world appears to be because the categories and divisions in which human beings ascribe to, do not necessarily refer to real divisions (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1999). Instead, taking a social constructionist stance suggests categories and divisions created and maintained by humans should be challenged. A second assumption of the social constructionism framework references the notion that terms and labels in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historical and cultural exchanges among people (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1999; Lock, 2010). Regarding this, Burr (1995) notes,

...all ways of understanding are historically and culturally relative... The particular forms of knowledge that abound in any culture are therefore artifacts of it and we should not assume that our ways of understanding are necessarily any better (in terms of being any nearer the truth) than other ways. (p. 4)

The third assumption surrounding this conceptual framework suggests knowledge is sustained by social processes. In other words, individuals construct knowledge of the world through their interactions with each other. It is the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that versions of knowledge become invented and constructed. Lock and Strong (2010) affirm this sentiment as they suggest meaning and ultimately understanding, develop in the social interaction and shared meanings between people. The last assumption

undergirding the social constructionism conceptual framework suggests that knowledge and social action go together. As such, forms of negotiated understanding between people are of critical significance in social life because those negotiated understandings are fundamentally connected with many activities in which people engage on a regular basis (Gergen, 1999). Further, Burr (1995) asserts those negotiated or agreed upon understandings result in different constructions of the world in which some patterns of social action are sustained while others are excluded.

#### Identity, Language, and Discourse in Social Constructionism

Lock and Strong (2010) suggest since ways of meaning-making are embedded into socio-cultural processes and vary in different situations and locations, people are instrumental in defining themselves. They say,

Thus, people are self-defining and socially constructed participants in their shared lives. There are no pre-defined entities within them that objective methods can seek to delineate but, rather, our ways of making sense to each other are constructed to yield quite different ways of being selves. (p.7)

Burr (1995) maintains this defining or identifying of self is deeply rooted in language, further suggesting the very nature of 'self,' including thoughts, feelings, and experiences are all the result of language. Within this discussion of 'self,' Burr explores the way structuralism and post-structuralism impact interpretations of language. The view that the way language is structured determines the way experience and consciousness are structured refers to

structuralism. This implies that through the use of language, people divide the world into categories. However, Burr suggests any category or concept can only be described by referring to other categories or concepts from which it is different. Even still, once words are attached to a particular meaning, they become “fixed” and this explains how people of a particular language are able to communicate with each other (Burr, 1995, p.38). The other view about language from a post-structuralism perspective suggests that language is never fixed and always open to being questioned or contested. This has major implications for our understanding of the personal identities and the possibilities for personal and social change (Burr). Therefore, the process of constructing oneself cannot be accomplished by the individual alone. Instead, since language is a social phenomenon and occurs between people, identities are constructed socially.

Further, Burr (1995) suggests it is through discourses, or the system of statements, meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, or statements about an object or thing that particular versions of events are produced. As such, there may be a variety of different discourses about an object. Each discourse then brings different aspects of the object at hand into focus and raises different issues for consideration. Burr suggests in this way, discourses that form identity have implications for what people can and should do as they are intimately connected to the way society itself is organized and run. Acknowledging the relationship between discourses and identity and the connection to the structures and practices that are lived out in society brings into question the nature of knowledge and truth. Burr asserts this is so because particular discourses and ways of representing events and people are generally accepted in the form of common sense or truth.

### Power and Social Constructionism

Burr (1995) suggests that since identity is not fixed or pre-given, but instead formed through representations or established practices as the result of discourse, it is important to acknowledge that those representations can serve to support power inequalities between people. Hence, the examination of claims to knowledge and truth become important issues at the heart of identity, power, and change. The common-sense understanding between knowledge and power is the idea that knowledge increases one's power. Burr suggests however that what is deemed as 'knowledge' is instead a particular version of a phenomenon that has received a "stamp of 'truth' in our society (p. 64). This view connects knowledge and power. We therefore exercise power by drawing upon discourses which allow our actions to be seen in the best light. Burr says when we define or represent something in a specific way, we produce a particular 'knowledge' that brings power with it. As such, power is not seen as a repressive force, but instead most effective when it produces knowledge. Burr asserts then that conceptualized this way, power is not the property of any one person or group, but is instead something any one can exercise through discourse.

### Critiques of Social Constructionism

Now that I have discussed the major assumptions associated with social constructionism and offered my visual conceptualization of the relationships between knowledge, power, language, discourse, and identity, I will use this section to discuss some of the prevalent critiques of this framework. Andrews (2012) suggests the major criticism of this framework surrounds the

confusion over its philosophical underpinning. More specifically, this confusion is associated with the nature or history of knowledge (epistemology) and the philosophical study or nature of science (ontology). Andrews suggests these misunderstandings come from perceptions about relativism and realism. Relativism suggests there are multiple realities and therefore there can be multiple interpretations of those realities. Further, this stance suggests there is no way of judging one's account of reality as better or more valid than another. At the other end of this position is a realist stance which concerns itself with one objective reality. Andrews suggests as these two concepts represent opposing perspectives, they can be problematic for qualitative research as questions about truth or reality emerge. Specifically, Andrews (2012) says,

Adopting a realist position ignores the way the researcher constructs interpretations of the findings and assumes that what is reported is a true and faithful interpretation of the findings and assumes that what is reported is a true and faithful interpretation of a knowable and independent reality. Relativism leads to the conclusion that nothing can ever be known for definite, that there are multiple realities none having precedence over the other in terms of claims to represent the truth about social phenomena. (p. 4)

Despite this, I agree with Burr's (1995) position that suggests discourses and perspectives offered by study participants in qualitative research are equally valid. The discourses offered by them will be viewed as relative to each other and not viewed as true or false or any more valid than the other. This view is also in line with Sismandó's (1993) critique of social constructionism. Sismandó suggests the realist stance does not actually occur in research, as findings are often presented as multiple realities. Yet another critique of social constructionism has to do with the discussion of discourses. As noted previously, there may be varying

interpretations or discourses about an object (or as in this study, discourses about the value of higher education) - with each of those discourses raising issues for consideration. Additional critiques of the social constructionism framework are related to personhood and human agency – all constructs that have not been fully addressed (Burr).

To conclude, the social constructionism conceptual framework offered here will be used as a guide from which to understand and interpret how the responses from first-generation, minority women who participated in a Student Success course address the research questions.

### Research Questions

This basic interpretive qualitative research explored the understandings, perceptions and experiences of first-generation, minority community college women; ultimately to document how they constructed the value of higher education in their lives. Accordingly, the following research guided this study:

1. How do first-generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course describe and understand their higher education experiences?
2. What discourses about value are present as the first-generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course discuss their understandings and experiences in higher education?
3. How did participation in a Student Success course inform the first-generation, minority female students' identity as college students?

These primary research questions were addressed by asking the women more specific, yet semi-structured questions relating to their history, current experiences, the Student Success course itself, and their future goals (See Appendix A).

### Researcher Reflexivity: My Lens

Researcher reflexivity is a central component in any qualitative research piece since the researcher serves as the primary instrument in the data collection and analysis process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Creswell (2007) notes how researchers' interpretations are largely based on cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics. As such, I recognize how my experiences may shape the study and potentially influence the interpretation of the findings. It is therefore imperative that I be transparent in discussing my personal perceptions, assumptions, and potential biases. As such, I felt it important to conclude this introductory chapter with a more in-depth personal reflection on several of my personal experiences that have brought me to this point.

I have had what I like to think of as a rendezvous of sorts with higher education since I was eight years old. Early trips to my mother's office at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, and my participation in summer enrichment and college preparatory programs there and at Morris Brown College and Emory University, not only allowed me the opportunity to gain exposure to the necessary elements and requirements to be successful in college, but gave me a real glimpse into life as a college student. While involved in those programs, I stayed on college campuses and met with college students and professors who shared with me the ins and outs of

college life. The confidence as well as social capital I gained was invaluable and set me on course for what I believed even then to be a life of scholarly pursuits and of course, a bit of fun as a college student. When I entered Howard University, an historically black college and university (HBCU) in the fall of 2001, I was more than ready. Although it would seem appropriate to say I have not looked back since, that would not be the entire truth. My time at Howard deeply impacted the lens through which I began to see the world and ultimately shaped my research agenda.

Specifically, my training in Media Studies required that I understand and explore how people construct meaning, tell stories, and share their unique perspectives about life. I learned to value the multiple realities as expressed in the stories around me. As a result, I began to see it as my responsibility in my research and early work in the Communication industry to accurately represent those stories and to highlight the significance of the lived experiences of people. I was especially concerned with sharing the stories of those from underserved and/or what have been recognized as historically marginalized communities of color.

After getting married and moving to Orlando, Florida, I started a writing workshop where adolescent women from a local middle school could write their own stories and learn about journaling as a way to express themselves. While this was rewarding for them and extremely gratifying for me, my glimpse into their young worlds compelled me to act. I felt like there was more I could do to help support them and others like them in their journeys to greatness. I applied to the Higher Education and Policy Studies doctoral program at the University of Central Florida (UCF) where I truly believe I started what is my life's work and purpose. After taking an intensive Retention in Higher Education course during the summer of my first year in the



program, I knew that working within programs to ensure minority student persistence was the direction I wanted to take. I immediately contacted Valencia College about opportunities to teach in their Student Life Skills department. I believe it was my passion that led me to the position, and I started teaching Student Success for the first time during the fall 2011 semester.

I often implemented journal reflections in my class and heard from students directly about their interests and future goals. More than that, students made comments, laden with meaning about the social, economic, and political implications that attending college had on their lives. As I noted at the open of this chapter, I felt a special connection with many of my female students, who were trying to figure out their lives while balancing home (including children at times) and work responsibilities. One particular student, Sue, shared her strivings about completing her degree in a journal entry that I will never forget. She revealed,

A college degree is an opportunity to better myself. A college degree is a chance for me to show my kids just how important education is. A college degree is also important to me because of my mother's five children, no one has received one yet.... A college degree could be the one thing that sets you apart from your competition (personal communication, October 11, 2011).

Her testament spoke volumes and also caused me to wonder what others felt and thought about the value of higher education in their lives. For Sue, her first steps at Valencia College were an opportunity to improve her life, and more importantly, a tool that would help her get to where she wanted to be. Sue inspired me and gave me a renewed sense of purpose as a teacher and as a researcher.

While my professional experience in higher education has been limited to that of an adjunct faculty member at a community college and work as a graduate assistant in the Dean's office at a large university, it is through my reflections on those experiences that I realize how much my personal love affair with the college life has played in shaping my own identity as a teacher, researcher, and future administrator. I want for all of the students I come across to feel just as inspired, empowered, and fulfilled by their time as college students. It has also been within the context of my studies at an HBCU and now a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and my most recent teaching experience at Valencia, a "minority-majority" community college, that I have developed a critical consciousness about the value of higher education.

As such, any biases unveiled in this reflexive discussion of my experiences with higher education personally and professionally are monitored by focusing on the research questions and literature used to guide this study. Further, the validation and verification strategies I discuss in Chapter Three provide additional support in establishing the rigor and quality of this study (Glesne, 2011).

### Summary

This introductory chapter, also considered Act I, provided the reader with the setup of this study. It provided the background and backstory to support a qualitative study about the value of higher education from the perspective of first-generation, minority community college women who participated in a Student Success course. It also highlighted the role of community colleges and Student Success courses in the lives of students. The major terms of this study,

along with assumptions, limitations, and delimitations were defined. Further, this chapter also described the social constructionism conceptual framework and how it would be used to highlight the voices and experiences of the student participants. Chapter Two as the beginning of Act II of this study elaborates on the literature that supports this study, including literature on various constructions of value, community colleges, first-generation students, student success as a concept, and Student Success courses. In Chapter Three I discuss the methodology, sample, and data collection process. Finally, Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven serve as Act III of this research. In those chapters readers are introduced to the participants, the discourses uncovered from their interviews, my thoughts about the process, and the implications and recommendations I have offered to practitioners and researchers.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

*...A unit of dramatic action... held together with the dramatic context...*  
-Syd Field (1994, p.11)

### Act II: The Confrontation

The second act of any screenplay is generally the time in which the leading protagonist faces a series of events, actions, or obstacles that keep him or her from achieving a goal. As such, the reader is taken through a detailed description of these events and even the conflict that further help to establish the story; it provides the foundation for the development, exploration, and the story's resolution or finale. In a similar manner, this literature review will provide the reader with an understanding and the context of this qualitative study through an exploration of relevant literature.

### Value

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand and describe how first-generation, minority community college women who participated in a Student Success course perceive the value of higher education in their lives. These perspectives may or may not be similar to one another and they may or may not reflect what one would traditionally think of when he or she thinks of something being of value or as valuable. Current literature and news media sources are ripe with references to the value of higher education, specifically in reference to its economic

value. Those news outlets, parents and students alike, are asking if colleges and universities are worth what they cost. Particularly, Porter (2002) suggests the continued escalating cost of higher education has caused many from low-income families to question the value or worth of continuing education beyond a high school credential. Still others may describe value for the intellectual, social and/or human and cultural capital gained as a result of participating in higher education. It is evident that the term value on the surface can have different meanings to different people and in different contexts. This is perhaps most evident in the scholarly literature where depending on the circumstances of a study, the field/discipline itself, the concept of value can have even more complex meanings (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1999; Ledden, Kalafatis, & Samouel, 2007). For example, value has been extensively researched in business and marketing literature to explore relationships between the quality of services and customer satisfaction. Many of these consumer studies also investigate the connection between price, brands, and how they influence consumer's perceptions of product quality and overall value. Further, value has been explored in psychology and sociology, often as 'values' to represent a measurement or determinant of human behavior and as a factor in making personal judgments. Hence, the subsequent section of this literature review explores the conceptualizations of value in higher education literature, followed by descriptions of its use in business and marketing literature (including the varied descriptors and levels associated with it such as customer value, consumer value, and perceived value). This section concludes by distinguishing between those conceptualizations of value and those proffered in the sociology and psychology literature as 'values.' An understanding of value from these diverse viewpoints also provides contextual insight into potential ways and discourses about value that the student participants in this study

may refer to as they frame their answers and ultimately construct meaning about the value of higher education in their lives.

### *Value of Higher Education*

Value has frequently been used to discuss the long-term benefits students and societies receive as a result of a more educated citizenry. With rising institutional costs, some perceive the value of higher education in terms of an investment (Porter, 2002), while others explore the relationship between value and student satisfaction (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009). Still another conceptualization involves exploring the relationship between perceived value, institutional image, and knowledge acquired to address how students evaluate their educational experiences (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1999). Moreover, research within this sphere also speaks to the ways in which understanding student assessments and satisfaction can help administrators determine and plan educational offerings and services (Ledden et al., 2007).

While there are large volumes and ranges of studies about the impact or value of college, Bowen (1997) describes the value of higher education for individuals and society. His work focuses primarily on the individual investment of going to college, and specifically the social value a student obtains as a result in participating in some form of higher education. Bowen's analysis further suggests beyond the economic returns associated with a higher education, there are additional consequences or benefits associated with an individual's growth in the areas of cognitive abilities, emotional and moral development, aptitude as citizens, family life, and even health.

Similarly, Porter (2002) discusses the economic and social value of higher education as the two primary benefits of obtaining a college credential; suggesting students enjoy increased personal/professional mobility, quality of life, and quality of health as primary benefits. Moreover, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) affirm this in their discussion of how college affects the student as a whole person. While they suggest students benefit from going to college in terms of their attitudes, values, and moral development, they assert students' career and economic status is also deeply impacted. Specifically, they note how attaining a bachelor's degree has significant implications for the type of job graduates obtain and their overall lifetime earnings. Further, they propose those with a college degree are more likely to have a higher occupational status over those with only a high school diploma (including pay), a lower level of unemployment, higher job satisfaction and job performance. Their analysis also addresses between college effects and within college effects on students. Particularly regarding the within college context, they found courses that relate directly to career development or related interventions can significantly enhance students' career development and overall maturity.

Knox, Lindsay, and Kolb (1993) discuss the value of college and describe the early part of the twentieth century when a college diploma became an "omnipotent symbol of status, a powerfully defining entrée to the middle-class American dream" (p. 1). They assert what society wants from participating in higher education stems from the basic core values of Americans and American culture. These values (described with an "s") are based on utilitarian or individual desires, expressive desires (personal happiness, freedom, friendship, marriage, family, and leisure), and civic commitments by people. Knox et al. assert these conflicting values have played a critical role in the development of American higher education, primarily because of the

tensions about higher education as a place that prepares one for work and the view that it is a place where one's mind and ideas are broadened and liberalized. As such, they offer an interesting view about what getting a higher education offers to a student. They suggest having a higher education confers status upon alumni and strengthens utilitarian values. It also undergirds the legitimacy of the social and economic system, and upholds myths and norms of society. Moreover, Knox et al. assert higher education fails to affect the expressive side of one's self.

### The Functional Value of Higher Education

Viewing higher education from a functional or practical perspective has caused researchers to question how students perceive the value of their education in relation to what they get and/or experience in terms of services at their higher education institutions. In other words, viewing higher education from this practical perspective draws attention to the economic value of the higher education institution and the benefits connected to the product (the classes or degree itself) or services received while at the institution. Many of these studies come specifically from business schools within higher education institutions. In an exploratory study on the perceived value of higher education among Chinese students, Lai, To, Lung, and Lai (2012) found the Theory of Consumption Values (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991) most accurately explained how students perceived services offered by their higher education institution. A step-wise multiple regression on those 33 consumption values revealed students' satisfaction with their program of study depended largely on experiential benefits and usefulness of the degree after they graduated—two functional values. Also important to note is that



epistemic value (value associated with gaining knowledge) was seen as a negative association for non-local Chinese students in the study. Lai et al. suggest this may be because of cognitive burdens related to their non-familiarity with the language and instructional styles of their particular institution.

In yet another study, the examination of the students' perceptions of service value in business education revealed a relationship between price, quality, and knowledge acquired (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1999). Results from this study suggested the stability associated with having a business degree, image, as well as social and emotional value were considered to be important factors for students in business education. Despite this, there were differences in what male and female students valued; males were more likely to value the social aspect of their business educational experiences, while women were more likely to be critical of the price and quality of the actual program. The studies by Lai et al. (2012) and LeBlanc and Nguyen indicate cultural and gender-specific factors may influence perceived value of educational services and experiences.

Results from a 2011 Pew Research Center study affirm this sentiment (Wang & Parker, 2011). Overall, women found more value and benefits associated with going to college than most men. More specifically, study results revealed that while the majority of Americans surveyed (57%) gave the higher education system negative ratings for the job it does for the money students and families spend, half of all women who graduated from a four-year college rated the American higher education system as good or excellent in these areas. Women were also more likely to say their education was very useful relating to the intrinsic benefits they gained, including their general quality of life, growth of their intellectual capacity, and job or

career preparation. Further, the study revealed women and men saw changing gender patterns in higher education to be a positive trend. However, African-Americans were far less likely than others to say the gender gap was good thing. Wiseman (2011) notes the gap between women and men in higher education is most pronounced in the African-American community where 63% of the college graduates are African-American women.

DiPrete and Buchmann (2005) address a conceptualization of value as it relates to higher education during their assessment of trends in college completion rates for men and women as part of data from the Current Population Survey. They assert that while returns for obtaining a college education were higher for women than men over an extended time span, those trends do not provide a thorough justification for gender-specific trends in college completion. As such, their research looks at those trends related specifically to trends in earnings, marriage prospects, educationally-related differences in families, and education being viewed as protection or a sort of insurance against living in poverty. They found that because standard of living and insurance against poverty yields appeared to have risen faster for women than men, it is likely that female college completion may be largely associated with gender-explicit variations in the value of higher education. DiPrete and Buchman suggest women who often must rely on their own labor earnings for a standard of living and for any dependents, tend to value higher education more because it reduces the risk of living in poverty. Further analysis of the data provided evidence of female-favorable returns to higher education among African-Americans. The author's do note the role of incentive effects from returns on education on educational behavior is more complicated for this population because of historical inequities in educational access and

resources. As such, these areas may have an important impact on gender-specific college completion rates for these groups.

#### Antecedents to Value and Future Outcomes

In another study specifically related to the value of higher education as perceived by students, Alves (2010) suggests given the features of higher education services and their importance in the life and future of the student, it is important to measure value perceived by the student through components of emotion and future goals beyond traditional trade-off conceptualizations. Specifically, looking at the original goals, backgrounds, and thoughts of students or the antecedents to their decisions, also proves to be important when examining future outcomes. As such, Alves developed a scale to measure perceived value by looking at the following variables: future goals, price/quality trade-off, comparison with alternatives, and emotion among different groups of students to develop. These were assessed to develop an index of perceived value. The findings from a questionnaire distributed to a randomly-selected sample of students from all universities in Portugal, revealed a high correlation between quality of the program and image. Further, Alves found that perceptions of value varied within groups of students. As an example, younger, inexperienced students largely perceived service education to be of greater value because they thought it would provide them with future career opportunities.

Though not directly about perceptions of value, a study conducted by Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, and Reinhardt (2010) on student academic entitlement explored the notion that students think they are owed something beyond what they might get as a result of their efforts during their

educational experiences. Results from this phenomenological study of 52 university students revealed six primary areas relating to this sense of entitlement, with one specifically related to product value of higher education. More specifically, Singleton-Jackson et al. found perceptions of higher education to be strongly linked to job or career outcomes. Students expected to get a job because of their educational accomplishments. Moreover, the student responses suggested a desire to exchange money for a degree, what the authors referred to as an oversimplification of the educational process; whereas only about 10% of those interviewed understood what education was from a scholarly perspective or recognized education for the value of learning and growing as an individual opposed to just going to a university or college for job training or preparation.

Dorri, Yarmohammadian, and Nadi (2012) suggest that higher education institutions can take a cue from such student responses and expectations. Moreover, they assert those demands coupled with increasing national and international competition have presented new challenges that if improved upon can create a competitive advantage for higher education institutions. Thus, their research focuses on the use of value chain models to explore the primary areas of a university. Further, Pathak and Pathak (2010) also suggest that higher education as a service industry has undergone many changes and challenges as traditional models of education face increased scrutiny for their ability (or inability) to create value proportionate to emerging benchmarks based on performance. Hence, they suggest the value chain model can serve as a useful tool for defining core competencies and activities that can create a more competitive advantage specifically as it relates to cost and distinction for the university itself.

Finally, Conrad and Dunek (2012) discuss the value of higher education in regard to the contemporary discourse on the purpose of a college education. They suggest as the U.S. economy shifts from one based on industrialized production to one based on knowledge and innovation, higher education is no longer “afforded the luxury of pure scholarship, teaching and learning” (p.25). Instead, higher education is being increasingly affected by two market forces—the demand for higher education institutions to address workforce preparation and for an increased demand for knowledge and innovation that can be turned into marketable products and services. Further, Conrad and Dunek suggest four major trends affecting higher education are all driven by monetary incentives. More specifically, they argue the dramatic increase in for-profit colleges and universities, the use of adjunct faculty at not-for-profit institutions—what they refer to as academic capitalism in terms of the commodification of university-created products and entities—as well as the major declines in public funding for higher education threaten higher education. Further, these authors maintain that the default (or traditional) purpose of college in terms of providing students with foundational knowledge and skills they need to enter the workforce is inadequate because it fails to prepare students for the sweeping and constant changes of the emerging global world. Students are not critically engaged and expected to hone their abilities to exercise independent thought, reasoning or problem solving. More explicitly, they submit,

A twenty-first century college education must also prepare students to reflect on the knowledge and ideas that are developed—including their own—in response to such pressing social issues as exploding population growth; the rise and scarcity of natural

resources...; the increasing deterioration of the earth's climate and ecology; and the instability of many world governments.... (p. 51)

Conrad and Dunek (2012) continue by noting that if there fails to be an established purpose for a college educated person, and society continues to uncritically honor the default purposes of higher education, the long-term result may be the betrayal of the long-term needs of all major stake-holders, including students, faculty, staff, parents, employers, and taxpayers.

The studies and views presented in this section reflect various conceptualizations of value in some higher education literature. Though varied in how the concept has been approached, these views suggest a need for value-added products and services because of their relation to success and ultimately "customer's retention decisions," specifically in the competitive higher education and workforce environment students face (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1999, p.187). This line of thinking has largely been accepted in the business and marketing literature and will be discussed in the forthcoming section.

### *Value in Business and Marketing Studies*

Perceived value as a concept has been explored and defined in the business literature in several different ways by researchers (McDougall & Levesque, 2000; Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007; Sheth et al., 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). Particularly, Zeithaml highlights the strategic management implications associated with understanding customer values, suggesting strategies based on those customer values will help businesses use resources more effectively and meet customer expectations more adequately. Further, Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-

Bonillo (2007) suggest exploring value in this way emerged as a defining business issue in the 1990s as a reflection of an interest in the phenomenon of ‘value creation’ among market researchers in both academia and industry (p.427). They submit there are two main approaches to studying value in the business literature—examining it as one-dimensional or multi-dimensional construct. As a one-dimensional construct, perceived value can be measured by a self-reporting item that evaluates an individual’s perception of value of a product or service. Studies that explore perceived value in this way are generally price-based studies (Monroe & Chapman, 1987) which focus on product quality and value based economic theory of the consumer and the concept of utility (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo). Monroe and Chapman’s review of the price-perceived relationship suggests buyers’ perceptions of value are based on a trade-off between the benefits they perceive in the product in relation to the sacrifice they perceive by paying the price. However, they note the importance of expanding this to include the process a buyer uses when evaluating a purchase discount or deal, suggesting more research should be conducted to evaluate how the use of rebates or special promotions influence a buyer’s evaluations of such offers.

In addition to value studies that focus on price, other studies under the one-dimensional classification tend to rely on Means-end theory that connects consumers’ personal values and their behavior. Zeithaml (1988), who is most associated with this theory, created a conceptual model that describes the way people evaluate a service or product based on their perceptions of price, quality, and value rather than on the actual price or actual quality of the service or product. More specifically, this definition of perceived value suggests it is the overall evaluation a consumer makes of a product based on perceptions of it given in exchange for that which was

received. This definition creates hierarchical relationships between these concepts, ultimately proposing value is an individualistic, higher-level concept.

McDougall and Levesque (2000) explore the influence of value on satisfaction. Their investigation explored four major service areas – dentistry, auto services, restaurants, and hair styling services in which respondents were to base their questionnaire responses on an ideal service encounter. They found service quality and perceived value to be the most important factors of customer satisfaction, with a direct connection between that customer satisfaction and their future intentions. Moreover, the strong relationship between loyalty and satisfaction further suggested the importance of perceived value to customer loyalty and ultimately (company) profitability. Thus, as with Alves (2010), McDougall and Levesque (2000) recommend future research should focus on identifying other antecedents to customer satisfaction.

Finally, exploring customer value as a multi-dimensional construct has been studied in the business literature in the following ways: value as hierarchical in structure, utilitarian and hedonic, as axiological, or as value theory driven. Studies have also explored Holbrook's typology of consumer value (1999) and consumption-values theory (Sheth et al., 1991).

Particularly, Woodruff (1997) discusses customer value through the value hierarchy model as “a customer's perceived preference for an evaluation of those product attributes, attribute performances, and consequences arising from use that facilitate (or block) achieving the customer's goals and purposes in use situations” (p. 142).

As an adaptation of the Means-end model (Zeithaml, 1988) previously discussed, this hierarchical model suggests that value is the result of learned perceptions, evaluations, and preferences. Consequently, customer value changes over time. More specifically, this hierarchy



addresses how customers' desired value guides them when they form perceptions of a service or product in a specific situation and how received value may lead to overall feelings of satisfaction or be compared to the customer's standards. Woodruff (1997) suggests conceiving customer value as a hierarchy allows managers and organizational leaders to have a much richer understanding of how customers think about the value of products and use in situations.

Sheth et al. (1991) assert consumption value is a multi-layered consumer choice in which consumers choose to buy or not buy specific products based on several variations of value. These varied forms are based on three fundamental propositions: 1) consumer choice is a function of multiple consumption values, 2) consumption values make differential contributions in any given choice situation, and 3) consumption values are independent. Consequently, they assert five main values influence consumer choice including functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional values. Functional value relates specifically to economic utility and the benefits connected to the product or service. Social value describes the quality associated with belonging to certain social groups. Sheth et al. (1991) assert goods and services are frequently associated with emotional responses. Therefore, emotional value relates to a product or service affecting a buyer in such a way as to influence their emotions or attitudes. Epistemic value refers to the capacity of product or service to arouse curiosity or satisfy knowledge of the consumer. Lastly, conditional value denotes the circumstances or situations a customer faces when trying to make a decision. As independent values, Sheth et al. (1991) assert they relate additively and contribute incrementally to a consumer's choice behavior.

Hartman (1973) is known for his axiological or value theory based model conceptualized value as intrinsic, extrinsic, and systemic in nature. These values represent emotional, means to

an end, or logical relationships in the consumption process, respectively. Holbrook (1999) expands on this notion. Holbrook defines consumer value as an interactive relativistic preference experience. In essence, there is some type of interaction between a subject (the consumer) and an object (the product or service). The experience itself is only comparative or relative to relevant competition. As a personal and situational construct, value then depends on the context in which the judgment is made. According to Holbrook this Typology of Consumer Value reflects three vital areas of consumer value: 1) Intrinsic versus extrinsic value, 2) Self-oriented versus other-oriented value, and 3) Active versus reactive value. In combination, these three areas produce eight types of value – Efficiency, Play, Excellence, Aesthetics, Status, Ethics, Esteem, and Spirituality. Holbrook suggests these eight values work together in any consumption experience. Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonilla (2007) suggest this conceptualization of value is the most comprehensive approach to understanding value since it defines more sources of value than other studies.

This section provided the reader with a review of pertinent conceptualizations of value in traditional business and marketing literature and its use as a trade-off of benefits and services. Still, there exists further delineation about what constitutes value in the form of ‘values.’ The use of the term ‘values’ often indicates one’s personal ideas about what is right and wrong that help to guide his or her behavior. Thus, prior to transitioning fully into a discussion on values as a distinct construct, I will provide a review of what Ledden et al. (2007) have suggested about the relationship between personal values and the perceived value of education within an overall social/cultural milieu. Specifically, the authors proffer that while the literature acknowledges the said relationship, the possibility still exists to distinguish even further between diverse kinds of

values. As such, they combined the constructs of personal values, consumer value, and satisfaction in a theoretical model. They tested this model on MBA students enrolled at a school in the United Kingdom. The testing of their model revealed the functional relationship between people's personal values and perceived value (of a service or product) can be best understood by examining the behavior of their respective components rather than treating them as higher order constructs. More specifically, Ledden et al. found that people's terminal values and instrumental values had a considerable impact on the get or trade-off component of value. Further, they found perceived value to be a significant determinant in their overall satisfaction, but also provided support for their claim that value gained through educational experiences is also an important factor in student satisfaction; Ledden et al. suggest these findings have implications for practice in the areas of marketing education.

### *Values*

As noted, there is a distinction in the literature across fields about the terms 'value' and 'values.' I have provided you with several conceptualizations of value in the higher education, business, and marketing literature. I also provided you with a theoretical framework offered by Ledden et al. (2007) that suggests value and values should be explored together. This section of the literature review will now more thoroughly explore the term 'values.' Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo (2007) suggest values refer to the goals, standards, rules, criteria, norms, or ideals people have that tend to aid in their overall judgment process. More specifically, values

refer to the relationship between people's personal beliefs and the goals for which they may be striving.

Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) discuss five key features common to the definition of values. They assert values (a) are concepts or beliefs, (b) are desirable end states or behaviors, (c) transcend specific situations, (d) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (e) are ordered by relative importance. They further assert values can be conceived as static constructs that involve a focus on standards of preferences. In this way, values are like schemata or organized structures or cognitions about a social entity. As such, much of the work in sociological circles about values involves examining patterns of values held by members of different cultural groups who live within different social structural positions. As primary examples, they suggest some may contend that values have adaptive significance and thus a biological basis to the way people make decisions and act. Further, values may be rooted in race/ethnicity or gendered relations, whereby people subscribe to values that may be attributed to their race/ethnic or gender specific backgrounds. Additionally, Hitlin and Piliavin discuss social structures, including social class, occupation and education to address how facets such as family characteristics, immigrant status, age, religion, and national/demographic status have been used to explore values and their relation to individual self-direction.

Rokeach's (1973) seminal work discusses the nature of human values specifically as it relates to value systems, values in American society, attitudes and behavior, and political ideology based on one's values. This discussion is guided by five assumptions about values including, (1) the total number of values that a person possesses is relatively small, (2) all men [and women] possess the same values to different degrees, (3) values are organized into value

systems, (4) the antecedents of human values can be traced to culture, society, and its institutions and personality, and (5) the consequences of human values is manifested in almost all phenomena that social scientists might consider investigating. As such, Rokeach describes one's values as relating to an enduring, prescriptive, or proscriptive belief that specific behaviors or end states of existence is preferred to an opposite mode of behavior. He says,

This belief transcends attitudes toward objects and toward situations; it is a standard that guides and determines action, attitudes toward objects and situations, ideology, presentations of self to others, evaluations, justifications, judgments, comparisons of self to others and attempts to influence others. Values serve adjustive, ego-defensive, knowledge, and self-actualizing functions. (p. 25)

Taking these ideas into consideration, Rokeach developed the Value survey, a classification system of values. This survey looks specifically at two sets of values, terminal and instrumental values. The terminal values focus on desirable end-states of existence or peoples' goals that they would like to accomplish like a comfortable life, social recognition, an exciting life, sense of accomplishment, a world of beauty, mature love, a world at peace, salvation, self-respect, freedom, equality, inner harmony, family security, pleasure, happiness, true friendship, wisdom, and/or national security. Instrumental values focus on people's preferred ways of behaving or living such as being ambitious, broad-minded, clean, cheerful, helpful, forgiving, independent, polite, imaginative, obedient, capable, responsible, courageous, honest, intellectual, loving, self-controlled, and/or logical. The instrumental values therefore serve as a means for achieving the long-term terminal values.

Rezsóhazy (2001) discusses the sociology of values as it relates to several key areas including the dimensions of the concept, value systems, harmony and contradictions about it, the process of how values are acquired and maintained, and how one's values change. Further, Rezsóhazy discusses the development or production of values based on historical, social, political, and even economic factors. The author primarily asserts values are interdependently bound together forming a system of connected cognitive and affective elements. In this system, values are organized by and within cultures. Further, they are acquired and maintained by the process of socialization. Thus, meanings associated with values is primarily garnered through relationships such as those with family, school, media, and peer groups, with social approval or disapproval aiding as an alternative method of strengthening values. As such, value systems are regularly challenged due to a wide range of causal factors including economic crisis, pressures, and external influences. Learning and gaining new knowledge, therefore, challenge or precipitate the questioning of values. Further, Rezsóhazy suggests the relationship between values and economic, social, political, or cultural factors has resulted in various value classifications. These classifications range from those that speak to values as specific to certain groups of people and values as structured or foundational for why people do what they do or behave the way they do. There are also final and instrumental values which refer to the setting of a major goal and the steps or things needed to reach that goal. There is also the concept of global values, which extends considerations about human relations and treatment. Additionally, there are sectorial values that are generally confined to a particular domain of society such as political, religious, or economic circles. Another key aspect of values is its role, place, and function in larger sociological analysis. Specifically, Rezsóhazy suggests values undergird the

identity building process. As one becomes aware of his/her values, he/she “can consider him/herself as a person, find his/her place in the world, feel confident, interpret and evaluate his/her environment” (p. 16156).

### Personal Reflections on the Value of Higher Education

Having shared these conceptualizations of value and values, I think it is important to document my own thoughts about how I have come to conceptualize the value of higher education. In the introductory chapter to this research, I provided you with a formal researcher reflexive statement about my experiences in higher education, what I referred to as a “rendezvous of sorts.” However, I never truly explored how I have come to construct or define the value of higher education in my own life. As such, during the writing of my proposal, my dissertation Chair asked me several times about how I understood and described that value. It was hard to put the many ideas and somewhat disjointed feelings I had into words and as a result, it took me an extra semester to truly meditate on just how I would respond. It has however, been interesting through this writing to reflect on my experiences and exposure to the realms of higher education, especially now as a doctoral student and young professional, to be able to say participating in higher education has changed my world, my personal world in terms of how I think about myself, how I identify myself, and how I aim to help others experience these same things. I have always been a good student, a “go-getter” and in love with learning and growing. As such, I have always felt at home among books, among completing assignments, and in growing intellectually. The challenge to learn something new, to push myself to deeper levels of

knowledge, is what has kept me in school all of these years. My circle of friends have often joked that they cannot fathom how I do it all the time, the energy, the studying, the reading, the writing, the thinking. Yet, just like any artist who is truly dedicated to her craft, I have been devoted faithfully to intellectual stimulation, lofty ideas, and being a life-long learner. I can hear my father now, who during many of our pep-talks reminded me that I was made for this, made to accomplish this task, this challenge, this quest that I have been on since I was a child.

Though now at the highest academic level I can achieve, I realize it has been those sentiments, while perhaps part of the larger societal discourse or rhetoric Conrad and Dunek (2012) discussed, that have propelled me to this point. As such, pursuing a higher education, and more specifically my Ph.D., has had nothing to do with a financial trade-off as described in the business literature on value, or thoughts of being marketable for the global economy. Although I do acknowledge that I have had moments where those thoughts have crossed my mind, I have never seen them as the primary benefit or dominating force behind my views of higher education. Instead, my personal conceptualization of the value of higher education in my own life has everything to do with accomplishing something greater than myself: civilizing my life's purpose and refining my personal goals.

The following sections of this literature review will highlight the American community college as well as the concept of student success and Student Success courses, in an attempt to provide additional insight as to how the participants in this study may construct and describe their experiences in higher education, and ultimately, the value of higher education in their lives.



## The American Community College

As there has been more of a demand for students to go to college in order to earn a living wage and be competitive in the global environment, the public has become increasingly skeptical of higher education (Bowen, 1997). As such, many have turned to community colleges which have long been recognized for their role in local communities for their exceptional economic value. As a uniquely American institution, community colleges have long been lauded by researchers because through their open admissions policies, millions of students have been afforded access to college, including large proportions of low-income and minority students (Baum et al., 2011; Boggs, 2010; Lincoln, 2009; Mellow & Heelan, 2008; Mullin, 2010; Tschechtelin, 2011). Further, as the cost of attending college continues to escalate, students as well as national leaders have looked to community colleges as places where students can begin their college journey (Whitehouse, 2009). This section of the literature review will provide a detailed description of these colleges and their original purposes, as well a discussion of their contemporary challenges to move beyond access to student success. Further, this section of the literature review will discuss the critiques of these institutions as potential “cooling out” stations as described by Clark (1980).

### *Community College History and Mission*

Witt, Wattenberger, Gollattscheck, and Suppiger (1994) describe the historical development of community colleges as institutions that expanded America’s democracy and provided a place for the common man. These new two-year colleges made higher education

available to an increasing number of high school graduates and focused their curriculum on the needs of a changing nation. Karabel (2005) asserts community colleges were places for those who did not fit the collegiate ideal that was perpetuated by the elite who dominated the enrollment ranks of schools like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale Universities. Although there are contested views about which community college was actually the first, William Rainey Harper and J. Stanley Brown of the University of Chicago are most widely viewed as responsible for the creation of this institution that opened up higher education to the general masses with the development of 'post-diploma' courses and the founding of Joliet Junior College in 1901 (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Across the nation other junior colleges, which were often the extended branch campuses of major universities, offered lower-division courses. Shortly following, general education and vocational training courses began to define the essence of a community college.

From 1960 to 1970, a time in American history where the country was experiencing much change socially and politically, the number of community colleges grew from 412 to 909 (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The American Association of Community Colleges (2012) touts the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963 for its even greater contributions to the massive growth of community colleges; whereby in one decade, 500 new community colleges were developed across the nation. Dassance (2011) asserts community colleges embody a social consciousness that marked that period in American history and provided opportunities for millions of previously underserved and underrepresented college students. Marked by their commitment to the community, the term community college became ingrained in the American vernacular by the 1970s to describe these comprehensive, public supported institutions that began offering associate degrees or certificates. While various other names such as junior or technical college

have also been used to label these institutions, the community college's mission has largely been the same—to provide access (primarily) to basic education, continuing education, career education, and transfer education courses for the local community.

Boggs (2010) suggests America would not be the same without these two year institutions that now enroll close to half of all undergraduates and have expanded educational opportunities to students of all ages. Boggs suggests they have also served as a place to prepare students for senior level courses at the local university. Today's almost 1200 community, junior, and technical colleges offer associates degrees and certificates, with many more starting to offer bachelor's degrees. These colleges play a pivotal role in preparing the nation's workforce, including those in the fields of nursing, EMTs, police officers, and fire fighters. Furthermore, community colleges are places where many working (and displaced or unemployed) adults go to upgrade their skills or prepare to gain credentials to re-enter the workforce.

For those reasons Mellow and Heelan (2008) describe community colleges as key players in America's democracy and economy and critical to the development of American public goods. They further suggest that as a place of integration for minority and immigrant populations, these institutions are facing increasing scrutiny over their effectiveness as a distinctive part of American higher education.

### *Community College Students*

As previously noted, community colleges have long been seen and used as a gateway to higher education by multitudes of students with diverse characteristics and goals (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). This includes diversity in the racial/ethnic, socio-economic status, age, gender, and academic backgrounds of the students (Boggs, 2010; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). This section of the literature review will highlight these characteristics of this growing group.

The comprehensive mission of most community colleges makes them attractive to a broad range of people seeking specific programs and opportunities (Phillippe & González Sullivan, 2005). In fall 2006, over 6.2 million students (35% of all students in higher education) were enrolled in community colleges (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). While the majority of community college students were White in 2003-04, Black and Hispanic students made up a larger percentage of the student body at community colleges than at public four-year institutions, with 15 percent of community college students being Black and 14 percent being Hispanic (Provasnik & Planty). Further, Mullin (2012) asserts for approximately half of all minority undergraduates, community colleges serve as a key point of entry into higher education. This number is expected to grow as the American population becomes more diverse (Phillippe & González Sullivan).

Community colleges also serve as the starting place for more than 40% or 1.7 million undergraduates from low-socio economic backgrounds or those living in poverty (Mullin, 2012). Community college students that are part of this demographic group also possess a greater percentage of characteristics commonly thought to negatively affect persistence and attainment,

including delayed enrollment, lack of a high school diploma (obtained in the traditional manner), and part-time enrollment. Further, they generally have dependents and are often single parents or the head of the household. A large percentage (84%) of community college students work, and 60% work more than 20 hours a week (Mullin, 2012).

While community colleges are generally thought to be older, current college enrollment trends suggest younger students are now considering community colleges as the starting place to reach their educational and/or career goals (Mullin, 2012). More specifically, Provasnik and Planty (2008) suggest 40 percent of community college students are dependent students, meaning they are under 24 years of age and not independent financially from their parents. In the 2003-2004 academic year, the median age of a community college student was 24, compared to students at public and private four-year institutions whose median age was 21 (Mullin).

Additional comparisons with students attending four year colleges and universities reveal that higher proportions of community college students were older females from low income communities (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Mullin (2012) suggests changes in the age structure of those participating in higher education began as early as the 1970s when a substantial number of women over the age of 35 began to enroll in higher education institutions. This enrollment pattern for women (at all institutions) increased 67.5% between 1972 and 1976. Finally, by 1978, undergraduate female enrollment surpassed that of males and has continued to do so (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). This increase in female college enrollment is also reflected by the number of women at community colleges. Provasnik and Planty (2008) maintain that for the

2003-04 academic year, 59% of all community college students were female. This represents a larger percentage than female college students represented at four year institutions.

Further, community college students have greater risk factors compared to students who attend four-year institutions (Mullin, 2012). Goldrick-Rab (2010) also note because academic success is not a pre-requisite for admission into community colleges, 61% of all community college students take at least one remedial course and 25% take two or more remedial courses. According to Provasnik and Planty (2008), the growing need for remediation on college campuses in general has resulted in many states requiring all students to take their remedial coursework at community colleges.

#### First-Generation Community College Students

While community college students have a wide variety of demographic characteristics as described above, they are also more likely to be first-generation college students (Nomi, 2005). First-generation students are described as such because neither parent has received more than a high school diploma or credential (Pascarella, et al., 2004). Further, many first-generation students often come from low-income and minority backgrounds (Nomi, 2005). Engle (2007) suggests because of these factors, first-generation students remain at a large disadvantage when it comes to college readiness or preparedness, which could have immense long-term effects. These students often enter college unprepared and are also less likely to persist toward a degree.

Compared to their non-first-generation peers, first-generation students may enter a college environment lacking basic knowledge, family income and support, educational expectations and plans, and pre-college preparation (Nomi, 2005; Oldfield, 2007; Pascarella, et al., 2004). Thayer (2002) notes first-generation students likely have limited access to information about college experiences either first-hand or from their relatives, and as a result they will likely lack knowledge about time management, college finances, budget management, and even the bureaucratic operations of higher education. Hence, Terenzini, Springer, Yager, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) note first-generation students tend to face significant differences and challenges in their actual experiences while in college. Oldfield (2007) describes his personal collegiate experience and that of other first-generation students as a rare, completely mystifying culture of rites, rituals, and rules. In addition to lacking the academic preparation needed to do well in college, first-generation students may also have poorly defined long-term goals. As such, Engle (2007) suggests it becomes vital to not only address factors that affect access to college including academic preparation, but factors that affect success while in college. Some of these factors include areas discussed in traditional persistence literature such as helping students become acclimated into the academic and social environment of the campus, but also include issues related to cultural adaptation and other intervention programs that promote access and success.

Additionally, many first-generation college students are less likely to be of traditional college age in contrast to their peers whose parents attended some form of college (Nomi, 2005). Moreover, many of these students work full-time and/or part-time jobs to support themselves and their families. Nomi (2005) asserts many first-generation students are likely to be the primary wage earners in their households. In my personal experience teaching many first-generation

college students, I found that they often described working in or having family members who worked in “dead-end” or labor intensive positions as the impetus for pursuing higher education. Valencia College in particular was often viewed as a “saving grace” on their path toward a more fulfilling and stable future. Oldfield (2007) suggests for first-generation students often coming from poor and/or working class communities, surviving the social challenges associated with being at an institution of higher education can be just as demanding as succeeding academically. Further, many first-generation students are often female and have more dependents and responsibilities than traditional college students (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Nomi, 2005) While first-generation students may face some of the same challenges as non-first-generation students, they may also face more as a result of many of these distinguishing characteristics.

### *Emerging Trends in Community Colleges*

Researchers have explored the emerging trends in community colleges, primarily concerning the need for community colleges to revisit their missions, provide an overhaul of student educational experiences—including establishing clarity about pathways to careers and providing those resources (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Lincoln, 2009; Mellow & Heelan, 2008; Mullin, 2010; Tschechtelin, 2011). Griffith and Conner (1994) suggest there is a new educational reality to face, considering nearly half of all the students enrolled in public higher education attend a community college and even more are expected to attend. The American Graduation Initiative proposed by the Obama administration has looked to community colleges to play a strategic part in the education of approximately five million more students by 2020 (Whitehouse, 2009). As



such, community colleges are faced with one of their biggest challenges—to move beyond access and to focus on student success and college completion rates. Phillippe and González Sullivan (2005) further suggest that with a highly diverse student body characterized by differing aspirations, life circumstances, and skill levels, community colleges are challenged to provide learning experiences and support services that meet the needs of these distinctive groups. Other significant issues community colleges have to deal with include an aging leadership population, building strategic partnerships, and how they will be more transparent in their accountability. Tschechtelin (2011) notes particularly how swelling student populations combined with decreased funding places community colleges in a precarious situation as they will have to revisit their missions.

This sentiment is echoed by Lincoln (2009) who asserts some of the challenges facing community colleges include going beyond levels of access and deal more with helping students develop skills and credentials for the twenty-first century global economy. He suggests one way to do this is to provide interventions such as improving students' first-year experience, placing more emphasis on advising, and developing early alert systems in order to contribute to student success and help students achieve their goals. Consistent with these sentiments are the calls for community colleges to revisit their missions and the reformation and renovation of general education, an area for which community colleges play a large role (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011; Dassance, 2011; Mullin 2010).

Mullin (2010) in particular discusses the necessity of community colleges to revisit their mission in light of the American Graduation Initiative, in which the Obama administration has outlined goals for America to have the highest proportion of college graduates by 2020. Mullin

asserts community colleges must address college completion in the same way they have traditionally addressed issues of access. Additionally, some of the primary challenges facing community colleges are to help students achieve their goals by helping them to define and plan education and career goals more clearly. As such, Mullin suggests community colleges may need to amend some of their traditional ways of completing their mission. He suggests community college leaders will need to address course enrollment, course completion among high school students, and certificate and degree completion issues all while dealing with less money and swelling numbers of students.

The issue of student success at community colleges therefore becomes an area of increasing significance. Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, and Leinbach (2005) assert addressing issues of access alone is not adequate enough to quiet the conversation about what community colleges must do to contribute to student success. They posit that the dominant challenge facing most community colleges is to develop ways for systematically dealing with the students they have, many of whom are unprepared for college level work. As such, they identify several institutional features of community colleges that are strongly associated with successful educational outcomes for students. These characteristics include, institutional size, faculty status (whether full or part time), and the number and type of degrees awarded. Further, institutional characteristics that impact students are whether or not the college is dominated by part-time students, large proportions of females, and minorities. The authors note these characteristics in particular because it may be more difficult for students to engage with the college both socially and academically. Financial aid, the college location, and socioeconomic status were also factors listed as influential in student success. Calcagno et al. used NELS:88 data to measure those

institutional features that affect the success of students at community colleges. Their findings suggest that the link among institutional features and institutional effectiveness is vital for community colleges to recognize how they can increase completion and transfer rates, ultimately contributing to student success.

The American Association of Community College's (AACC) Reclaiming the American Dream Report (2012) made several recommendations for ways to address and focus more specifically on student success. They suggest redesigning students' educational experiences (through various methods including improving college readiness and focusing education on preparing students with knowledge and skills required for existing and future jobs), reinventing institutional roles (including revisiting college missions and investing in support structures that emphasize collaboration), and lastly, the AACC suggests the entire system needs resetting, meaning re-evaluating policies and practices to ensure transparency and accountability by community colleges so they are recognized for the valuable role they play.

### Community Colleges in Florida

Wattenberger and Albertson (2012) provide a concise history of Florida community colleges and describe their development as a response to financial pressures. The first community college established in Florida, St. Petersburg Junior College, was established as a two-year private college in 1927. Several other two-year colleges including Jacksonville Junior College, Orlando Junior College, Casements Junior College, and Edison Junior College were also founded during this time. Only St. Petersburg Junior college would succeed and by 1933,

Florida's first public junior college, Palm Beach Junior College, was founded. Despite a 1939 law which allowed counties with populations of 50,000 or more to petition the State Board of Education for the development of a public junior college, Palm Beach Junior College remained the only public two-year college until 1947. During this same year, the passage of the Minimum Foundation Program enabled junior colleges to become part of the local school system, granted that the County Boards of Public Instruction received approval from the State Board of Education. As such, the Pinellas County Board of Public Instruction requested to make St. Petersburg Junior College a public junior college by incorporating it into its school system. Similarly, other counties including Jackson, Calhoun, Holmes and Washington received approval to take administrative control of Chipola Junior College, which had been operating as a private junior college. Finally by the end of 1948, Escambia County received permission to establish Pensacola Junior College. As a result, Wattenberger and Albertson assert Palm Beach Junior College, St. Petersburg Junior College, Chipola Junior College, and Pensacola Junior College became the focus in Florida's approach to post-secondary education.

By 1949, Washington Junior College was established and the Florida Association of Public Junior Colleges (FAPJC) was established. Over the next few years, much attention was given to the expansion of junior colleges in Florida. In 1955, Dr. James Wattenberger led the Community College Council and by 1957 recommended a state plan to the Florida Legislature that would provide 28 junior colleges within commuting distance of 99 percent of the state's population. Six colleges were approved including Gulf Coast College, Central Florida Community College, Daytona Beach Community College, Manatee Junior College, North Florida Junior College, and St. Johns River Community College. Over the next ten years, sixteen

community/junior colleges were opened: Brevard Community College, Broward Community College, Miami-Dade Community College, Edison Community College, Lake City Community College, Lake-Sumter Junior College, Okaloosa –Walton Community College, Polk Community College, Florida Keys Community College, Florida Community College at Jacksonville, Santa Fe Community College, Seminole Community College, South Florida Community College, Valencia Community College, and Tallahassee Community College. Finally, Hillsborough Community College and Pasco-Hernando Community College were established in 1968 and 1972 respectively.

Over the next several decades, Florida’s community colleges would prove to be leaders in the nation’s two-year degree production (Wattenberger & Albertson, 2012). However, Wattenberger and Albertson assert just as the nation began experiencing economic downfalls, so did Florida. Particularly, the real estate, lending, and construction booms that had fueled much of the economy came to an end, and Florida, like the rest of the country, entered a recession. In the spring of 2008, the state legislature adopted a conservative budget, and renamed/redefined the Florida Community College System. As such, four main provisions guided the new Florida College System (FCS) including, 1) The Florida College System was to be defined as a system of colleges that grant two-year and four-year degrees to meet the employment needs of Florida in a more cost-effective manner to the state and the student than the state university system; 2) It provided criteria and a locally-controlled process for the changing of an institution’s name consistent with its degree-granting status; 3) It established the Florida College System Task Force to make recommendations regarding the implementation and funding of the new system; and 4) It established the State College Pilot Project, consisting of nine colleges also tasked with

the responsibility of making recommendations on the implementation and funding of the new system. By 2011, the effects of the recession, lower tuitions than state universities, the open-admissions policies, and expanded degree options, increased the number of high school graduates in Florida who enrolled in the FCS to an all-time high (Wattenberger & Albertson). Furthermore, fourteen of the FCS colleges were in the top 10% of the community colleges in the country.

### Students in Florida's Community Colleges

Florida's community colleges serve as a primary point of access to higher education for Floridians. Sixty-five percent of high school graduates in the state begin their post-secondary education at one of the schools that is part of the FCS. Further, 82 percent of all freshman and sophomore minority students in public higher education attend a Florida community college. During 2010-11 academic year, over half a million students (539,770) were enrolled in credit programs. The students in Florida's community colleges are largely part-time (61%) and female (59%). For the 2010-11 academic year, the largest enrollment by program was for those in Associate of Arts Degree programs (351,938) and Associate of Science Degree programs (113,019). Further, of the 93,285 degrees/certificates awarded in 2010-11, 52,317 were for Associate of Arts degrees (Florida Department of Education, 2013). In 2011-12, a record number of associate degrees and certificates (105,762) were earned by students in the FCS. As a result, Florida was ranked first among Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) member states in the number of associate degrees and certificates awarded (Florida Department of Education, 2012).

### *Critiques of the Community College*

Despite widespread praise about community colleges and especially those in Florida as dream developers for those who may not have otherwise been able to get a college education, Goldrick-Rab (2010) describes the most evident flaw of community colleges is in the area of student success, noting how low student success is largely connected to socioeconomic factors associated with the types of students that attend them. Further, some (Clark, 1980; Dougherty, 1987; Pincus, 1984) have described community colleges as contributors to the social reproduction of classes. This section will highlight these views on community colleges.

Goldrick-Rab (2010) asserts that although community colleges help democratize opportunities for students, completion rates remain connected to early-on socioeconomic advantage (or dis-advantage). She examined 750 studies and analyzed them based on those that focused on community colleges' provision of wide-scale opportunities, their institutional practices, and the academic, social, and economic attributes that attract students to them. She found 14 main areas where community colleges can focus their attention moving forward including, Student aid, performance-based funding, simplifying FASFA, articulation agreements, offering community college baccalaureate degrees, creating career pathway programs, developing contextualized learning opportunities, establishing learning communities, provide student life skills courses and centers, smaller counselor-student ratios, dual enrollments, early assessment programs, performance-based scholarships, and emergency financial aid. Together, these areas can help enhance community college student success. She also noted because of the very nature of community colleges' open admissions policies, success at these institutions must be more carefully and broadly defined. One measure that has traditionally been used to define

success has been to assess whether students' educational expectations change after entering a particular community college.

Clark (1980) has referred to community colleges as "cooling out" stations and argues the structure of community colleges functions to actually shift the ambitions of students to paths that end up in narrow, long-term career and life choices. This is primarily seen when community colleges redirect students' attention to terminal degree programs as opposed to transfer opportunities to a university. In essence, degree programs and certificates are thought to be in areas in which people are unable to advance or use in more prestigious careers. As such, Clark asserts community colleges reproduce social inequality instead of the many opportunities as purported by other supporters of the community college movement.

Similarly, Pincus (1984) refers to community colleges as a place of false promises where class conflict and vocational education ultimately reproduce inequitable conditions for low-income minority students that attend them. He asserts this happens when community college teachers and counselors convince students with "unrealistically" high aspirations to be "realistic" and enroll in terminal degree programs (p.333). Further, terminal degree programs have a higher proportion of nonwhite and working class students than those enrolled in transfer programs. Pincus suggests it is this stratification at community colleges that contributes to continued class and racial inequalities that exist within larger society. Instead of being an answer to labor market challenges, Pincus suggests students leave community colleges essentially trained only for jobs that are usually referred to as semiprofessional or paraprofessional in nature. Consequently, there has been an attempt to elevate the status of middle-level type jobs to make them appear more desirable. This essentially creates a division of labor which increases profit for the small



percentage of business owners who garner revenues from the various institutions for which many of those who attend community colleges end up working.

In this way, Dougherty (1987) asserts there is much controversy over whether or not community colleges actually aid or hinder socioeconomic attainment for groups of people who attend them. He reviewed several studies regarding the educational and economical attainment of students attending different types of higher education institutions—community, four-year, and other types of post-secondary institutions. Dougherty concluded that community-college negatively hinder the educational and economic attainment of students who attend them. Primarily, he notes that for those looking to obtain a Bachelor’s degree, this had a significant impact. He found students enrolled in a community college looking to transfer to a four-year college either no longer desired to transfer or found it difficult to make the actual transition. Furthermore, Dougherty offers a model explaining why community colleges hinder educational attainment. He suggests there are three main processes including attrition in the community college, difficulty to transfer to four-year colleges, and then attrition once they transfer. As such, he emphasizes research on community colleges should focus on transfer rates and continuation rates, and provide more accurate information about upper-division attrition rates. Moreover, Dougherty suggests more attention should be placed on comparing community colleges to schools with similar characteristics.

Bahr’s (2008) study examined Clark’s (1980) “cooling out” concept and examined the effect of academic advising on students’ chances of success at a community college. He tested the effect of advising on the likelihood of successful remediation in math as well as the effect of advising on the likelihood of a student to transfer. Further, he tested four hypotheses regarding

“cooling out” (as a general phenomenon, as a specific phenomenon of the poorest skilled students, as institutional racism, and as a contextual phenomenon); he found none of these hypotheses to be statistically significant. Instead, he found that underprepared students appeared to benefit more from advising and support services than their college-ready peers; this contradicts Clark’s earlier research about community colleges as cooling out stations.

Although Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) focus on the college-choice process, they highlight both the economic and sociological impact on students’ choices of going to college. Particularly, they note how students from low-income and minority communities base their decisions to attend specific higher education institutions (namely community colleges) on their perceptions of these areas and on their exposure to resources. They also discuss how low-income students tend to opt for less expensive institutions such as community colleges, arguably participating in a cycle of social reproduction.

### Student Success

Despite their growing popularity, community colleges have faced many challenges including transfer, completion rates, and student success for the diverse population of students that attend them. It is important that community colleges focus on student success for all their students, but especially for first-generation students navigating their higher education experiences. Current literature is full of references to student success (Braxton, 2000; Kuh et al., 2005) but there fails to be an agreed upon definition. Words and phrases like ‘persistence’ and ‘drop-out’ characterize the field. Further, many of the discussions in relation to student success

measure success from an institutional perspective while other discussions and definitions focus on helping students achieve their specific academic and career or personal goals. There is also an area of literature that focuses on Student Success courses and programs. These courses are varied in their naming, format, and content. This section of the literature review will describe the nature of some of these courses and programs as further foundational support for this study.

### *Student Success Courses*

#### The History

While an attempt to uncover the history on Student Success courses proved to be unfruitful, I was able to establish their history by proxy of the models used to guide traditional freshman seminar courses utilized in universities and colleges across the nation. Freshman seminars date back to 1882 at Lee College in Kentucky and 1888 at Boston College, with the first “for-credit” seminar course making a debut at Reed College in Oregon in 1911 (Bigger, 2005; Myers, 2003). These courses were used as an extended orientation to fulfill *in loco parentis* (Keup, 2012). Brubacher and Rudy (2008) affirm this as they discuss early colonial colleges and the role they played as more than just a place where students received an education or skillset. The role of college extended beyond intellectual pursuits. This “collegiate way of life” focused on strict supervision of college dorms, religious life, and guided student discipline *in loco parentis* or in the place of parents. Brubacher and Rudy continue with “...the college

was to look after the moral as well as the intellectual development of students; character training was just as important as mind training” (p. 123).

Keup (2012) maintains as faculty became disenchanted with teaching life skills content and as attitudes toward student success changed, *in loco parentis* came to an end and many of the early freshman orientation and seminar courses died out by the 1960s. Myers (2003) suggests that despite the freshman seminar course losing its popularity for a number of years, they began to re-emerge on college campuses during the 1970s. Keup suggests this was due in large part to the post-World War II Baby Boom generation, along with increased numbers of historically underserved and under prepared students who began to enter and struggle in higher education. Further, Myers (2003) suggests during this same time there was much political upheaval in the United States as students began to riot and protest the Vietnam War. In an attempt to come up with innovative solutions so that such incidences wouldn't occur on his campus, the former president of the University of South Carolina, Thomas Jones, asked faculty to create a course that would help connect students to the institution and remodel the nature of undergraduate education (Myers, 2003, University of South Carolina, 2013). According to the University of South Carolina's website, the primary goal of the course was to open the lines of communication between students, faculty, staff, and administrators and in 1972, the University 101 course was introduced to the campus as a method for training faculty and staff. Bigger (2005) suggests as competition for students increased during the last quarter of the twentieth century, institutions began more enthusiastically to address the needs of entering students in an effort to make their institutions more appealing. Most notably associated with the freshman experience and the University 101 course itself is John Gardner. Gardner (1980) describes the University 101

method as a way to improve university teaching and learning. Through training that focuses on the needs and problems of students in general and freshman students more specifically, faculty and staff are prepared to teach the freshman seminar course and help students transition into college. This concept quickly became part of a larger national movement. Bigger (2005) suggests that over the years the freshman seminar or orientation course as an organized transition program has become the cornerstone of new student experiences at campuses across the country. According to Keup, as much as 94 percent of all U.S. campuses currently offer some type of freshman seminar.

In regard to the courses themselves, Cuseo (1991) describes them as effective for promoting student persistence and academic achievement. Cuseo notes while these courses vary in content, they should be used as a place to establish meanings, value, and expectations about education, explore self-concept(s) and self-esteem, provide a place of problem solving and decision making regarding academic and career planning and goal setting. Further, they should also teach skills and strategies for studying, self-management, and ways to foster interpersonal relations. The following section will highlight some of the major formats of these courses, followed by a discussion of Student Success courses specifically. It will also provide an overview of studies that highlight the impact of such courses from an institutional and student perspective.

## Formats to First-Year Seminar courses

Keup (2012) describes the first-year seminar course as one designed to assist students in their academic and social development as they transition to college. She suggests some of the highest quality first-year experience courses place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that help to develop students' intellectual and practical competencies. As such, some typical first-year seminars include: extended orientation seminars, academic seminars with uniform content, academic seminars on more specific areas or topics, professional or discipline-based seminars, study skill seminars, and hybrid seminars. Further, Keup maintains some of the most important goals of these seminars include helping students develop academic skills, develop connection with the institution, become oriented to campus resources, facilitate self-exploration/personal development, and create a common first-year experience. Myers (2003) suggests many institutions offer a hybrid of these courses based on the specific needs of their student population. Specifically, the University of South Carolina's Freshman Year Experience course is composed of an extended orientation and freshman seminar, and Marquette University's Freshman Frontier Program is a five-week summer program for students who have been conditionally admitted to the university. I have provided a visual representation below of the formats of first-year courses with these noted goals (See Table 2).

Table 2

*Common Formats, Characteristics and Goals of First-Year Experience Courses*

Format	Characteristics/Course topics	Goals
	Courses place emphasis on:	To help students:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended orientation seminars</li> <li>• Academic seminars with uniform content</li> <li>• Academic seminars on more specific areas or topics</li> <li>• Professional or discipline-based seminars</li> <li>• Study skills seminars</li> <li>• Hybrid seminars</li> </ul>	<p>Critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that help to develop students' intellectual and practical competencies.</p> <p>Topics Include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Campus Resources</li> <li>• Study Skills</li> <li>• Academic planning/ advising</li> <li>• Critical Thinking</li> <li>• Time Management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop academic skills</li> <li>• Develop connection with the institution</li> <li>• Become oriented to campus</li> <li>• Facilitate self-exploration/development</li> <li>• Create a common first-year experience</li> </ul>

*Note.* This table provides a summary of the common format, course characteristics/topics and goals of first-year experience courses as noted by Keup (2012).

From the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars, Padgett and Keup (2011) found that 37% of all first-year programs were offered through an institution's academic affairs unit or a specific academic department. Further, most programs had a seminar director (75.1%) who

was full time (39%). The courses themselves were mostly taught by a team (43.7%) or by academic advisors at an institution (31.2%).

### College Success Programs

As exhibited in the previous section, the first-year experience, seminar, and orientation courses take on a variety of formats and methods for introducing content to freshmen students. Myers (2003) conducted a comprehensive review of similar college success programs and courses. She maintains that the benchmark for all college retention/success programs has been the Student Support Services (SSS) program, a federally funded program part of the TRIO initiatives. As such, the majority of college success programs provides services to students early in the freshman year and uses a variety of strategies to help with student persistence, overall academic success, transfer, and graduation. These programs generally provide a pre-freshman academic and social integration, advising, group services that extend traditional service hours, and deliberate messaging about success as a conscientious effort. An example of an SSS program includes the HORIZONS program at Purdue University in Indiana. As part of the HORIZONS program, students are required to attend a four-credit hour freshman orientation course. This course is divided into two parts in which students meet for three hours per week in a traditional classroom to discuss cognitive needs and in a “Community Building/Personal Growth Laboratory” to discuss affective needs. The Personal Development Portfolio (PDP) program at Bridgewater College in Virginia, focuses on getting students involved on the campus and in the local community. The PDP program is structured to addresses the whole person



through lessons on citizenship, intellectual growth, personal/emotional, and ethical/spiritual growth (Myers). The program also incorporates a summer orientation, followed by a freshman success course, service learning, and opportunities for students to examine goal and career setting and leadership development. The retention initiative “It Takes a Campus to Graduate” at Loyola University in Louisiana, took a collaborative approach to improve student recruitment and retention. The university created a large task force to address areas relating to instructional effectiveness, academic support, career development, campus diversity, academic advising, freshman experience, post baccalaureate programs, student life and campus tradition, campus services, alumni affairs and public relations, recruitment, and financial aid. Through this initiative the campus also created a new marketing and communication plan. Since the implementation of the initiative, the university’s retention rate for freshman to sophomore year increased from 74.2% in the fall of 1995 to 84.8% for fall 2000.

Myers (2003) also discussed the use of learning communities, linked courses, learning clusters, Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs), freshman experience programs, orientation programs, summer bridge programs, and culturally conscious programs as several other college success course and program formats that have successfully helped to retain first-generation, low-income, and traditionally underrepresented students at higher education institutions. One example of a learning cluster is the “Model Institutions for Excellence” program at the University of Texas, El Paso, which was designed to help improve the performance of minority students in the areas of math, science, and engineering. Similar to a cohort format, each cluster consisted of 25 students. Students took classes together and were provided with space to meet outside of class, work on group projects, and receive free tutoring.

Hope (n.d.) discusses Student Success courses (specifically labeled as such) as ones that combine study skills, life skills and career exploration. She suggests the lack of formal (and empirical) research on Student Success courses themselves may be due in large part to the variations in curricula and the philosophies used to guide them. Despite this, she describes them as an essential component in developmental education. As a general focus, Student Success courses attempt to create a singular experience that helps students identify campus resources, establish relationships with other students and faculty, and improve their overall academic and life management skills. At the core of the courses is the notion that they help to create a supportive landscape for learning and provide opportunities for students to interact with each other and faculty. As such, Hope identifies several areas for exploration when examining Student Success courses. These areas relate to a sense of community and belonging, organization and delivery, and the curriculum (as explicit and implicit). More specifically, Hope notes how the goals of the Student Success course are defined by the curriculum. These goals include: 1) help students gain a sense of themselves as students, 2) promote a sense of responsibility for their own learning, 3) help students to internalize how to use resources and exhibit behaviors that promote success, and to 4) engage in the academic community. Further, Hope discusses some of the theories used to guide curriculum such as a curriculum based on cognitive theories, including those based on emotions, the brain, and motivation.

Finally and perhaps most significant to this study is the discussion of Student Success courses as powerful tools for helping students shape their sense of identity as students. Hope (n.d.) suggests this issue is critical to the students' overall success because without a contextual and social framework shift, students are more likely to feel lost or alienated, which may heighten

their risk for dropping out. Hence, she suggests more research on such courses and the students who take them is needed to help inform educators and administrators on how to balance those various components more powerfully and effectively in the process of helping students succeed.

### *Student Success Courses in the Community College*

Many community colleges across the nation have implemented a wide-range of student support services including Student Success courses in an attempt to assist students from diverse backgrounds to attain a college education. These courses are designed to provide participants with information on the college including other college services and/or offices (O’Gara et al., 2008; Stovall, 2000). The general premise of these courses is to provide students with support in academic and career planning and strategies to develop study skills so that they will be successful. O’Gara et al. assert despite this, there has been very little research on their effectiveness, including qualitative research that highlights these courses through the experiences of the students themselves. Their study focuses on how Student Success courses influence student progress toward degree completion. They interviewed 46 students at two urban community colleges and asked the students questions about their initial experiences at the college, their reasons for enrolling, their goals and perceptions, and experiences in their student success course. They also asked them about their knowledge of other student services. Additionally, they interviewed various college staff to get a better understanding of the services offered to the students. Many students reported the Student Success course was a convenient, “one-stop location” to receive a variety of important information, including information about

services offered by the college itself, information on other courses, and graduation requirements (O’Gara et al.). Further, students reported the Student Success course helped them with their time management, study skills, and their overall development in other relevant ways. Primarily, the course helped them establish relationships with peers and their college professors through the interactive nature of the course. O’Gara et al. assert in these ways and more, the Student Success course itself is important because it provides benefits that extend beyond the basic information students receive and relationships they build, ultimately creating greater outcomes with long-lasting impacts. Despite these benefits, the authors assert there are certain areas needed for improvement when discussing the Student Success course. One area in particular is the timing of when students actually take the course. It seems most beneficial for students who took the course upon first entering the college opposed to in their second (or later) semesters.

Stovall (2000) examined the use of Student Success courses for promoting persistence and completion, especially among ethnic minority students. She suggests since more than half of all first-time community college students are the first in their families to attend college, it is important to help integrate them into the college environment. Further, enrollment in the courses can help the students complete the term with higher grades and higher first-term credit hour completion. Taking such a course also increases the odds that a student will continue enrollment into the second term and future terms of college. This is consistent with the findings of a study on Student Success courses in Florida’s community college system conducted by Zeidenberg et al. (2007). Using logistic regression to control for characteristics that they hypothesized might be related to the decision to enroll in the course, the authors looked into race, gender, citizenship, English proficiency, and high school completion. They found students who enrolled in the

course were more likely than their peer group to earn a credential, including an eight percent increase in their chances of persisting in school. Zeidenberg et al. also found that students who enrolled in a remedial class(es) were seven percent less likely to graduate than those who did not take such courses. Similarly, Winn and Armstrong (2006) found Student Life Skills (Student Success courses) in Florida were beneficial for all students who took them, including those in remedial and non-remedial courses. Using data from the Florida Community College System (FCCS) Student Data Base and the State University System (SUS) Student Data Course Files, they analyzed data from a cohort of 36,123 fall 1999 first-time-in college students with complete placement scores (from ACT, SAT, or CPT). The student cohorts were divided into two groups based on whether or not they completed a Student Life Skills course. The groups were followed for five years and it was revealed that overall the group that had completed the Student Life Skills course was more successful than those who did not take the course. Further, the results indicated that taking and successfully completing a Student Life Skills course had a positive impact on academic success.

Porter and Swing (2006) attempted to address how these courses affect persistence. As part of their study, they analyzed data distributed to 45 institutions as part of the First-Year Initiative survey, conducting a multilevel model approach to estimate how specific parts of the first-year seminars impacted the students' intent to persist. Their findings were consistent with persistence literature; meaning those students who fared better in high school were more likely to express an intent to return to the institution during the following year, whereas those students who worked many hours at the institution were less likely to say they would return.

Rhodes and Carifio's (1999) examined the opinions of community college students regarding the value of their freshman seminar experience course. They assert no matter how well-planned a freshman seminar course is, it can be destroyed by students' reactions and perceptions. Further, they suggest only by understanding students' perceptions of the value of such a course can the outcomes for classes be less variable. This will also help provide an overall more positive experience for students. In their qualitative study, they interviewed five randomly selected freshman students from a technical community college. They found approximately half the students felt their needs were met, while the other half of the students who were all older and non-traditional felt the class was a "waste of time" (p. 521).

Karp, et al. (2012) investigated College 101 course at three Virginia community colleges. As a result of their interviews with 169 staff, faculty, and students and observations of 19 course sections, they found that the College 101 courses were largely supported at the institutions. However, circumstantial aspects of the course, including constraints at the state and institutional level made the actual execution of the course challenging. This was most evident in the course instructors' teaching where they were often limited by compressed formats, broad curricula and a disconnect between the course and the academic side of the community colleges. This seemed to weaken the courses' prospects of creating long-lasting impacts on students' outcomes. Moreover, while the courses' part of the study sample provided students with important information about college and campus services, they did not offer adequate opportunities for in-depth exploration and skill-building practice. Few students in the study reported that they had developed reflective and metacognitive skills. Karp et al. suggest these major findings help explain the lack of positive long-term outcomes in quantitative research on Student Success

courses. As such, they suggest their theory of action can help to explain when College 101 courses focus more on learning-for application rather than just on an exchange of information or relationship development, students would be more likely to experience long-lasting impacts.

### Summary

Reviewing the literature for this study provided me as researcher as well as readers with the foundational support to proceed with this study. Specifically, exploring conceptualizations of value, community colleges, and the first-generation students that attend them, I came to a greater understanding of the impact going to college could have in the lives of students like the participants in this study. Further, through an examination of the concept of student success and Student Success courses, I was able to begin to gain a more thorough understanding of the topic through the lens of prior research. At times it was frustrating to try to synthesize what other researchers said and seemed as if writing the literature review could be a never-ending exercise in itself, because of the breadth of research on each individual topic. Through my ‘writing and reading, reading and writing’ exercises, I became familiar with the key issues in each distinct area and feel confident moving forward in the study. In Chapter Three, the conclusion to Act II, the qualitative methodology and data analysis procedures are discussed. Together, the first three chapters of this research provide the underpinning for the exploration of the voices of the participants and implications and recommendations offered in Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

*A plot point is any incident, episode, or event that hooks into the action and spins it around into another direction.*

-Syd Field (1994, p. 13)

### Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss why a qualitative research design is appropriate to explore how first-generation, minority community college women who participated in a Student Success course perceive the value of higher education in their lives. This “plot point” serves to provide the basis for the third act of this research which introduces the participant’s voices and study findings. Further, in this chapter I provide an overview of the data collection and analysis procedures that were used in this study. I also discuss the validation and verification strategies that were used to ensure the validity of this study. I conclude the chapter with commentary on the Institutional Review Board process, approval documents and the originality score this dissertation received.

### Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen for this study because according to Patton (2002), qualitative research and the findings that come from in depth interviews, observations, and document analysis “illuminate the people behind the numbers and put faces on the statistics... [helping to] deepen understanding” (p.10). In this vein, this study aimed to highlight



the voices, perceptions and experiences of the students in this study. When conducting qualitative research, the primary concern is with the collection, analysis and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data in order to gain insights into a particular phenomenon (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006; Glesne, 2011). Merriam (2009) discusses this as trying to uncover how people make sense or meaning of their world.

Grounded in fields such as anthropology and sociology, the goal of qualitative research is to understand, discover, and generate meaning in expansive, richly descriptive ways (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Merriam asserts qualitative studies themselves are probably the most common in educational research in which data collected in the form of interviews, observations, and document analysis are often used to identify patterns and themes. These patterns and themes provide a larger lens through which to analyze and interpret the deeper meaning and implications of what has been said by study participants.

Consistent with the social constructionism conceptual framework used to guide this study, qualitative research is concerned with how people experience their lives, how they construct meaning and tell their truth. Qualitative research focuses on the very real human stories that traditional quantitative research cannot fully encompass because of its concern with numbers and statistical analyses. Merriam (2009) further states that qualitative researchers who serve as the principal instrument in the research, are interested in how people ultimately understand their experiences, how they conceptualize their worlds and consequently give meaning to those experiences. Thus, the primary aim in this research and in any qualitative research is with understanding the subject matter from the participants' vantage point. Moreover, this interpretative research as Stake (2010) describes qualitative research, relies heavily on the

researchers' ability to define and redefine the meanings of the things they see and hear. These interpretations give emphasis to human values and experiences. Stake continues that the best interpretations will be logical extensions of a simple description, but will also include contemplative, speculative, even an aesthetic extension. As first-generation, minority women reflect on their collegiate experiences, future goals and perceptions about the value of higher education in their lives, this research highlighted their voices and individual stories. Stake (1995) suggests the interpretation process by the researcher therefore becomes critical and is what ultimately makes qualitative research distinctive from other types of research. Moreover, the researcher is charged with objectively recording the situation, while concurrently examining the meaning and redirecting the observation to refine or support those discoveries (Stake). In essence, it is the participants' views that shape the meaning of a phenomenon based on their beliefs and cultural values, and it is then the responsibility of the researcher to reflect the meaning garnered from them (Merriam, 2009).

Fraenkel and Wallen (1993) acknowledge that while many types of qualitative methodologies exist, there are salient features of all qualitative research. Generally, a natural setting serves as the direct source of data, and the researcher is the key instrument as mentioned previously. Further, the data that are collected can take on the form of field notes (from observations), video, personal documents (journal entries, letters etc.), official documents including minutes from meetings, official forms/files, policy documents, news releases and the like, photographs, pictures in the form of drawings or paintings, films, advertisements, or interviews (one-on-one and/or focus groups) (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In addition to establishing meaning from all of the collected data in the form of an end product, it is important

to note, qualitative researchers are also just as concerned with the actual research process. Fraenkel and Wallen suggest that qualitative researchers tend to analyze data inductively, exploring a picture as it takes shape to examine its parts. Thus, researchers' observations and insights also become part of the overall research process.

The quality or depth of qualitative research has often been questioned because of its assumed biases and what some deem as a lack of rigor (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Stake (1995) asserts that while qualitative research is indeed subjective, its subjectivity should not be seen as a shortcoming. Rather, the subjectivity of qualitative research should be seen for what it is—an essential element in the process of understanding the phenomenon or material being covered. In fact, Stake (2010) suggests all researchers depend on qualitative research at some point. He says:

Whether we are looking at the world through quantitative or qualitative eyes, we reconceive the world in terms of the concepts and relationships of our experience. There are times when each researcher is going to be interpretive, holistic, naturalistic, and uninterested in cause, and at those times, by definition, he or she will be a qualitative researcher. (p. 30)

Another quip against qualitative research, especially in studies that focus on students, is the inability to generalize the research findings that come from qualitative data. Despite this, Walford (2001) suggests this enduring impasse of qualitative research can achieve transferability through the 'thick descriptions' which characterize this research method. As such, readers are then able to make informed decisions about the relevancy of the research findings to their own or other similar situations or populations (p.15). Stake (2010) describes these thick, rich

descriptions as ones that provide abundant interconnected details, descriptions of cultural complexity as well as a proffering of a direct connection to cultural theory and scientific knowledge. This concept, first offered by Geertz (1973) focuses not only on the detailed thick, rich descriptions, but also explores the deeper connections between cultural complexity and the literature guiding the study. There are several other critiques of qualitative research that deal with observation threat (or observer effect) and researcher or observer bias. Fraenkel and Wallen (1993) refer to this as the notion that there are certain characteristics or ideas that observers (researchers) might have that bias how they see or interpret the situation and thus the findings. This will be addressed in greater detail in the forthcoming sections on verification and validation strategies that can be used in qualitative studies to establish trustworthiness.

### Research Questions

Research questions that guide a qualitative study seek to gather a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes (Glesne, 2011). Further, Glesne suggests these questions generally extend from two general areas including: ones that ask questions about social, cultural, economic, political and/or environmental structures and those that focus on individual experiences within those structures. As such, the research questions in this study focus on how first-generation, minority community college women who participated in a Student Success course perceive the value of higher education in their lives. After reviewing the literature, it was determined that there was a gap about these students' perspectives, experiences and the impact their perspectives can have on community college policies and Student Success courses, as well

as larger first-generation and student success literature. Therefore, the purpose of the research questions in this study were developed to garner a more in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions about the value of higher education in the participants' lives.

As noted in Chapter One and throughout this chapter, a basic interpretive qualitative research design was used to explore the meanings, constructions about higher education, and the students' overall perceived value of higher education relating to the following research questions:

1. How do first-generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course describe and understand their higher education experiences?
2. What discourses about value are present as first-generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course discuss their understandings and experiences in higher education?
3. How did participation in a Student Success course inform the first-generation, minority female students' identity as college students?

#### The Location: Valencia College

The research study was conducted at Valencia College (VC) in Orlando, Florida. Founded in 1967 as Valencia Junior College, the college's mission is to provide opportunities for academic, technical, and life-long learning in a collaborative culture dedicated to inquiry, results

and excellence (Valencia College, 2013a). By 1971, the newly named Valencia Community College became part of a major articulation agreement adopted by the Florida Legislature (Klingman, 2008). In their discussion of the planning of the Florida Community College System (now the Florida College System), Wattenberger and Albertson (2007) describe this articulation agreement as one that allowed graduates of community colleges admittance and transfer to universities. In 2010, the college experienced yet another name change and became Valencia College to reflect the institution's expanded scope to include Bachelor's degree programs.

Valencia currently serves Orange and Osceola counties in Florida, and boasts seven campuses and centers in the central Florida region. It offers the Associate of Arts degree (AA), 10 of which are articulated AA Pre-Majors, 5 AA Pre-majors, 30 Transfer Plans, and 105 Associate in Science and Applied Science degrees and certificate programs. Valencia also offers two Bachelor degrees. According to the school's informational fact sheet, there were 60,770 degree seeking students for 2011-2012 academic year, making VC the third largest of Florida's 28 community colleges. (The total number of students served is closer to 71,328 as the college has continuing education, conferences, and seminars listed as part of its total counts) (Valencia College, 2012b).

Valencia College was chosen as the location for this study because of its prominent distinction as a leader in community college education, and particularly because 40% of all of graduates complete a credential and either graduate or transfer to a four-year university (Aspen Institute, 2011). In VC's 46-year history, the college has been recognized for its stellar commitment to students and the local community. Recognitions include being named "Community College of the Year" in 1998 by the National Alliance of Business (Klingman,

2008). In 1998 and 1999, Valencia was ranked second in the nation in the number of Associate of Arts degrees conferred, whereby approximately 85% of all VC students sought this transfer degree. In 2000, the college was chosen to participate in a national project sponsored by the League for Innovation in the Community College and had also been selected as a Vanguard Learning College in the United States and Canada (Klingman). In 2001, Valencia was also recognized by *Time* magazine as one of the best schools in the nation for helping first-year students excel (Klingman, 2008, Valencia College, 2013a; Valencia College 2012a). In 2009, the college was honored with the inaugural Leah Meyer Austin International Student Success Leadership Award by the Lumina Foundation for its data-informed initiatives to close performance gaps among students from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Finally, in December 2011, Valencia was recognized nationally by the Aspen Institute and awarded the first-ever Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, designating it as the top ranking community college in the nation (Aspen Institute, 2011). The college was awarded with this prestigious honor after a year-long study by the United States Department of Education which focused on student performance and graduation data of 1,200 community colleges. Notably, for the 2010-2011 academic year, Valencia ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> among the United States' two and four year colleges and universities in the number of Associate degrees awarded; a distinction it has received in the past (2003) as well.

Table 3  
*Valencia College Demographics 2011-2012 Academic Year*

Name	Characteristics / Course topics
Name	Valencia College
Established	1967
Institution Type	2-Year Public
Location	Central Florida, USA
Campuses	7
Enrollment (Fall 2011-2012)	
Credit	60,770 (Associates and Bachelor's)
Post-Secondary Adult Vocational	249
Education prep	221
Continuing Workforce Education	3,672
Graduates by Degree/Certificate (2011/2012)	
A.A.	6,406 (54%)
A.S. or A.A.S.	1,404 (11.8 %)
Technical Certificate	3,790 (31.9%)
Career Certificate	185 (1.6%)
EPI Certificate	87 (0.7%)

*Note.* This is an abbreviated table from Valencia College (2012a). *Just the facts 2011/2012.* (Just the Facts). Retrieved from Valencia College website:

[http://valenciacollege.edu/ir/Reporting/internal/documents/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Master11-12.pdf](http://valenciacollege.edu/ir/Reporting/internal/documents/Fact_Sheet_Master11-12.pdf)

Known informally as a “majority-minority” institution, over half of Valencia’s students are ethnic minorities (33,119) and/or female (33,996) (Valencia College, 2012c). The largest population represent the 18-24 age range (61.2%), followed by those in the 25-29 (13.2%) age range. Valencia has also been recognized for graduating more Hispanic and Asian American students than any other two year school in the state of Florida (Valencia College, 2013b).



Table 4  
*Valencia College Student Demographics 2011-2012*

Credit Enrollment (Annual)	Number	Percentage
	60,770	100%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	33,996	55.9 %
Male	26,076	42.9 %
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White, Non- Hispanic	22,054	36.3%
Black, Non- Hispanic	10,980	18.1 %
Hispanic	18,189	29.9 %
Asian/ Pacific Islander	2,869	4.7%
Native American	179	0.3%
Other	6,499	10.7%
<b>Degree Status</b>		
AA	29,221	48.1%
AAS	968	1.6%
AS	10,873	17.9%
Non-Degree	11,035	18.2%
Awaiting	8,673	14.3%

*Note.* Adapted from the Valencia College (2012b). *Statistical History Fact Book 2011-2012*. Institutional Report IR2013-01). Retrieved from <http://valenciacollege.edu/IR/Reporting/internal/documents/2012StatHistFinal.pdf>

### Participant Recruitment and Sample Selection

While qualitative studies can be conducted using a variety of methods to uncover issues relevant to a particular group or population, Glesne (2011) suggests qualitative researchers need a justifiable selection strategy for choosing the people, events, and times in which their study is conducted. Unlike quantitative research where the aim is to collect a random sample from which to generalize claims about the population, qualitative research is concerned with selecting people or sites that can best help the researcher understand the central phenomenon under investigation.

The population from which the sample of participants was recruited and selected came from (self-identified) first-generation, minority women at the community college who completed a Student Success (SLS1122) course at Valencia College during the 2012-2013 academic year. (This sample of students included students who took Student Success during the fall 2012 or Spring 2013 semester).

#### *The Student Success Course at Valencia*

In 1987, Valencia was awarded a Title III grant to help keep students in college (Klingman, 2008). The result was the establishment of the Student Success course. The course is designed to help students survive college by introducing them to college resources, including helping them to create an educational plan, set goals, and refresh study skills (Valencia College, 2013c). The course, much like other such courses across the nation, has a proven track record at the college for improved student success (Valencia Community College, 2009). Originally paired with the college's Project MORE (Mentors and Orientation Reinforce Education)

program, the first participants in the Student Success classes returned to Valencia in the following semester at a rate of 85% at a time when the return rate for all Valencia freshman was 66.5% (Klingman, 2008).

The three-credit course is described as one in which students learn to apply strategies for success in college and life-long learning situations. The emphasis on helping students to establish those long-term academic and career goals is what made the course most attractive to me as a teacher and researcher interested in exploring students' experiences. Some of the major learning outcomes of the course include having students: identify their learning styles to help them develop and practice effective study strategies across disciplines; demonstrate critical thinking by analyzing ideas and principles related directly to college and life situations; create academic and career action plans; and lastly, communicate effectively both individually and with groups in written and verbal formats (Valencia College, 2013c).

Since its inception, Valencia has taken several measures to study the effectiveness of the Student Success course. Most significantly the institution found since the 1990s that there has been a strong correlation between students who take the Student Success course and increased persistence rates (from fall to spring term and from fall term to the following fall term), especially among underprepared students and students of color (Valencia Community College, 2009). Despite this, an in-house study regarding the impact of making the course mandatory for all students and not just 'three-prep students'—those who test into preparatory levels of math, reading, and writing—was inconclusive.

In the fall of 2011 the Student Life Skills department implemented the use of individual portfolios to track student comprehension and execution of previously mentioned learning

outcomes. The outcomes themselves were broken down into four primary areas: self-discovery, study skills, academic planning, and career exploration, which guide the flow of the course.

These four areas also follow the format of the course text, *Becoming a Master Student* by Ellis (2013). As part of the portfolio process, students are expected to complete several mandatory class assignments including a goals paper, career exploration paper, education plan, and include artifact examples of how they apply what they have learned in the course in their academic (other courses) and personal lives. This evidence coupled with students' written reflections on each section is orally defended at the end of each semester and serves as the students' final exam for the course. Finally, as of the fall 2013 semester, there were a strategic plans being made to make the Student Success course, a common curricular experience for all first time entering college students.

In order to select participants for the study, I had to get approval from administrative leaders at Valencia College and the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of both Valencia College and the University of Central Florida. I met with Dr. Leonard Bass, the East campus Dean of Learning Support during the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters. He expressed his sincere interest in research pertinent to the perceptions of various populations of students who have participated in a Student Success course and gave his full support for a study that focused specifically on this population of students.

The criteria used to select the final participants for the study required that all participants were (a) 18 years or older, (b) first-generation, (c) part of an ethnic minority group, (d) and were (e) female. Further, the students had to have (f) completed a Student Success course during either fall 2012 or spring 2013 semester.

While I would like to say the recruitment process for this study was a smooth one, it was anything but that. After I had received IRB approval (APPENDIX C), I immediately contacted Dr. Bass with my recruitment materials, ready to be distributed as part of the weekly faculty and student email news blasts. The actual body of the email asked other Student Success faculty members to share the recruitment email with their past classes and students who they believed fit the criteria. I also sent out direct recruitment emails to my past students. The recruitment letter itself provided a summary of the research including: information about me as the researcher, the purpose of the study, the criteria for participant selection, and provided information about how the data would be collected (in the form of audio-recorded one-one-one semi-structured interviews) and used. It also described the time constraints associated with the study and the measures that would be used to prevent breaches in participant confidentiality. Further, the letter provided a section about verification strategies this study that noted after the data had been collected, participants would be asked to help validate the accuracy of how I represented them (APPENDIX D).

In my mind, I thought that sending out those materials would be as easy as copying and pasting the materials into a mass email to faculty and hitting send. The initial delay in this process occurred because the Dean was out of the office. After he returned to the office, I was assured my materials would be sent out that week. Finally, at the end of the week I was informed that faculty may not feel comfortable helping me to recruit for my study. After I recovered from the shock, feelings of devastation set in. The Dean of Learning Support and I talked about possible alternatives for recruiting and decided along with my dissertation Chair that it would be best to get the help of two full-time faculty members in the Student Success

department who taught eight courses each over the course of the 2012-2013 academic semester (16 courses total). Additionally, I would send the recruitment materials out to my past classes from the 2012-2013 academic year – 4 courses total. I did so and waited patiently. The goal was to recruit a sample of at least 15 interested students from which a minimum of five students would be selected as the final participants. Within the first two weeks, I quickly got responses back from 10 of my former students. Each of these participants were called and emailed to set up a time for a pre-interview conversation. During our 15 minute pre-interview, I covered information discussed in the recruitment letter email about the purpose of the study, the study criteria, time commitments, and future plans for the research. I also asked the participants demographic questions to verify whether or not they met the study criteria. Six of the women met all of the criteria for the study, but only five had availability and expressed an interest in participating in the study. We concluded our phone conversation by establishing the date for our one-on-one, semi-structured interview, with each being roughly a few days to one week from the time we spoke. At the three week mark in the recruiting process, I heard back from one student outside of my class. That one student had the names and phone numbers for another five potential participants. I felt like I had hit the lottery! However, after going over the purpose of the study and discussing the criteria with her over the phone as I had done with the other participants, I found out she and the list of other potential study participants she provided me with, has taken three Student Success courses during their first year of college as part of a special program at Valencia. After speaking with my dissertation Chair again, we decided that their experiences would be much different than students who had only taken one Student Success course and thus decided that I would stick with the five participants who all had taken my

specific Student Success course instead. This would be a limitation to the study, but would be discussed as such. I left the recruitment period open for an additional three weeks and when I did not hear from any other potential participants, I decided to close the recruitment process and continue the study with the five women who had confirmed a few weeks prior.

Consequently, the participants for this study were a purposively selected sample. Patton (2002) describes purposive sampling, also known as criterion sampling, as powerful for producing information-rich cases in which significant information can be garnered. Creswell (2002) suggests this involves the researcher intentionally selecting the participants, whether it is individuals, groups or sites to understand the primary phenomenon in question. Further, Patton notes there are several purposive sampling strategies. For this investigation, I used homogenous sampling. This form of sampling selects similar cases, people or sites based on similar traits or characteristics in order to describe them in depth (Creswell, 2002; Glesne, 2011). For this research, that homogeneous sample consisted of first-generation, minority women who participated in a Student Success course at Valencia College. Chapter Four provides the profiles of those participants.

## Data Collection

Stake (2010) suggests qualitative researchers seek data that characterize personal experiences in particular circumstances. As such, a major aspect of any qualitative research is to identify what types of data would best address the research questions (Creswell, 2002; Stake, 2010). For this research, I collected one primary form of data in the form of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews.

## Interviews

Creswell (2002) describes the interview process as a popular method in qualitative research to gain understanding from the participants' point of view. Interviews allow for the participants to provide detailed information about their experiences and contribute to the thick, rich descriptions for which qualitative research is known for (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2002; Geertz, 1973). Stake (2010) also suggests interviewing provides an opportunity to find out about "a thing" that I as the researcher may not be able to observe or experience myself (p.95). Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or completely unstructured in nature. Further, interviews can also take on several different forms including one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, telephone interviews, or email interviews (Creswell, 2002; Glesne, 2011). While each form has its advantages and disadvantages, this study used a one-on-one, semi-structured, face-to-face interview format with each research participant. This format allowed me as the researcher to ask some questions that were both open-ended and closed-ended. It also allowed for me to probe or explore other areas as brought up during the participants' responses. The interviews



lasted approximately one hour to one hour and forty-five minutes in length each. An interview protocol created based on the literature findings in Chapter Two and the social constructionism conceptual framework was used to guide the interview process and address the research questions of the study. Further, the interview process covered areas about the research participants' general background, their higher education experiences, and future goals (APPENDIX A).

Interviews were conducted with five students using the interview protocol at a pre-determined location by the student participant and researcher on either Valencia's East campus or a local community site such as a coffee house or restaurant. Creswell (2002) suggests whatever the location, it should be quiet and suitable for conducting an interview, including free from distractions and external noise. This did not always happen as planned. While the locations were generally free from distraction, they were not always free from noise. A hum from a coffee machine or noise from other people talking sometimes presented a challenge during the interview, but for the most part it was only a minor inconvenience. Further, Glesne (2011) suggests the interviews should be done at a time that is "convenient, available and appropriate" for the participants, deferring to the study participants' needs (p.113). This was significantly important considering the students balanced work, home and for some, class responsibilities. I therefore, made myself available at a time that worked for them. This meant late evenings in two instances, a time after the students got off of work. (Specifics of locations, meeting times and these incidences are provided in Chapter Four).

At the time of each individual interview, each student was welcomed and thanked for her time and contributions to the study. Further, I also reviewed information they received in the

recruitment email including the purpose of the study, how the information they provided would be used, the expected length of the interview, and the fact that their identities would be kept confidential. I also provided the study participants with a five minute discussion about my path to higher education and how I came to be interested in finding out about the experiences and perspectives of women like them. I believe this helped to remove some of the distance from me being 'researcher' to me being a 'student' just like them. I also asked them if they had any additional questions about me or the study itself. After we discussed those things and a comfortable rapport was established, I asked them if it was okay if I audio recorded our interview. All of the women agreed to be audio taped and so I began audio-taping the interviews with a Sony digital voice recorder. I also took notes throughout all the interviews on a field notes document (APPENDIX B). These notes helped me jot down key phrases, some initial thoughts and my personal reflections of the interview process. Additionally these descriptive and reflective notes helped me while writing the participant profiles as they helped to transport me back to the time of the interview and reminded me of what I was thinking. This note-taking process was also an additional source of insurance and assurance for any mishaps with my recording devices (Creswell, 2002). Fortunately, I did not experience any technical issues in the recording process. I did however experience an interesting experience with when I was trying to upload the audio from my interview with the fourth participant, Janette. Somehow the audio was uploaded in multiple parts, which frightened me because I initially thought it had cut off the audio altogether. To date I am not quite sure how or why that happened. I was however able to re-upload the audio and proceed normally.

### *Interview Protocol*

As described above, interviewing in qualitative research is an opportunity for close researcher and study participant interaction (Glesne, 2011). In fact because of the nature of qualitative research, there are several occasions throughout a study to engage feelings. As such, the interview protocol was comprised of several closed-ended and open-ended questions with the intent to elicit meaning and understand feelings about the women's perceptions about the value of higher education. Glesne describes several useful attributes while interviewing participants. She recommends that one should be: anticipatory, ready to learn, analytic, all while providing a therapeutic opportunity for the student participants to safely say what they feel, think, and share what they have experienced. The anticipatory and analytic sides of interviewing required that I looked beyond the interviews and ask questions of myself about what was needed for the study. I think I found this to be the most challenging and in fact I might have done this too much because at least two points in my interviews I felt myself "zoning out" or thinking "What am I asking?" or "What did they just say?" After each interview I also felt the panic of feeling like I did not get enough information from them or that I would somehow not be able to complete the study. The interview process most certainly also required an intense focus. I found that maintaining an analytical focus from the moment I defended my dissertation proposal helped me to more fully examine what the women said for not only dominant themes, but the dominant discourses about value. It also was extremely helpful that I had two colleagues in my corner who assured me that it was natural and normal to be experiencing the feelings that I had. This helped me to move on with the process and feel more confident as I captured the women's stories and wrote their profiles, I quickly learned that as Glesne noted, interviewing was not merely asking questions

and recording data. It was a time in which I was making constant connections, asking questions about relationships and the importance of the information being revealed from the study participants and even dreaming about what to write, how to write it and the larger implications. At my proposal defense, one of my committee members, Dr. Rex Culp drew my attention to a very important idea for all researchers. He noted I needed to be thinking about the end from the very beginning. While I had considered this before, it was really during my first interview when it sunk in and became real. As such, I like to think I became more of an active listener, an obsessed note-taker and reflective about everything going on around me so that I could do the data due diligence.

Further, I found myself continuously asking questions about how the interviews were assisting with learning about the student's lived experiences and whether or not there was a need to adjust future interviews. Glesne (2011) suggests "Casting yourself as learner correspondingly casts the respondent as teacher" (p.122). I had much to learn. Further, Glesne reported that having this kind of mindset can increase a respondents' satisfaction with being interviewed, their likelihood to elaborate with answers, and allows for an opportunity for me as the researcher in a student-learner role to truly be taught. Moreover, this learner attitude required that I set aside any assumptions that I had about the students and their responses, despite my personal experiences or perceptions of the interview questions and the topic itself. Most significantly, I did not assume I knew what the student participants meant when they responded to my questions. Instead, I often delved deeper to seek out more detailed explanations and more intricate descriptions from the students. Glesne suggests one should patiently probe during interviews in order to give responses "due, unrushed attention and deliberation" (p.123). Doing this ultimately allowed me

to ask for more clarification, explanation, and more thorough descriptions from the women. Further, asking the study participants to communicate in more detailed ways helped me to make evaluations about how to continue with them within the interview and ultimately determine what questions I followed with. For example, many of the women in the study provided such rich, vivid information about their lives in their discussions. Although I had adjusted my interview protocol per the suggestion of a member of my committee, Dr. Penfold Navarro, to be more open-ended and not structured in a way as to lead a response, I still found that during the interviews I still had to adjust questions. Naturally during the flow of the interview, a participant may have answered a future question I planned to ask as part of the interview protocol. By the third interview, I had adjusted these questions even more and felt more comfortable with the interview protocol serving as a helpful guide and less as a strict mandate for what was covered in the interviews.

It is important to note that despite the fact that the interview process is the dominant data gathering method for highlighting the voices and perspectives in basic interpretive qualitative research; it can also just as easily be seen as a type of colonizing approach to research (Glesne, 2011). This colonizing argument suggests that because researchers develop the interview questions which eventually determine the direction of the interview and ultimately its outcome, it may be necessary to co-construct interviews. Due to time constraints of the study, I did not co-construct questions with the student participants. However, because I do recognize the hierarchy in power relations and the relevance of Glesne's point, I did share my journey to higher education (as already noted) including many of the challenges I have faced and my subsequent research interests, comprising of the stories and voices of other similar women as part of a brief

introduction to the interview process. Glesne remarks how sharing one's own experiences often helps with access to groups who may not normally share their experiences with someone who seems distant or removed from their situation. I feel like this definitely played an important role in the interview process as the women seemed comfortable and interested in sharing their perspectives. Further, Glesne notes, it is important to be mindful of differences in status (my role as researcher and teacher at the community college in which the study takes place and the participants in their role as students and research participants) and seek ways to minimize those differences and distance. Dr. Penfold Navarro brought up an important point regarding this positionality. While I am a researcher and was their teacher at one point, I am also a student and whenever possible, I made sure to share this with the study participants. Like them I was working on a major project and had a lot of reading and writing to do. I also concluded all interviews by asking the women if there was anything I left out and if there is anything else they would like to share about themselves, their experience, or the interview process itself in an effort to allow them to share any additional details that I may have left out. Finally, after the interviews were complete, I expressed my gratitude to them for their participation and contributions to the research study. I also provided time for informal discussions after the interview was over for the participants to talk about their thoughts or feelings about the interview process and the study itself. Beyond the formal interview, I also ended up chatting with each woman for at least an additional 15 to 20 minutes about their college choices, adjustments or general life issues. I think this made them feel more comfortable and trusting with me and the research process. I believe they felt that I valued them and not only considered their feelings, but greatly appreciated them and what they had to say.

The interview protocol (APPENDIX A) contains a complete list of interview questions and corresponding research questions. As a general overview, the types of questions I asked were related to the student's background, experiences within higher education and future goals. Our interviews also covered their demographic characteristics such as their ages, marital status, employment status and number of children, if any. I created a visual matrix that provides a consolidated view of the relationship between the guiding research questions of this study and the questions that appear as part of the interview protocol based on a similar table created by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002). The Table contains research questions in the left column, with the coded interview questions from the interview protocol in the right column (Table 5 and APPENDIX A). For example, PH1 indicates the first question from the interview protocol developed to address questions relating to the student's prior history about higher education experiences, whereas V1 indicates the first question from the interview protocol created to more specifically address questions related to the student's understandings and perceptions of the value of higher education.

Table 5

*Relationship between the Research Questions, Conceptual Framework and Interview Protocol Questions*

<i>Research Question</i>	<i>Conceptual Framework</i>	<i>Interview Questions</i>
1. How do first generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course describe and understand their higher education experiences?	Assumptions: 1. Critical Stance Toward taken-for granted Knowledge 2. Historical and Cultural Specificity	O1 - O3; PH1 – PH7; F1, F2; R7-R9; V1-V15
2. What discourses about value are present as the first-generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course discuss their understandings and experiences in higher education?	Assumptions: 2. Historical and Cultural Specificity 4. Knowledge and Social Action Go Together	V1-V15; R1 – R9
3. How did participation in a Student Success course inform the first-generation, minority female students' identity as college students?	Assumptions: 3. Knowledge is Sustained by Social Processes 4. Knowledge and Social Action Go Together	SS1 – SS12; R9

*Note.* This table reflects my understanding of the assumptions that guide the conceptual framework; and thus provides corresponding research questions to elicit responses from the participants in those specific areas.



### Field and Reflective Notes

In addition to collecting data in the form of interviews from the student participants, I also collected field notes on a field notes observation document as previously mentioned. Creswell (2002) suggests this type of text recorded by the researcher during an observation in a qualitative study can provide additional information to help triangulate research data. In this study, I completed field notes during each interview. I recorded my observations, particularly describing the interview, including verbal and non-verbal actions of the student participants. These descriptive notes generally illustrated what happened during the interview. Additionally, I kept reflective notes about the interview, noting intriguing comments and my overall impressions and thoughts on the interview. These reflective notes helped to confirm key insights, hunches or themes (Creswell, 2002). Further, they aided in discovering patterns for analysis and helped to support the interview data.

The field notes observation document developed for this study (APPENDIX B) is a slightly modified one based on Creswell's (2002) observational field notes form. Creswell's form has seven main areas: (a) setting, (b) name of the observer, (c) the role of the observer, (d) the time and date of the observation, (e) the total length of the observation, (f) a column for the description of the object and (g) a column for reflective notes. I have included a space for the participants' pseudonym to be listed, as well as a space for me to write in the page number of the field notes. Finally, I added space at the end of the document for ending reflective notes. Glesne (2011) suggests full field notes include those running notes collected during the observation (in this instance, the interview), as well as thoughts or insights after the observational (interview) period. She also recommends that all notes should be expanded once more at a later time after

reviewing them. This new set of notes can help construct beginning theories as to what is going on and help to shape the direction of the study. In addition to keeping field notes, I also wrote additional expanded reflective notes in a separate researcher binder that I carried with me throughout the duration of the study. I also kept notes on the overall process and notes about my behavior, emotions, any changes, challenges and schedules in my researcher diary (Glesne, 2011). There were many feelings and emotions displayed on the pages as I was going through a somewhat stressful personal transition during the study as well. Glesne suggests a research diary “becomes a means for thinking about how the research is co-created among [the researcher] and research participants; how actions and interactions shape what follows and where power dynamics lie” (p. 77). Many of these notes and reflections are included in the final chapters of this research as a way to connect my personal story with the larger constructed story and discourses present from the participant interviews.

### Data Analysis Procedures

In qualitative research, data analysis involves organizing those things that have been seen, heard and read in order to process what has been learned, with the ultimate goal of making sense of the research experiences (Glesne, 2011). Stake (2010) describes this process as both analysis and synthesis as researchers take things apart and put things back together. Glesne asserts data analysis done simultaneously with data collection enables one to focus and shape the study as it proceeds. She suggests for one to ... “consistently reflect on data, work to organize them and try to discover what they have to tell you” (p. 188). This effort is done to make the

study more relevant and more profound than just viewing data analysis as a separate step in the research process. This consistent time of observation and reflection helped me to develop analytic files that were valuable as I continued to collect data. I must note it was somewhat hard to maintain a sense of focus throughout this research, but staying consistent in this way and with my personal notes proved to be a saving grace as I reflected on them and worked a little each day. While Anfara et al. (2002) suggest data analysis is eclectic and varied in the way it can be done, I decided to focus primarily on thematic analysis of the one-one-one semi structured interviews as described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

### *Thematic Analysis*

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within collected data. It is done in such a way as to describe that data in robust detail while interpreting it in relation to the research topic. As such, they suggest thematic analysis should be seen as the foundational method for qualitative analysis. While much of the analysis used in qualitative research is thematic in nature, it is often categorized according to an emergence of themes or a discovery process. Thematic analysis therefore places more of an emphasis on the proactive process of the researcher to truly live up to their role as the research instrument in uncovering meanings. Further, another attractive feature of thematic analysis is the ability to use it with any theoretical framework and in different ways within those frameworks.

Therefore, to establish the themes and more specifically the discourses of this research, I proceeded in the following manner: after each participant interview had been completed, I uploaded our dialogue from the Sony digital recorder and transcribed it verbatim. Once this data was transcribed, I read through the interview data for each participant twice and made initial researcher notes/reflections on common words, ideas, phrases, and/or meanings and included this as part of the larger reflective notes on each participant. After this had been completed, I employed the six phases of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and described in the following paragraphs.

#### Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Data

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest immersing oneself in the data by making additional repeated readings of the data. By doing this, I was able to become fully familiar with and connected to the profundity of the data in front of me. Conducting multiple readings also helped me to capture the essence of each participant as described in their profiles in Chapter Four. As I noted, in this phase I listened to and read through each transcript twice as I began to make reflective notes of ideas, key words and quotes made by the participants that I planned to revisit.

#### Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

After my initial familiarization with the data and creation of lists of ideas the next phase in the thematic analysis of the data involved more formally creating preliminary codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert coding is part of the analysis as data is systematized into meaningful

groups from which themes start to develop. These codes encapsulated both the overt and latent meanings described by the participants in the study. This process is detailed more explicitly in Chapter Five.

### Phase 3: Searching for Themes

There was one major goal in this phase. It required that I refocus the analysis by taking the previously developed codes and arranging them as potential discourses. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest visual representations in the form of tables or mind-maps may be helpful for this aspect of the process. These representations aided me in thinking about the relationship between the codes and themes, and potential levels or sub-themes with the appropriate supporting detail. (See Chapter Five, APPENDIX H, and APPENDIX I).

### Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

After completing this task, I began to review the discourses. It was at that point that I felt some themes could be refined even further by reducing or combining categories. As part of this phase, I also re-read the entire dataset to revisit what had been said by the participants.

## Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

After I confirmed the discourses in Phase 4, I defined them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, this consisted of identifying the essence of each discourse and describing the what, why, and how each facet of the data supported the theme. It was at that point I was able to formally name the discourses.

## Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final phase of the thematic analysis of the data is discussed in detail in Chapters Four, Five and Six. I provide concise, interesting, and vivid examples to capture the essence of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### Validity and Verification Strategies

Despite arguments about the lack of rigor or legitimacy of qualitative research, researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2011; Stake 2010) proffer several strategies qualitative researchers can take to ensure credibility or plausibility of such a study. Unlike quantitative research in which validity and reliability are determined by correctly measuring constructs and the overall generalizability of a study, validity measures in qualitative research are often determined by the lens of the researcher (Creswell &

Miller, 2000). Maxwell (1992) asserts qualitative researchers often rely on a wide variety of understandings and corresponding types of validity in the process of describing, interpreting and explaining a phenomenon. Anfara et al. (2002) describe how establishing validity can provide a holistic understanding of the situation by explaining or clearing up any misconceptions. As such, the strategies that were used to establish validity in his study included: (a) triangulation of the data, (b) rich, thick descriptions, (c) respondent validity, (d) external audits, and (e) researcher reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2011; Stake , 2010).

### *Triangulation of the Data*

Creswell and Miller (2000) describe triangulation as systematic process in which researchers organize data to find common themes or categories—a type of confirming evidence that supports their narrative account. The use of multiple data collection methods, sources of data, investigators, and/or theoretical perspectives can help triangulate the data because it is based on multiple forms of data opposed to just one single point or aspect of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2011). Data was triangulated in this study based on respondent validity, thick rich descriptions, researcher reflexivity and external audit. Stake (2010) suggests in addition to collecting data from multiple sources and methods, reviewing the data several times throughout the duration of the study can help to confirm findings. This was something I most certainly did and discuss in greater detail in Chapter Five. Despite this Stake suggests it is important to note that triangulation can just as easily uncover additional themes and meaning, suggesting the need to examine potential differences or even multiple meanings. As such, Stake

outlines four primary ways to approach triangulation of data, including:

- (a) if the description is trivial or beyond question, there is little need to triangulate;
- (b) if the description is relevant but debatable, there is some need to triangulate;
- (c) if the data are evidence for a main assertion, there is much need to triangulate the validity of the statement; and
- (d) if a statement is a person's interpretation, there is little need to triangulate the validity of the statement. (p.124)

Triangulating the data as represented by Table 10 helped to paint a picture about the study participants and ultimately contributed to the trustworthiness that what had been presented was an accurate representation of the views of the study participants (APPENDIX J).

### Respondent Validity

According to Creswell and Miller (2000), when using respondent validity, the validity procedure shifts from the researcher to participants in the study. Stake (2010) suggests that while these checks are a vital process in qualitative research, they often work slowly. Glesne (2011) further suggests by sharing the interview transcripts, analytical thoughts, and/or drafts of the final report with research participants, researchers are able to determine whether they have accurately represented the participants and their ideas. Essentially, this respondent validity ensured what I thought I heard is what I actually heard. As such, I shared the transcripts, participant profiles and final discourses with the women in the study. I provided the participants with a copy of their transcribed interviews and participant profiles three months after our original



meeting. My original plan was to provide them with this information one week after our initial interviews and this honestly may have been my naiveté thinking that I could handle such a large bit of data and writing in such a small span of time. While Stake (2010) suggests the sooner excerpts or information is presented to the participants, the greater the chances of a good member check, I was fortunate that throughout the three month period I was able to remain in touch with three out of five of the study participants on a regular basis as they emailed and / or called or texted me to ask questions about life, share their summer frustrations and thoughts at the beginning of their second year of courses. In some instances I would call or text just to say hello and to let them know I was still working on the research. When the participants finally did receive the documents, I asked them to take one week to review the data and determine whether they believed the overall account was realistic and accurate (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Stake, 2010). I also asked them to comment on potential insensitivity and/or new meaning (Stake). Finally, I also asked the women to provide comments including those about potential corrections or clarifications and assured them these would be incorporated into the final account (Creswell & Miller).

All five women responded to this call and provided me with their feedback. Most commented on the transcripts and their apprehension about others seeing it because of the way they phrased things. For example, they did not like the use of the word “like” or “umm” in their transcript. I assured them that the only people that would see the transcripts would be myself and my dissertation Chair and I would do my best to make sure that all quotes used in the analysis did not show these common verbal filler words. The women also commented on their participant profiles remarking that they were surprised at how I had captured who they were and

helped them re-live their first year (or semester) of college. In one instance, Celeste commented that reading her transcript and profile actually encouraged her. A new semester had just begun and she had faced some difficulty with registering for her classes. Reading the documents made her feel ready for the new school year, ready to accomplish what she had set out to do. She said, “Sometimes we get the right food, right when we need it.” I was happy that she felt this way and that I could represent her in a way that made her feel proud as well as encouraged and she continued with her collegiate journey.

### Thick, Rich Descriptions

Glesne (2011) describes the use of thick, rich descriptions in qualitative research as a way that further allows the reader to enter into the research setting. As an ethnographer, Geertz (1973) originally described thick, rich descriptions in regard to the interpretation process of culture. As such, providing thick, rich descriptions through copious amounts of interrelated details of a site gave the reader an “elaborate venture in [side]” the experience (p.2). Described as verisimilitude by Creswell and Miller (2000), the vivid details garnered from this validation strategy help readers to understand the account as one that is credible. Further, such descriptions also provide an opportunity for readers to make decisions about the applicability of the findings to similar situations or contexts (Walford, 2001). Thick, rich descriptions guide the sharing of the participants’ profiles in Chapter Four and the discussion of discourses in Chapter Five.

## External Audit

In addition to asking the respondents to validate the final write ups and providing thick, rich descriptions of their experiences, I employed the use of an external auditor as another validation strategy. Described by Creswell and Miller (2000) as creating an audit trail, this validation strategy shifts the focus of the study yet again to that of someone external or outside of the research project. In establishing an audit trail, the researchers provide clear documentation of all of the research activities throughout the written investigation or in the appendices (Creswell & Miller). As such, Glesne (2011) describes the external auditor's function as one who examines the overall research process and the final product by "auditing" the researchers' field notes, researcher journal, coding scheme and themes. Dr. Rosa Cintrón, the Chair of my dissertation committee, served as the external auditor for this research. In addition to her traditional role as Chair, she challenged me with questions about the process and final product including whether or not the findings were grounded in the data, whether the connections I made were logical, whether the codes I created encompassed what was revealed in the transcripts, and whether the final decisions in the study were justified. We also discussed at length potential researcher bias, and to what degree the overall validation strategies increased the credibility of the study (Creswell & Miller). As with the respondent validity strategy, Dr. Cintrón's comments—including those about clarifications and additions to the study—were considered and incorporated into the final report and chapters of this study.

## Researcher Reflexivity

Lastly, a typical validation strategy in qualitative research and one which has already been employed throughout this research is researcher reflexivity or clarification of researcher bias. This validity procedure entails self-disclosing any assumptions, beliefs, and biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Simon and Dippo (1986) suggest that as a researcher, I must recognize how the knowledge I produce is actually restricted by my own history and the systems in which I work. Further, Creswell (2007) notes how one writes is a reflection of his/her interpretations based on cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics. As such, reflecting on my subjectivity and how I monitor it throughout the research further contributes to the trustworthiness of the study (Glesne, 2011). While such transparency may not necessarily present this research as free from bias, it does help to clarify my responses and decisions within an appropriate context of the study itself.

As noted in Chapter One, I realize how my past experiences in higher education and current position has impacted and ultimately shaped this research. As a graduate of an HBCU, I was trained to seek and ultimately highlight the experiences and stories of those from historically marginalized communities, remaining cognizant of the potential to transform policy and society through research on (and with) such populations. Hence, I found myself immediately attracted to and consequently impacted by the Student Success course at Valencia College when I started teaching it in the fall of 2011. I would listen to my students and read their personal reflections with sincere interest in their stories, including how their triumphs and struggles played a part in getting them to the point they had come. I also felt blessed to be able to help them navigate their

college experiences, knowing that as a result of the taking the class, they would be more prepared and better equipped to persist. Moreover, my experiences working with students affirmed my ideas about the value and importance of education in my personal life. Yet, at the same time it also made me question all that I had been taught within a higher education system and all that I ever thought about higher education and what it could do for a person and society. Although my personal journey within higher education had not always been easy, it was worth going through in order to not only gain new knowledge and skill levels, but also to facilitate a pathway to my personal destiny—specifically regarding the type of faculty member and eventually administrator I aim to be. However, I also recognize that this is not a reality for everyone. My heartfelt interest in hearing from and sharing the perspectives of my students also fueled this research. I realized their voices were often missing from the literature and this research provided a unique moment to capture life through their lens. Lastly, as a woman who identifies with African-American and other minority communities, my decision to frame my research within a social constructionist framework speaks to my desire to give voice to the understandings and multiple realities of other such women whose stories are often underrepresented and undocumented. It also provides an opportunity to address larger societal and structural implications.

To conclude, the collection of interview data and field notes along with thick, rich descriptions, respondent validity checks, an external audit, and researcher reflexivity throughout the work will make for fuller, more robust research that affirms the validity of this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2011).

### Consideration of Human Subjects

Historically some research studies in the social and medical sciences inflicted physical and/or psychological pain on study participants (Glesne, 2011). As a result, the federal government mandated the establishment of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at American universities and colleges. IRBs are guided by five principles for research with human subjects. Research participants must be given adequate information that allows them to make an informed decision about whether or not they should participate in the study. Further, they must be given the option to withdraw from a study at any time without any penalties; additionally, any avoidable risks that may impact the participant must be eliminated. Also, the benefits to the study participant or society at large must outweigh any potential risks. Finally, any research experiments must be conducted by qualified investigators (Glesne). For the purpose of this study, there are no anticipated risks and no experiments and as a doctoral candidate, versed in the literature and experienced with this population, I am considered a qualified investigator.

As noted previously, all participants in the study were provided with a complete summary of the research including: information about the researcher, the purpose of the study, the criteria for participant selection, and how the data collected (in the form of audio-recorded interviews) would be used and shared. Further, I shared with the participants the time constraints associated with this study and provided an opportunity for them to provide feedback about the accuracy of the research findings and their representation. I informed the student participants about the minimal risk associated with confidentiality in this sort of study. I did, however, also make it clear that I would take measures like using pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant. Further, through the interviewing process, I was able to ask

participants for clarification, explanations, and detailed descriptions as a form of validity check itself (Glesne, 2011). Prior to conducting the actual study, I submitted an application to the IRB of Valencia College and the University of Central Florida. Both were approved with no modifications and can be found in APPENDIX C.

### Originality Report

The department of Child, Family & Community Sciences in the College of Education and Human Performance as well as the College of Graduate Studies at the University of Central Florida require all students to submit their dissertation work to turnitin.com, a plagiarism detection website. The dissertation chair ultimately establishes the boundaries for any acceptable originality score. Dr. Rosa Cintrón determined that an originality score of 10% or less must be achieved before any student can successfully complete a study and move on with other College and University wide deadlines and proceedings. This final chapters of this dissertation received a 2% score on January 30, 2014.

## Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to explain in detail the basic interpretive qualitative research methodology used to shape this study. It focused primarily on the definition of qualitative research and elaborated on the setting and sample population. The chapter also highlighted how data was collected and provided a detailed description of the interview process and protocol. Further, the chapter provided insight into the data analysis procedures, verification strategies, and researcher reflexivity as an important element of qualitative research. It stressed how and why qualitative research must be planned and structured, yet remain open and flexible at the same time in order to elicit responses from participants (Stake, 2010). This chapter provided the foundation for the remaining chapters of this dissertation research. The forthcoming chapters will introduce the readers to the study participants, and discuss the major findings as it relates to discourses of value.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: PROVIDING CONTOUR AND RESONANCE TO PARTICIPANT VOICES**

*Resolution does not mean ending; resolution means solution.*  
-Syd Field (1994, p.12)

### Act III: The Resolution

At the heart of basic qualitative interpretive research is uncovering the voices of the participants (Merriam, 2002). In this study, I heard directly from first-generation, minority community college women who participated in a Student Success course about their higher education experiences and their understandings of those experiences. This chapter provides the contour and resonance to those participant voices. It also serves as the beginning of the resolution of this research. However, as suggested by the opening quote to this chapter, this resolution does not indicate the ending to this research. Instead, it as well as the following three chapters serve as part of a larger solution for understanding; a starting point for a discussion on the value of higher education for students like those in this study.

During the analysis process of this research, I determined it would be beneficial to the organization of the final chapters to rearrange the research questions. I began to think this way as I recounted the participant interviews and the questions as part of the interview protocol. I was asking the women about their higher education experiences, prior to and during their first year or semester. Questions about their specific experience in the Student Success course fell within that discussion of their first set of experiences at the community college. As such, this

chapter addresses the first two research questions (previously, the first and third research questions) of this study:

- *How do first generation minority female students who participated in a Student Success course understand and describe their higher education experiences? and*
- *How did participation in a Student Success course inform the first-generation, minority female students' identity as college students?*

#### Student Success Courses at Valencia College

In order to understand thoroughly the population from which the sample of women from this study were recruited, this section highlights the demographic characteristics of all students who participated in a Student Success course during the fall 2012 – spring 2013 academic year at Valencia College, the same time for which the sample of students made up in this study participated in the course. In general, approximately, two-fifths (approximately 24, 308) of all of Valencia's students – including students who tested into the three-prep courses take a Student Success course at Valencia College (Aspen Institute, 2011; Valencia Community College, 2009). During the 2012-13 academic year there were 5,254 students enrolled in the course on Valencia's East campus. The majority of these students were enrolled full-time (61.6%) in a General Studies degree program (46.2 %). (See Table 6).

Table 6  
*Demographic Characteristics of Students Enrolled in a Student Success Course at Valencia College, East Campus (2012-13)*

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	2988	56.87
Male	2266	43.13
Total	5254	100
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Caucasian	1234	23.7
African American	1428	27.04
Hispanic	1841	34.86
Asian	154	2.92
Indian	17	0.32
Multiple	145	2.75
Not available	427	8.09
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	3965	75.08
25-29	344	6.51
30-39	275	5.21
40-49	133	2.52
50-59	39	0.74
60+	8	0.15
< 18	517	9.79
<b>First-Generation Status</b>		
First-Generation	2101	39.78
Not First-Generation	2018	38.21
Unknown	1162	22

Source: L. Rosen of the Valencia College Institutional Research office (personal communication, July, 18, 2013).

According to data compiled by the Institutional Research office of Valencia College, the following information reflects the demographic profile of a student who took the Student Success course on Valencia's East campus during the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semester. First, of the 5,254 students who took the Student Success course on Valencia's East Campus between the fall 2012 or spring 2013 semester, 2,988 (56.87%) were females, and 2,266 (43.13%) were males. The ethnic make-up of the students enrolled in the course was largely Hispanic (34.86%)

or African American or Black (27.04%). Caucasian or White students made up 23.7% of those who participated in the course. The largest age group of students taking the course was represented by those students who fell into the 18-24 year old category, representing 75.08% of those enrolled in the course. Further, as inferred by their responses on their Federal Pell Grant applications, 39.78% of students were first-generation students. Lastly, the vast majority of students were from Orange (54.46%) or Osceola (15.75 %) counties, the two primary counties Valencia College serves.

With this background in mind, I will proceed to introduce the reader to the women who shared their experiences and thoughts with me.

### Participant Profiles

As noted in Chapter Three, five participants ended up taking part in this study. While the study called for students who were first-generation, minority and female, there was significant diversity even within this small set of demographic characteristics (Table 7). Racially/ethnically, the women described themselves as either African American (or Black), Puerto Rican and one student identified as Dominican and Lebanese. The students were generally considered the traditional college going age, 19 or 20 years of age. One participant was 53-years old. Though legally single, all of the women with the exception of one were in relationships that had lasted five years or more. Only one participant, the 53-year old woman had children, two of which were also enrolled at Valencia College with her at the time of the study. The four other participants had no children. Two of the participants were from Orlando and lived in Orange

County, while the other three participants were from cities across the state of Florida, including West Palm Beach, Jacksonville, and Miami. Two of the participants were employed full-time, with one noting that she would be only a part-time student in the fall 2013 semester. One other student identified as a part time student while all others described themselves as full-time students and employed part time. Three out of five women in the study described their employment as necessary to offset living expenses associated with being a college student. All of the participants in this study described their higher education experiences at Valencia in mostly positive ways, noting that any negative experiences or feelings had more to do with external situations or familial conflicts. Three participants were enrolled in an A.A. degree program and two were enrolled in an A.S. degree program. All of the participants expressed a sincere interest in transferring to a university after completing their associate degree programs in order to pursue a Bachelor's degree. The University of Central Florida was noted as the dominant choice among the women for where they would most likely continue their studies. Further, four out of the five women expressed an interest in pursuing degrees at the Master's level or beyond. Finally, out of the five participants, only one participant, the 53-year old participant chose Valencia College as her first choice for pursuing a higher education. All other women either had ideas about attending other private or state universities or no intentions of going to college at all.

Table 7  
*Demographics of Study Participants*

Participant	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Home-town	Employment	Enrollment Status	Marital Status	Children	Year Participated in SLS
Azariah	20	Dominican/ Lebanese	Orlando, FL West Palm Beach, FL	FT	PT	Single	0	Fall 2012
Lyssa	19	Black	Orlando, FL	FT	FT	Single	0	Fall 2012
Celeste	53	Puerto Rican	Orlando, FL	PT	FT	Single	5	Spring 2013
Janette	19	Black African	Jacksonville, FL	PT	PT	Single	0	Fall 2012
Tracie	19	American	Miami, FL	PT	FT	Single	0	Spring 2013

*Note.* This information was collected directly from participants as part of the pre-interview discussion of their basic demographic information.

Each participant interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. This process took me approximately two months to complete. I naively thought this process would take no longer than a week after I had completed each interview. After each interview I did make a point of listening to each participant's audio and writing out notes about what was said, how the interviews went and my overall researcher reflections. After completing the transcription, I both read and listened to all of the interviews several additional times to make sure that I understood what was being said by the participants as well as for deeper meanings and implications... (This is described in more detail in Chapter Five and Six).

As a minority woman and researcher writing about a setting and population in which I have worked, I was careful to not let my own experiences, impressions and overall position impact the interpretation of the women's understandings and descriptions. Instead, I allowed their words, the language they used to guide the interpretation process and overall descriptions related to their experiences and the value of higher education in their lives. During my dissertation defense it was determined that it was not necessary to reference the location of each quote in the transcripts for this chapter; thus allowing for a more succinct flow for the reader. As such, the forthcoming section provides a profile of each participant based on their interview responses, followed by an account of the interview in which I incorporated reflective notes on the setting of our meeting and personal thoughts of each interview. I offer an overview of the insights provided by the study participants about their higher education experiences. All descriptions and writings were shared with each participant as part of respondent validity

/verification strategies employed in this study and were met with their approval. Finally, note that any and all names of the women in this study are the agreed upon pseudonyms that the women created at the time of our meeting.

*Azariah*

*“...I just feel like I’m in and out...”*

Azariah was a 20-year old Dominican and Lebanese female who was enrolled in the General Studies program at Valencia College. The Student Success course was recommended to her by a college advisor and she enrolled in the course upon first entering Valencia in the fall 2012 semester. When we met, she wore a delicate gold band with diamonds on her left ring finger. When asked about it, she noted she had been with her boyfriend for almost five years – all throughout high school and now college. Though they weren’t officially married, she felt connected to him because he helped her out of some of her darker moments and was a major part of her life. She looked forward to planning a wedding with him in the coming years. She had no children, but had two siblings who lived with her mother in the Dominican Republic. She also had a younger cousin with whom she lived at her aunt and uncle’s home in central Florida. She had not lived with her parents – a Dominican mother and Lebanese father since she was five years old and commented several times throughout the interview how her love for them and their love for her fueled her to do well and continue with her education. She specifically wanted her father to see that she was going. Though she noted her life had been comfortable living with her aunt and uncle, they along with other family members did not quite understand her decision to attend a community college instead of a traditional four-year university. They felt she would



‘waste herself’ because after all, if she had the ‘intelligence and capacity to attend a university’, why wouldn’t she? While Azariah understood their opinions and believed their trepidation were out of love and genuine concern, she also felt she had to make the right decision for her life. She remembered feeling unprepared to deal with something as ‘huge’ as life as a university student. She craved the promise of making connections with her professors and felt like she could not get that at a university. She said, “I couldn’t be an anonymous in an auditorium with like 300 students. I wanted a way more condensed environment.”

Though Valencia was not officially her first choice, she felt that the convenience, ease of application process combined with the cost of attending would still allow her to end up at the University of Central Florida. In addition to filling her evenings with college classes during her first year as a student, she tried to spend a lot of her time away from home at work. Though the recognition and challenge that she craved proved to be there, she consistently thought about her desire to be a ‘100%’ student. When we met, she was employed full time (40 hours a week) in retail for a business at the Orlando airport. Finally, although not taking any courses at the time of our interview, she referred to herself as a part-time student since during the academic year, she took two to three courses (six to nine credits) per semester.

As a stunningly attractive young woman, Azariah arrived at the Waterford Lakes Boston Coffee, dressed in semi-casual professional work attire. Her dark blue slacks, crisp white dress shirt and kitten heels made her appear mature and confident. A gold watch, diamond studs, and gold bracelet brought out a sense of classy sophistication. Though her face was young and delicate, her mannerisms and eyes reflected a deep wisdom. Her waist-length dark hair was held

back by sunglasses which served as a headband. Her work name badge was still hanging around her neck, but she took it off and folded it into her black leather purse. She greeted me with a huge smile and thanked me for the opportunity to meet with her and apologized for getting to our meeting late. I smiled back, acknowledging that it was I that felt truly grateful for the opportunity to hear about her experiences as part of the study and that she was right on time. It was exactly 6:00 in the evening as I glanced down at the clock on my cell phone. After being seated by a curly haired waitress a moment later, we got up and moved twice in order to get into a more comfortable spot in the little coffee shop. We decided to order – water for me and a ‘small’ Pepsi for her. She laughed as she said this because she followed it up by ordering Caesar salad and said, “I can be a little bad today...but not that much.” Besides a man with head phones on plugged into a lap top sitting two tables directly behind us, we were alone in the shop. The lights were slightly dim and our new (larger) table was perfect for my field-notes observation sheet, several pens and pencils, folder and interview protocol. Reflecting on this, I must admit that this may have seemed a bit “intense” for Azariah, the staff or our lone coffee shop comrade. None “questioned” this and I thankfully for me, this did not prevent Azariah from sharing her experiences. The mix of R&B and Pop music that played from the sound system overhead along with a low hum of coffee machines provided the rhythmic background for our conversation.

During the interview Azariah sipped her Pepsi and took bites of her salad. Overall, she seemed eager to share her experiences and asked twice if she could really express her truth. At one point in the beginning of the interview she said, “Umm is this where I can be completely honest?” I said, “Yes, definitely,” and encouraged her to be as open as she felt comfortable with in order to share her unique experiences and reality as a college student. We addressed questions

as part of the interview protocol as well as others that came up throughout the interview discussion. The additional questions were either clarifying questions or questions to address an aspect of Azariah's responses. One such example of this is when I asked her how she felt when she applied to college. Despite feeling numb and annoyed with the application process, she shared she also felt,

...really good because it was like refreshing and there was no longer a routine. I was going to school at night which I found really cool. I almost felt like I was living the college experience, but that kind of faded out a little bit when my job got so demanding. I felt like I wasn't involved as I should have been in school, but I just loved going to class and learning. I just loved that change...

After which, I asked her "You liked change from what?" She went on to describe the change from high school and not having many responsibilities, to being a working, college student with a busy schedule. There were at least two pauses in the interview when a customer walked in and ordered a coffee drink that required the use of a more sophisticated coffee machine or blender that proved to be so loud that it filled the entire coffee shop. At those moments, we both sort of looked at each other with an agreed upon knowing to pause for a second and then continued with the question or answer. Besides this, the interview went on for one hour and 45 minutes uninterrupted. Reflecting on the interview, I can say Azariah was polite and smiled often, even when I blanked out for a moment and inadvertently asked her the same question twice. She chuckled and assured me that it was okay. Though she spent the dominant portion of the interview looking at me, there were moments where she looked off into the

distance, as if to more fully remember or draw upon her past in order to answer clearly. When she spoke about her father in particular, she looked down as if holding on tightly to memories of their time together. At one point near the end of our interview when discussing her job, a song by Marc Anthony, “My Baby You” came on over the sound system and Azariah paused. She squealed and pointed up, “Oh my God, my Dad dedicated this song to me... It makes me cry every time, but I’ll try not to cry.” I asked her if she was okay and if she wanted to continue. After another pause, she picked up where she left off. We went on for about another ten minutes and then concluded the interview. For my first student interview, I feel the flow of the interview went well and I gained quite a bit of insight into Azariah’s experiences and life as a very busy community college student. At the end of our interview, she even asked me about my experiences as a college student specifically related to taking a math course as an undergraduate. It was nice to be able to share with her that I had gone through a very similar situation as she had and I think it somewhat assured her that things would be okay as she continued with her studies.

The following section provides a detailed description of Azariah’s understandings and descriptions of her higher education experiences. It also addresses how her specific experience in the Student Success course informed her identity as a college student; thus answering the first two research questions in this study. These descriptions were guided by the responses as garnered through the interview protocol that address areas in Azariah’s life prior to coming to college, during her first year and her future plans and overall reflections.

As previously mentioned, during my interview with Azariah, she revealed she had not lived with her parents since she was five years old. Instead, she grew up with an aunt and uncle

in New Jersey and then, along with her family relocated to Orlando the summer prior to her eighth grade year. She finished middle school and then entered an Orlando high school. It was there that she met her current boyfriend and it was through their relationship that she got to meet his older sister, a then Valencia Community College student. Prior to that contact, she shared she had never remembered thinking too seriously about college. However it was also around that time that she was exposed to a Valencia's ATLAS portal, a web-site designed to help students with a multitude of needs from picking classes, to creating portfolios to communicating with professors and classmates. She remembered also seeing the ATLAS accounts of people like her best friend who was a year ahead of her and other friends from church and thinking "OMG [sic]... I'm not ever going to be able to do that." College seemed a scary place, but she said it was "a stone I had to jump on no matter how scary or bad it was, I had to step there."

Still it would not be until her senior year of high school that the reality of going to college truly set in. She had been going through an emotionally challenging time and remembered applying late, thinking "Here goes nothing." Her father, who came from a third world country himself (living in the Dominican Republic) and had been involved in several illegal activities that led to his imprisonment, instilled in her a desire to 'be someone in life.' Higher education seemed to be a way to do just that. Azariah made the connection that higher education seemed to be the way to do just that. She shared, "I think what made me decide to get a higher education was the vision of being someone because that was something my father always engraved in me..." Additionally, Azariah shared her thoughts that getting a higher education would allow her to have a better quality of life. For her, it was the next step, explaining,

... To be honest, I feel like it was just the next step. I don't know if it is something that I really pursued. I just felt like high school was done, now the next chapter is college. Like I never felt like it was never 'do I wanna go?' I felt like it was just the next thing. You know like when you're done eating, you wash your hands. I felt like that was the transition. Like it was that easy. Like it was never 'think about it'...

Upon entering Valencia in the fall 2012 semester, she initially felt good about her transition, but did not feel like she was completely engaged as a college student. She said,

...I feel like if my mind was more clear and I had more time on my hands and not so many necessities to... I wish I could just be a 100% college student. I feel that would be huge and different. There are times when I feel like because of my responsibilities outside of school, I am not involved as I want to be...not even as I need to be.

These responsibilities largely surrounded her job and conflicted with her desire to spend more time on school related activities because she felt like work was a place where she could not let people down. She clarified,

...like with school, no one looks at my grades at home, so I have my own pressure, but at work all eyes are on me as manager, so I felt like I couldn't let people down. I felt like in school umm if I let down a couple things no one would know.

This also prevented Azariah from being part of campus organizations, further exacerbating her and feeling disconnected from the campus. She went on to say, "...**I just feel like I'm in and out.** I don't care to see people. I don't care for nothing, I just want to get my

work... Learn and read and go.” While she felt this contradicted her religious beliefs as a Christian, she felt being by herself would allow her to focus on her work and not get into any trouble. She said, “It is so weird, but I feel like if I am alone, I will be okay.”

Besides challenges in her math course during her first semester, her first year experiences as a college student were reportedly not that bad as she started to take her pre-requisite courses. When asked whether there was anything that could have made her experience better or different, she referenced the fact that nothing at the moment could make those experiences better since her first year courses were so general. She said, “It’s almost like...I don’t want to say boring, because I am blessed to be in school, but I can’t wait to be in classes... and I am just like this is awesome.” Despite this, she felt that in order to reach her future career goals, to please her culture, father and family, it was important for her to go to college. She said, “I want to show myself that I am capable. I need to start doing things for me. I also want to show them that completing is possible... you know like finishing what you start...”

The Student Success course she took in her first semester in fall 2012 provided an opportunity for her to think differently about being organized. Also, despite wanting to be alone, she felt like there was a lot of conversation in the course and group work (which she admitted she was not too excited about) that “definitely helped me to learn so much more about other students.” She continued that “When the whole class shared, there were a lot of things that I could relate to and made me like appreciate the course.” Additionally, the Student Success course helped her as a new student to shape herself at the beginning of her collegiate journey. She noted how the written assignments in which she was able to express herself felt like

someone was listening to her voice. When asked how important it was for new students to have their voices heard, Azariah said,

Super important. I think that's one thing that people want to hide so much like... I think deep down we all kind of want to be outspoken, but we become maybe intimidated maybe by others opinions and how maybe we may be thrown to the back because our opinions differ from theirs, but when there's that non-judgmental ear just listening you know, I find that very important and valuing whatever you say or think and that's what I felt.

Azariah continued to use the skills she learned in her first semester in the Student Success course well into her second semester. She reported, "...I think the fact that I applied it and tested it and saw like I wouldn't stop using something that works and I think I am going to be in school for quite some time..."

That realization along with a friendship that she made with a fellow employee from her job at the airport made her think differently about herself as a student and her own study habits. She said of her friend, "Me seeing her, I'm like that's an ideal college student." She went on to describe her friend, a 19-year old university student as extremely dedicated to her studies and sincere when it came to setting priorities. It was through viewing her friend and the rigor of her studies that had Azariah somewhat disappointed with her life at Valencia. She said, "I feel like wow, what am I getting out of this class?"

When asked about her own sincerity as a student and whether or not she felt Valencia was challenging her and if the two concepts were related, she responded rather prolifically



stating that while everyone is different and makes choices, she "...just felt like I shouldn't be that young person that chooses work over school. I should definitely go with school first. In like my perfect mind, school is priority, school is first, but sometimes my actions say the opposite."

It was ultimately these experiences and revelations that impacted her ideas about college and its purpose in her life. Near the conclusion of our interview, Azariah commented,

...I feel like I see what a student should really be like now and um I'm not even sure right now if there is any such thing as a hard worker in the workforce and a super good student at the same time. The mind is to direct its focus on one thing at a time and like you will choose one over the other...

Azariah had a lot going on in her young world. She had many choices to make which resulted in her feeling like she was 'in and out' of college at the same time. This profile provided some examples supporting her mixed roles. Finally and ironically enough, the last quote from Azariah presented in this section resonated loudly with me as a student / researcher as I collected data, simultaneously analyzed that data, arranged additional interviews, worked in a professional setting and handled personal life-altering responsibilities and changes. I would read this quote from Azariah several times as I too tried to direct my mind's focus.

*Lyssa*

*“...I feel like it was put on my shoulders that I had to go to college.”*

Lyssa was a 19-year old Black female from West Palm Beach, Florida. Though she had her hopes set on the sights and sounds of life at an HBCU - Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, she enrolled at Valencia in the fall 2012 semester as a General Studies major. She had intentions of becoming a school counselor or child psychologist. A friend had encouraged her to consider Valencia since it was economically feasible and far enough to be on her own, but within the state should she ever need to get home. After visiting the campus and seeing Orlando for herself, she shared she really liked the city and the pace of it compared to her life back home in West Palm Beach. Lyssa grew up with both of her parents until the age of five, when her parents separated. Her mother raised her and her siblings with the help of her grandmother where her family ended up living during the latter half of her teen years. Her living situation is what eventually prompted her to seek out better opportunities by going to college. While she was a first-generation college student, she was not the first in her family to attend college. Her older brother (22) had started, stopped and began his college career again at another Florida community college. Her younger sister (17) was preparing to enter her last year in high school and was thinking about becoming a correctional officer, a position for which Lyssa wanted her to heavily reconsider in lieu of attending some form of higher education. Lyssa was not married, but had been in a serious relationship with her boyfriend, a marketing consultant for the past five years. She had no children or dependents.

Though Lyssa was disappointed she had tested into two developmental courses at the beginning of her collegiate career, she felt like taking them would help her get established as a new college student. Further, at the recommendation of a college advisor, Lyssa enrolled in the Student Success course during her first semester at Valencia College. She felt taking the Student Success course would help her to marry the ideas and experiences she was working on in her first set of courses, while also putting her on track to reach her other academic and personal goals. She revealed to me that her summer was less hectic than her first two semesters of college despite working two jobs. At the time of our interview, she worked at SeaWorld 20 to 30 hours a week and at a daycare another 20 to 30 hours a week. She had plans to leave her job at Sea World, however continue employment at the day care, a job that motivated her as it related to her eventual goal to work with children. Also, at the time of our interview, she was not taking any summer courses, but considered herself a full-time student since she carried a full course load during the academic year – taking four to five courses (12 to 15 credits). During the interview she shared she decided not to take summer courses because she wanted a break and chance to recoup after a busy social and academic second semester of college. She had joined a college fashion/modeling club which was based on the University of Central Florida’s campus and did not fare as well in her courses as she would have liked to because of it. She added,

That was the biggest mistake. The practices were 10 at night to 4 in the morning and I had a 7 o’clock class in the morning. When I would wake up, if I would wake up, I would be very drowsy in class and I was like ready to go. I fell behind in my work, everything. Like all my grades were like Cs in the spring and I’m like I was happy to make that because I didn’t think I would make it.

It would be this sense of openness and candid discussion that would remain throughout my entire interview with Lyssa.

When Lyssa and I met late in the afternoon on a Friday at a Starbucks coffee shop near Valencia's East campus, she greeted me with an infectious smile. She wore large diamond studded style earrings, a pearl necklace, a big gold watch on her left hand, and a stack of pearl bracelets on her right wrist. Her light pink tank top, fringe cut jeans and leopard print bag exuded summer chic. Her high, loose ponytail framed her stunning cheekbones – she could most certainly be on the cover of a magazine and her almond shaped eyes were bright. When she spoke she was giddy, funny even and emanated an outgoing joyful, yet reflective aura. Several times throughout our interview she chuckled or laughed as she recounted an experience and I laughed right along with her.

I had arrived to our meeting location a few minutes early to try to secure a seat in a quiet corner, but ended up at a table right near the cashier since all the others were taken. Those other tables were filled with what appeared to be college students studying, listening to music, checking their social media sites or a combination of all three. Directly behind us sat a man in scrubs reading a newspaper. He appeared to be relaxing after a long day with patients or students and seemed oblivious to the coffeehouse buzz going on around us. Though the shop was a little busier than I would have liked, it did not interfere with our interview. Instead, I think it added to the character and overall ebb and flow of our interview. We chatted on for an hour and thirty minutes with the bustle of customers making orders, small talk and cool jazz serving as our soundtrack for the afternoon. At one point, almost as if it was timed, a perfect trumpet

solo blared above as Lyssa made her point about not wanting to be stereotyped as a Black woman and her educational desires. She said rather astutely, “I do not like to be stereotyped because I’m not like the ordinary. I wouldn’t say ordinary, but I’m not what society thinks a black woman is....”

During our interview, Lyssa was also perhaps the most reflective in her responses, thoughtfully pausing before answering a question I posed. At times it was for but a moment and other times it was for 30 seconds or more. I appreciated this because I felt as if she was really contemplating the meaning of the questions and consciously evaluating her collegiate experiences. One such example of this is when I asked her how important it was for her as a first-generation student to go to college. Her answer contained notions of supporting her family and being an inspiration to her sister, so that she too might experience what Lyssa referred to as the benefits of college. Overall, the interview felt comfortable, natural and reinforced why I decided to do this study.

The following section provides a detailed description of Lyssa’s understandings and descriptions of her higher education experiences. It also addresses how her specific experience in the Student Success course informed her identity as a college student; thus answering the first two research questions in this study. These descriptions were guided by the responses as garnered through the interview protocol that address areas in Lyssa’s life prior to coming to college, during her first year and her future plans and overall reflections.

From the onset of our interview, Lyssa expressed what may be viewed as a paradoxical or perplexing relationship between going to college and success by some in our society and as

discussed in the literature in Chapter Two of this study. She noted that while going to college generally represented access to a path of success for those in her generation, it was not a necessity or guarantor of or for that success. In her own life, she felt like pursuing a higher education was a “strict guideline” that would provide the personal instruction that she needed to help her reach her career goals. Further, going to college had significant meaning in her life because as she articulated,

... Like where I'm from, a lot of people don't make it to college. And to me I feel like it's a way to get out of that situation...the lifestyle that we're in in West Palm Beach. I want to say it's a lot of poverty but it's a lot of like you know, teens... pregnant teens. It's really, you know... it's really up in West Palm Beach. Going to college to me was just like an escape to be on my own and experience something new and actually reach my goals because if I stayed home I don't feel like I would have met that.

This sentiment would continue throughout our interview and was almost always connected to financial stability. Lyssa made reference several times to not wanting to live pay check to pay check, not wanting to settle and instead wanting to live a comfortable life and one free from financial concerns. Even when she discussed a friend of hers who enjoyed learning and I asked her about what she thought of that compared to her, she couldn't quite express why she felt the way she did. She did state,

I don't know why it's foreign to me...maybe because like where I'm from I'm just here to get it...to make my life easier. So I don't have to think about money any more or you

know...just happiness.... Maybe it's not like that for everyone, but it's like that for me. I'm just ready to be done with school.

Though going to college was not something she felt academically prepared for, she spent much of her youth fantasizing about social life as a college student on a celebrated dance team. It was through her involvement as a member of her middle school band that she first became exposed to the idea of college. As she watched the college dance teams at various parades and football events, she became excited about going to college. She laughed as she remembered, "I wanted to go to Bethune Cookman to be a 14k Dancer. I didn't really know anything about the college itself, I just knew I wanted to go to college to dance." It wouldn't be until her junior year of high school that going to college became more of a reality. Her math teacher sent her class to the library where he displayed on the overhead projector a list of HBCUs. He also had the class create an account on a college-search website that provided information about various colleges. It was then that Lyssa settled on attending Clark Atlanta University, but because of a lack of preparation and financial aid, she decided to begin her collegiate career at Valencia. When asked about how she felt and the support she received, Lyssa remembered feeling generally supported by her family. Yet, there was a sense of apprehension in her voice as she described this. She noted, "Like... I would say everyone pushed me...well, not pushed me, but **I feel like it was put on my shoulders that I had to go to college.** So I was just like okay, I'm ready."

When asked how those expectations made her feel, she said she felt good, yet pressured because while many believed she should go to college, she did not feel like she had help getting there. She remembered thinking, "I'm really gonna be by myself, like independent in this." Despite this, she was determined to succeed and looked forward to her first year of college where

she could have a fresh start and time to focus and as she said, “I’m like okay, my head is in the books, I’m ready to go...ready to start this.”

The Student Success course she took her first semester helped her with her class work, by helping her learn how to take notes and prepare for her classes. She also found herself sharing information she learned with her mother and older cousin. She felt as a new college student, the course gave her help with the dos and don’ts of college and gave her guidelines for how to spend her time and money – both of which were areas she struggled with. One of her ending comments about the class stuck with me after the interview as she revealed, “I came into college wanting to be a successful student, but after taking the course, I was like okay, it’s not just about saying it, it’s doing it.” This new way of looking at things was more about modifying her behavior and performing specific actions to get the results she wanted.

Finally, though Lyssa and I had come from different backgrounds and taken different paths to start our college careers, I felt perhaps most connected to her. She originally desired to go to Clark Atlanta University, the university which I mentioned in my reflexive statement in the introductory chapter as the university where my mother worked and where I was first exposed to the idea of going college and even the notion of one day pursuing doctoral studies. Further, Lyssa’s desire to be a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, a sorority founded 100 years ago on the principles of public service was the same sorority I pledged as an undergraduate. Although Lyssa had a somewhat rough start to her collegiate experience at Valencia, she felt equipped to do better in her future semesters. When I asked her about how she had been changed so far and how she hoped her college experiences would continue to



change her, her answer was filled with hope for becoming a better person and more aware of the world around her.

*Celeste*

*“...Now it doesn't matter what happens since I got that first taste...”*

Celeste was a 53-year old Puerto Rican female who was enrolled in the General Studies program at Valencia with the intention to transfer into the Construction Management program at Valencia College. The Student Success course was required for her because she had tested into three developmental courses - reading, math, and writing. She originally enrolled in the Student Success course during her first semester in college, in fall 2012, but had to withdraw from the course because of a family conflict. She re-registered for the course in the spring 2013 semester and completed it. Though she did not originally want to take the course, she praised the course for helping her uncover key information about herself as a new college student. As the oldest participant in the study, Celeste, a mother of five and grandmother of 17, was also perhaps the most adamant about emphasizing how attending college was something that would complete her as a person.

Though all of her children were out of the house, she shared a home with her fiancé and regularly took care of her elderly parents. She referred to them as a true inspiration for her determination to finally pursue her degree. She noted how her father in particular, who had never gone to school and worked his whole life in the construction business, taught himself to read and write in English and Spanish. He also emphasized hard work and earning a place in the world. She said, “...it was hard for him because he had to do it after working wherever he was at a young age, due to the fact that his mom died. So I guess that made him make sure that we would look forward to a better future.”

In fact, her earliest memory or thought about college was from him and the encouragement he provided. She said, he would say, ‘When you grow up high school isn’t the last place. You have to go to college ... Make sure you get good grades because without good grades you can’t go to college.’ So from as early as third grade, she had ideas about going to college. She said, “I couldn’t wait to get into high school so that I could graduate and start college.” Though it would be decades before she would actually get to go, she thought about it often over the years, even taking online courses and reading stories to her children as she worked and encouraged them to go to college themselves.

At the time of our interview, two of her daughters were also enrolled at Valencia with her and she was working on encouraging her youngest daughter to join them. She worked part time for a union and considered herself a full-time student. Also, she was taking two flex-start (10-week minimized semester) summer courses, but during the academic year took four to five courses (12 to 15 credits) each semester.

Beyond Celeste’s enthusiasm and cheerful, open disposition, the most noticeable trait about her was her beautiful skin. In fact, her makeup-less, hazelnut colored skin was so perfect that I would describe it as radiant. Her bright wavy red hair, pulled back into a tight ponytail matched her vibrant personality. Celeste’s teal pants, black loose t-shirt and black sneakers suggested she was a woman on the move. In fact, when she arrived to Valencia College’s East campus on a Friday afternoon for our 3pm interview, she came running up to the door.

I had arrived to our interview about 20 minutes early because I needed to return a book to the library. It was only at that point that I realized the entire campus was closed! Doors were

locked and the campus looked like a ghost town. Except for a maintenance worker driving by on a golf cart, no one was around. I called my husband (also a Valencia College professor at the time) who reminded me that the campus closed at 12pm on Fridays during the summer semester. I felt embarrassed for not knowing this, but went to Building 6 where I had agreed to meet Celeste to wait for her. I planned to apologize to her and re-schedule our interview. Just as I sat on the bench outside of Building 6 Celeste came running up to the door from the student parking lot. She looked just as confused as I when she pulled at the door handle and it did not open. I called out to her as I walked over. I let her know how sorry I was that obviously the campus was closed, but we could meet at some other time and location that would be more comfortable. She suggested since it was quiet, we could just do the interview outside on the same bench where I had been sitting. After we were settled, I organized my papers and formally thanked her and provided her with an overview of the interview process.

During the interview, Celeste looked on attentively and laughed often as she relived her journey to and experiences in college. It was a light-hearted, interesting, and refreshing to hear from someone who lived what she described as life filled with children, family, business plans and lots of future goals. I was amazed at how forthcoming she was when she shared the story of how she originally wanted to go to college when she was 18. She reminisced, telling me that,

... I wanted to go because every time he [ex-husband] had...they had outings or parties or whatever I went along with him and I was like I can't wait to have my own group that I can be with and learn and what have you. He went for accounting and so yeah, it was just a lot. Then after we got married and got back from our honeymoon, my husband

encouraged me to further my education. That time I was finally able to enroll in classes and I couldn't wait to start. I was on birth control at the time because pregnancy wasn't an option and we had goals we wanted to meet. But, as it got closer to classes starting I got ill, like violently vomiting, passing out and feeling lifeless. I was taken to the emergency room and was finally seen by a doctor who said 'Congratulations you're having a baby.' My husband was elated with the news and I honestly didn't know how to feel about it. I guess you can say my child bearing days had begun. My husband didn't want me working until our daughter was able to speak, so I agreed and then as I was finally preparing to return to work, I was pregnant again!

Wow was my response when she shared this. She went on to reveal that she had two more children over the next three years and even though she would go through a phase of feeling depressed, she never let go of the idea of going to college. However, her new family and work demands prevented her from pursuing higher education.

It was a perfect feeling with us alone on campus, especially as Celeste shared these intimate details of her life. I felt like I had been made privy to such a wonderful story of determination and I was humbled and grateful to hear from her. Our interview lasted one hour and fifteen minutes. This shorter time may have had to do with the awkward feeling of sitting outside and not wanting to further inconvenience Celeste, possibly resulting in unconsciously rushing the interview. Despite gaining such awesome insight into Celeste's life and experiences, in my reflective notes of our time together, I wrote 'felt robotic, almost rushed.' Also, at two different points in the interview the wind picked up and blew so hard it caused Celeste's eye to

water. I asked her if she wanted to switch sides since she was facing the wind, but she assured me she was fine. Despite this inconvenience, I felt the interview with Celeste progressed well and provided a different view into college as a first-generation, older adult.

The following section provides a detailed description of Celeste's understandings and descriptions of her higher education experiences. It also addresses how her specific experience in the Student Success course informed her identity as a college student; thus answering the first two research questions in this study. These descriptions were guided by the responses as garnered through the interview protocol that address areas in Celeste's life prior to coming to college, during her first year and her future plans and overall reflections.

As described above, Celeste's desire to go to college had been ingrained in her mind since she was a young girl. However, work, marriage and eventually raising children delayed her from accomplishing this life-long goal. It would not be until one of her daughters, started college in 2011 that going to college became more of a reality for her. While her daughter was registering for classes, she asked Celeste to join her. Celeste said she thinks her daughter had a plan in mind when she asked, "Ma why don't you come with me? I have to register for a class." She did in fact go with her to Valencia's East campus and then ended up in the campus bookstore. She remembered feeling like, "...It was just calling me. It was just calling me to come..." Although her decision at that point to enroll would be thwarted for a year due to health challenges- issues with fibromyalgia and a Vitamin D deficiency, she said, "I didn't make it 'til 2012 and **now it doesn't matter what happens since I got that first taste** of coming and I do enjoy myself here..." She literally got just a taste of school, when her determination was

challenged yet again. During her first official semester, another one of her daughters got into a car accident and broke her collarbone. Because her daughter was a new mother, Celeste stepped in to help and ended up having to withdraw from two courses. While this devastated her, she felt triumphant in that she was able to do well in the one class she stayed in – a math class.

Finally, by spring 2013, Celeste was back on track, ready to make progress in accomplishing her life-long goal; she still felt the transition into college for the first time as an older adult was scary. In fact, she described going to school as feeling like a kid again stating,

...You know when you go to first grade, second grade, you're promoted, but you kind of like you're afraid of going to class, you don't know what's going to happen. Well, I felt a little like that and I just wanted to be able to know that... I was a little unsure as to how I would learn... Like would I actually grasp... time had passed to the point where I'm not going to grasp...so that was my biggest fear.

Despite this, her children, new fiancé and parents supported her which made things easier. Her brother would assist in helping her with her parents and she would schedule classes around her mother's doctor appointments. Though there were moments when her children called on her and she had to let them know she was busy, she felt they, along with the rest of her family transitioned well as she got into the groove of being a college student.

Valencia proved to be a natural fit. When asked if she ever had considered any other institutions, she said she had not. She did visit the campus with her daughter and also had the opportunity to compare prices to online institutions for courses Valencia was not offering. She felt Valencia's prices were much better and decided she would just wait until the courses were

offered at Valencia. She also felt that since she was considering transferring to the University of Central Florida, she could compare their course requirements and take them at Valencia instead, adding, “I am going to take them over here so that when I go over there I won’t have to pay half as much.”

Beyond the familial issue she faced during her first semester of college, the main challenges she faced were primarily related to test-taking. However, it was in the Student Success course that she was able to focus more specifically on learning strategies to help her not only read material for her courses, but retain the information. Celeste expressed that, “The SLS class for me taught me a lot. It forced me to look at my career, my education plan, and just in general... it opened up a little more avenues for me.” One of the most meaningful aspects of the course for her was the various journal entries and papers she had to write. She said,

I actually liked it because I had to sit down, focus... I mean at first I was like oh my God the journals; I don’t have time for this journal. Literally, this is me talking to myself, but when I sat down I actually enjoyed doing the journals because I liked writing short stories so it just put me right back to where I once was. So writing the journals made me think a lot of things, uh my grammar, how I wrote, I mean I still needed help, but it helped me in the right direction, it was a step forward.

This step forward also helped her to think and reflect on what was most important to her – her family and completing her college education. Further, she felt the critical thinking skills she gained from being in the course went beyond the class itself and was something she could use at work and at home. Like the participant Lyssa in this study, Celeste found herself sharing



what she had learned with others. Specifically, she shared study tips she learned in the course with her young grandson and felt good when he found the information helpful.

For Celeste, her very first semester as a college student was not without challenge. Starting college then having to withdraw from classes and then starting again was not convenient or what she would have planned, but as the opening quote to her section suggests, once she got a taste of college it did not seem to matter what happened because her goal was to finish. It was ultimately her life experiences, coupled with her experiences from her first year of college that helped calm her fears, placing her on a path toward becoming her whole self. When asked if being in college had changed her she explained that it had given her more confidence – more confidence as a speaker and helped her to feel more intellectual and enjoy being able to retain what she learned.

As I reflect on my interview with Celeste, I think that while accomplishing this goal is of paramount importance to her, it was and will probably always be with the idea of family in mind. This is represented by her going to school with her two daughters, making plans for recruiting her youngest daughter to join them, sharing learning strategies with her grandson and her goals to create a family-based business. While her accomplishment will indeed be her own, it is also a larger familial achievement that has been part of her plans since childhood. Though her road to Valencia included many sacrifices, my feeling is that this vibrant, determined woman who has lived a full life will finally be able to reach her goal of graduating from college because she is willing to put in the hard work.

*Janette*

*“...I wanted to go out and venture and find my own way or find myself... if that was possible.”*

Janette was a 19-year old Black female from Jacksonville, Florida. She was enrolled in the Associate of Science (A.S.) program for Nursing. The Student Success course was required for her since she tested into three developmental courses- reading, writing and math. She enrolled in the course during her first semester of college in fall 2012. During our interview, Janette described her life as a college student in a deep breath, “It’s real.” The realness is a reference to her growing up and taking on real life responsibilities in the face of difficulties. These difficulties included making adjustments and in some instances, the struggle she faced in order to do something that no one else in her family had achieved. Still, that struggle seemed better than what she had witnessed growing up and helped to put her on a path to get to where she wanted to go. Early in our interview, Janette described having a moment before coming to college where she sat down to reflect – feeling like she had to do something to change her life. She said, “...I’ve seen other family members or cousins not go to college and struggle their whole life... I don’t want to do that.”

Janette grew up with both her working class parents and one older sibling with a history of trouble with the law. She was single and did not have any dependents. Though Janette saw college as the ‘next step in growing up,’ the idea of going to college did not really become part of her life plans until her 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade year of high school. A teacher challenged her entire class to attend college. Janette remembered that even though she was just trying to have fun her senior year, it would be that same teacher that made sure her college letters went out. It would

then be her parents, especially her mother that provided support when she was turned down by several of those colleges. Although those colleges ranging from Spelman in Atlanta, to UCF, Florida State, Florida International University and University of Miami in Florida, were at the top of her list, Valencia seemed to be the next best fit. Janette's cousin, a former Valencia student provided her with insight on attending and described the benefits associated with being able to transfer to the University of Central Florida upon completion. That ability to transfer coupled with the low cost, location and access she had to another close relative made Valencia a good place to start her college career and get as she described, established. At the time of our interview, Janette was not taking any summer semester courses, but considered herself a part-time student based on the three courses (9 credits) taken during the fall and spring semesters. She was also employed part-time at Macy's as a sales associate where she worked 20 hours a week.

I was greeted rather warmly by Janette's bright smile on a Monday afternoon. I walked into Building 6 of Valencia's East campus where we agreed to meet 15 minutes early to sit, reflect and prepare for my interview with her. To my surprise, Janette was already waiting for me. After we exchanged pleasantries, we decided to walk to Building 3 of the campus to sit in the quiet lounge space. During our walk we talked about the study itself and Janette asked me about the progress of my other interviews. She asked me if I was doing well and I was somewhat taken aback; I was accustomed to checking in on my students and others and asking them how they were doing and to have a student express interest in my wellbeing was a surprise. Our brisk walk to Building 3 was over before I knew it, but in those two minutes, it reminded me to take some time to just talk, to be 'normal' and to enjoy the sunshine.

Once we were settled in a little corner of the lounge, I noticed Janette was dressed for work – in black slacks, black low ballet-slipper style shoes, a loosely flowing cream shirt and a black button up sweater with her Macy’s nametag attached. Her wavy hair was brushed off to the side, held in place by a hair clip. She had a gold watch on her left wrist and like several of the other participants, she wore diamond studded earrings in her ears. Her nails were neatly manicured with bright-colored designs. She had on little makeup - eyeliner and a little lip gloss at most. As we chatted, the little diamond stud in her nose twinkled in the light of the sun that beamed in through the lounge window.

During our interview, Janette was quite soft spoken and often looked off or away, appearing somewhat shy. Despite this, there was a confidence about her as she shared her experiences from her first year of college and talked about what being in college meant for her life. The interview was very mellow and straight forward. As such, it was also somewhat shorter than the other interviews, lasting only one hour long. I noticed during the interview that Janette really lit up as she discussed her future career plans. Like the other participant interviews, Janette and I also chatted after the interview as she asked questions about when the study would be complete, my own future goals and she shared her plans for the upcoming semesters. She came across as genuinely interested in how this research would help others and the implications for students like her.

The following section provides a detailed description of Janette’s understandings and descriptions of her higher education experiences. It also addresses how her specific experience in the Student Success course informed her identity as a college student; thus answering the first

two research questions in this study. These descriptions were guided by the responses as garnered through the interview protocol that address areas in Janette's life prior to coming to college, during her first year and her future plans and overall reflections.

Although Janette had not thought much about going to college, she did have dreams of one day becoming a neonatal nurse. Her desire to help others and do something that she loved made going to college a necessary step along her path. Even when she did not get accepted to the schools where she initially applied, her parents and particularly her mother encouraged her to leave Jacksonville in order to experience and learn something new. Janette also said, "I didn't want to stay home. **I wanted to go out and venture and find my own way or find myself... if that was possible.**" When she decided on Valencia, Janette remembers feeling supported, saying that,

My mom and dad were there 100% even though it was like a...even though you're applying to a community college, you're gonna get accepted or whatever... But they made it feel like I got accepted to the biggest university ever...

Upon entering Valencia, her transition seemed to be smoother than she expected. Similar to what two other participants mentioned during their interviews, Janette found that her classes and professors were not nearly as difficult as she had anticipated. She shared, "So when I found out it wasn't that hard, it was a big weight lifted off my shoulders..." While the pressures of school were somewhat lifted, she felt overwhelmed in her math class her first semester, even calling home crying to her mother. She also had the realities of life back home to think about. Specifically, her older brother had been incarcerated and she remembered feeling disappointed,

but even more so because they had not spoken for a while. She wanted to set an example for her brother's daughter, her niece about what going to college looked like. At one point in our interview, I asked her about the importance of a minority woman going to college and she referred to her niece. Her thoughts moved to what her life might have been like had she not gone to college. She figured if she was not enrolled at Valencia she would be "workin' a 9-5, livin' pay check to pay check..." This same sentiment was expressed when she talked about the importance of her attending college as a first-generation student.

Beyond those initial issues and feelings surrounding the importance of going to college, she felt a new found sense of freedom as she transitioned into life as a college student. She said, "The best part basically would be me making my own schedule and working on my own time or doing things when I could do it and not being forced to do it..."

She also went on to add,

When I got settled in I was really happy... Okay, at first I was really, really happy about coming to school. I walked with my chest out. But, after a while I started getting lonely 'cause all my friends... I had family and friends back home or all my friends were in like...that are at universities, they're in rooming, going to all the football games and all that stuff and it's just like I'm doin' nothing.. It got a little lonely after a while, but I got over it.

Valencia proved to be a place where she felt comfortable and one that would allow her to get on her feet as she prepared to move onto a university. She shared that she would never forget her first year of college or the things she learned or did, including the challenges and teachers. The Student Success course Janette took during her first semester of college in particular helped her to get over her fear of asking for help when needed. She acknowledged that,

I'm not the type to ask for help unless I really, really need it. So, the SLS class really taught me to if you need help ask because it's always gonna be some type of help or some type of way to get through somethin'. And basically it taught me that it's a way through anything, through college, through bad test taking, note-taking, studying and such things like that.

I thought she made a valid point for further exploration when I asked whether or not she thought the Student Success class would help her in the future. While her answer did note aspects of the course helping her with school and work, particularly as it related to her procrastination habits, her answer also referred to gaining insight into and understanding of how to successfully navigate college and life; including how to be open to and understanding different viewpoints and ways of communicating with others.

More than anything, Janette saw going to college as a necessary component of her path, providing her with the preparation she needed to get to where she wanted to be; a place where she could help others. As I reflect on my time with Janette, I can say the primary feature emanating from her was a quiet, yet confident strength, a determination to do what she had to do in order to reach her goals. I could identify with Janette's desire to help others and even her

ideas about college as a pathway to be able to do that. I believe this sentiment which has also been expressed in some form or another by the other participants is an important point for discussion and will be revisited in Chapter Five as it related to the dominant discourses found in this study.



*Tracie*

*“That’s when I got a feelin’ like I can really do this...like this is where I’m supposed to be.”*

The last participant in this study was Tracie. Tracie was a 19-year old Black female from Miami, Florida. She was enrolled in the Culinary Arts program, an Associate of Science degree program. The Student Success course was required for her because she tested into three developmental courses – reading, writing and math. She took the course upon first entering Valencia in the spring 2013 semester. Like Azariah, Lyssa and Celeste, Tracie was involved in a serious relationship with her boyfriend James. James also attended Valencia and they shared an apartment together. Though their relationship was somewhat strenuous at times, they supported each other in their studies. It was James who brought the idea of going to college to Tracie and encouraged her to apply. Unlike the other participants in the study, Tracie had never considered going to college as a real personal option. Despite this, Tracie was grateful for the change of pace and pleased with her first semester of college and all that she had gained because of it.

Tracie remembered that she was at her waitressing job when she got a text message from her boyfriend. That text would change her life as it read, ‘We just need to leave just do better things than this because I don’t want you to just be a waitress all your life and I don’t wanna be paintin’ all my life.’ At that moment, she decided to do something many in her community could not wrap their minds around – go to college.

Tracie was definitely a lively interviewee. She was constantly smiling and laughing throughout our 50 minutes together. Yet, at the same time, she reflected a deep seriousness when she discussed her family, her home town and her desire to be a role model and “live above

the standards” as a new college student. Before coming to Valencia, Tracie experienced several conflicts in her living situation. The stress and strain of living with her father prompted her to move in with her mother and instead of focusing on college she decided to help her mother pay the bills. She said, “I wasn’t really like focused on going to college because I was really just trying to get a job and have some income so I could have my own... I wasn’t really interested in being a college student.”

Her waitressing job seemed to be a quick fix until she could decide her next steps. After being introduced to the idea of going to college by her boyfriend, she recalled feeling somewhat reluctant, but eventually began to see college as an opportunity to get away from her bad situation as well as an opportunity to better herself as a person. Although she still faced challenges in terms of financial aid and securing housing at the time of our interview, she was determined that she would be able to handle those trials. Tracie had no children or dependents and considered herself a full-time student. She planned to take four or five courses (12 to 15 credits) per semester. At the time of our study she was not taking any courses and worked 20 to 25 hours part-time at 7-Eleven as a cashier.

I would describe Tracie as a petite ball of energy. When we met, Tracie wore black pants, white sneakers and a white polo style shirt with her 7-Eleven name tag still attached to it. Her black rimmed glasses made her look mature and studious. Though soft spoken at moments, she had such a presence about her that would easily make her stand out in a crowd. Her stylish haircut— long on one side and cut low on the other was fitting for her spunky personality. When I commented on this, she remarked how she wanted, needed in fact a new look and after our

formal interview was over we spent an additional 30 minutes discussing hair products and our ideas about being our best selves, identity, school and life in general.

I had arrived to our agreed upon location, the Panera Bread restaurant on University Boulevard near the University of Central Florida on a late Sunday afternoon about 30 minutes early; I wanted to stake out and secure a quiet space in a corner of the restaurant. Luckily, I found a perfect booth with only a few other diners nearby, sipping soup, eating a baked-good, casually chatting or studying. As I waited for Tracie, I felt nervous, thinking ‘what if she does not show up or backs out of the interview?’ At that moment, my phone buzzed with a text message from Tracie letting me know she was running a little behind and would arrive ten minutes late. Exactly ten minutes later my phone rang and it was Tracie saying she was pulling up and would be walking inside in a second. I left my things at the booth and met her at the front door. After we greeted, I walked her to the booth to drop her things off and we then walked to the main counter to order a snack. She ordered a cheesy broccoli soup and I ordered a gourmet chocolate chip cookie. After we got our orders we cozied into our little space and I told her we could start after she ate. She assured me it was fine and that we could begin the interview. After going over the necessary documents and answering her questions which related to how the information would be used and why had I chosen to do such a study, I began recording.

Our interview went well, but seemed a bit bumpier in terms of flow than the other interviews. Several times Tracie stopped to ask me what I meant by a certain question or asked me to repeat the question. In fact after asking my very first question, I was somewhat stumped. I asked her “Can you tell me what you think going to college means in our society?” Her

response was “In our society as black people or?” I then followed up by asking about society in general, but also asked her to share her thoughts about what going to college meant for black and minority people as well since she brought it up. Beyond this, I found that the interview was light-hearted and insightful. As the last participant in the study, Tracie made interesting commentary related to college being just as much a learning experience as it is one in helping one to become mature. In fact she alluded to the maturity she developed as a college student several times throughout our interview. As one who had once been dependent on others to do things for her, after her first semester in college she felt independent and self-assured as a student and in her general life.

The following section provides a detailed description of Tracie’s understandings and descriptions of her higher education experiences. It also addresses how her specific experience in the Student Success course informed her identity as a college student; thus answering the first two research questions in this study. These descriptions were guided by the responses as garnered through the interview protocol that address areas in Tracie’s life prior to coming to college, during her first semester and her future plans and overall reflections.

As described above, Tracie was the only participant in the study who had no personal intention or longing to go to college. After spending some time working, her boyfriend encouraged her to apply together in order to start over, leave the ‘chaos’ and create a better life than the one they were experiencing in Miami. Even after she decided that she would in fact attend college, she said, “...at first I didn’t do nothing because I thought he [her boyfriend] was just talking because he does a lot of talking and doesn’t back it up.” However, she soon helped

her boyfriend to research schools and began the process of applying for financial aid and getting transcripts and other documents together. Ultimately, it would be her boyfriend's choice that would bring the two of them to Valencia. As noted by Tracie, James had friends who had attended the college already and they told him Valencia was a great school. Even still, going to college did not feel real Tracie because they did not have much support on their journey.

Despite this reluctant backing, Tracie still did not quite know how to feel. That is until she saw Valencia for the first time and attended the college-wide orientation. It was at that point that she felt better. She remembered, **“That’s when I got a feelin’ like I can really do this... like this is where I’m supposed to be.”**

This sentiment would be echoed throughout the rest of our interview as Tracie revealed the ways her transition, proved to be a smooth one, one marked by a new sense of belonging in a collegiate family, her new home away from home. She even said at one point, “It felt like family a little bit...” This sense of family, especially the understanding nature of professors alleviated some of the stress and demands associated with her financial aid and need to have an income. She had preconceived notions of what her professors and college life would be like, and was surprised that her experience turned out to be quite the opposite. Particularly, she said of her professors

They were being very understanding...like if I couldn't turn in an assignment at like the due date and I needed extra or more time or I couldn't finish because of whatever, they were understanding and they were like helping me...but I like had to do it at that time ... it made me have hope to keep coming to school...

Further, being in a college environment provided another eye opening experience for Tracie as she began to see how as she described it, “everyone else acted, how everyone else carried themselves.” Seeing this made her feel like she had to ‘mature up’ and take responsibility for her actions. It also was a reminder to her about the example that she wanted to set for her younger siblings back in Miami and particularly her 10-year old brother.

It would be in her Student Success course that this sentiment would also be expressed. Tracie chose to look at the Student Success course as an exercise to help her in the areas that she needed to improve upon; including building her vocabulary and managing her time. It also taught her more prolific lessons about how to not judge others and invade others’ space. Yet at the same time it helped her to open up to people and be friendly. Further it was during her group project experience that she felt part of something and she liked that. She said,

My group was actually like amazing because they really were participating. Like when you’re in high school, you have group assignments but nobody really cares. Nobody really does their part. But, my group – we were meeting with each other, we were emailing each other back and forth and it just made me feel like a part of something and I liked it.

Tracie also found solace in the writing assignments, particularly the free writing she was able to do in the course. As a surprise to me, Tracie described herself as shy and noted how the course helped her to open up and be comfortable in her own skin, a change from when she first started her college journey.

For Tracie, her very first semester can probably be best described as an unexpected, but good one... especially because she did not make conscious plans to attend. The experiences she had her first year of college also proved to be more of a personal growing experience with deep, purpose-filled implications for the life she aimed to lead. As Tracie described, going to college would not only allow her to feel like she could finish any goal or task she faced, but it also proved to be an opportunity to make personal improvements.

As I reflect on my interview with Tracie, I cannot help but think of how our differences actually bring us together. While I had every intention and goal of going to college since a young age and I was most certainly prepared for college level work and expectations once I entered, I like Tracie saw college as a wonderful way to gain a new experience – an experience that could and would expose me to a new world, a new life and a new way of thinking. My college experience would ultimately help me grow as a person and help to shape, mature and develop me in ways I do not think I could have imagined at the onset. Similarly, when I asked Tracie specifically about how attending Valencia would affect her in the long run, she said,

I think it will better me as a person. I think it will make me... it will open...well, it already opened my eyes. But it will better me and it will just make me more how can I... I don't want to use the term hungry. I want to say something else. I don't know another term... it will just make me want to do more things.

Though Tracie did not start out with plans of going to college, I left our interview feeling confident that the experiences she gained during her first semester of college were enough to keep her coming back until she completed her degree. Our time together also resonated deeply

as I again remembered why being in college, pursuing doctoral studies and this research itself has impacted me deeply and made me too want to do many more things in life.

### Voices of the Collective Group: Recapitulation

I was able to introduce the reader to the participants through their voices and my reflections of our time together. In this section I will briefly summarize those experiences and understandings. Of the five participants only one intentionally chose to begin her college journey at Valencia. For others (Azariah, Lyssa and Janette), Valencia became an option because of its convenience and price. Further, all women had some kind of connection to the community college prior to coming through relatives and / or friends who attended before them. Despite this, going to college was largely seen as a solo or individual activity. Primarily, Azariah, Lyssa and Janette felt it best at least initially to go through their courses without the interference of others.

Additionally, though the women in this study were all first-generation students, they had an in-direct view of college through either those relatives or friends. Lyssa had been involved in a program that gave her access to college campuses and events since she was a youth. Azariah, Celeste, and Janette had at least one close family member or friend who had gone to college before them. Though the women were in fact first-generation college students, it did not play a prominent role in how they identified themselves or their experiences. Instead, the participants



saw themselves as new students, facing the same set of challenges and adjustments as any other first time college student.

Once at the community college, the participants all described their experiences as good ones (as noted in the introduction to this chapter), but these good experience were most especially characterized in their descriptions of having ‘good’ and ‘understanding’ professors, a surprising departure from what they thought they would experience as college students. Further, at some point in each interview, all the participants referred to their experiences at the Specialized Preparatory Area (SPA) on campus for helping them with any challenges they faced in class – and particularly their challenges in math courses.

The Student Success course did help to inform the women’s identity as college students, but it could said more clearly that their whole first year or semester helped with this. Some of the most significant ways the women benefited from the course was because it helped them to establish a sense of responsibility as it related to time management, working in groups with others and gaining a sense of awareness about themselves and the world around them. As such, journal writing and reflection was a prominent part of their discussions about the course. The course also helped the women to be more effective in their study strategies which translated to their work across courses and semesters. Finally, assignments that helped the women to focus specifically on their career goals proved to be an asset and helped the women, some of whom who did not quite understand the purpose of the class upon first enrolling, re-evaluate the relevance and applicability of the course in helping them to reach life goals.

Finally, all of the women in the study had plans to transfer to a university – with the University of Central Florida being the likely choice for the majority. They also planned to pursue careers that would require a minimum of a Master’s degree (as also mentioned in the introduction to this chapter).

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCOURSES OF VALUE: EXPLORING PARTICIPANT CONSTRUCTIONS**

*Each discourse brings different aspects into focus, raises different issues for consideration, and has different implications...*

-Vivian Burr (1995, p.49)

### Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to uncover the ways first-generation, minority female students who participated in a Student Success course perceived the value of higher education in their lives. Their understandings and experiences were explored in Chapter Four as part of their participant profiles. This chapter now more succinctly addresses the purpose of this study and answers the third and final research question – *What discourses about value are present as first generation, minority female community college students discuss their higher education experiences?* Specifically, I discuss how these discourses were identified. Further, the social constructionism conceptual framework used in this study serves as the prism or lens through which to understand what was said. The four major assumptions of the framework offered by Burr (1995) help to bring into focus the understandings and perceptions of the women in this study and serve as the foundation for the implications and recommendations in Chapter Seven.

The primary forms of data collected from the five participants were gathered through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. I also relied on my personal researcher reflective notes, field notes, respondent validity and my dissertation Chair who served as an external auditor to

help guide and shape the written report of these findings. Moreover, I referred specifically to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis as discussed in Chapter Three to identify the dominant discourses about the value of higher education present in the women's discussions of their higher education experiences. The primary way the value of higher education was discussed was largely in terms of the *opportunity* it would provide to the women. More specifically, *opportunity* was relative to the potential or chance to achieve *personal*, *economic*, and *social* opportunities that the women felt attending the community college would provide for them. It would in fact be a vision for opportunity and the choices that going to college gave them in controlling their lives that guided their decisions and future aspirations. These major discourses are described henceforth as:

1. *Personal Fulfillment and Intrinsic Motivation*
2. *Financial Stability and College as Insurance against Poverty*
3. *Social Obligations: Breaking Stereotypes and Setting Examples*

### Uncovering Discourses

As a qualitative research piece and one in which I vowed both on paper and in my heart to be completely transparent, I found that after I collected the data, the hardest part ahead of me to dissect the data, to read for the deeper meanings and to truly understand what the participants had said involved much more than I could have ever imagined. In my researcher diary on August 20, 2013, I wrote:

*Being so close to the end, yet so far away is painful. I can see the end, but with so much going on, I feel like how and when will this actually get done? I need to move forward. While I feel connected to this work, I am realizing there are still many things I do not know and many things that I need to revisit.*

I poured these feelings onto the page at a time when I was also reflecting on what my dissertation Chair said to a group of students at the beginning of my program - ‘Don’t make a major move or any serious life changes when you get to the end of your coursework and begin dissertation hours.’ I did quite the opposite and moved across the country to New York City so my husband could begin the first phases of his doctoral studies at Teachers College. I thought many days about this and would then be pushed back into action when I would get a phone call or text from one of the participants in the study. They were excitedly waiting, cheering me on even. I had to finish my work not only for me, but for them. It was also in those days that I listened to the audio files and read over their transcripts. Their words and phrases like path, struggle, future, sacrifice, escape, paycheck to paycheck, comfort, balance, statistic, open doors, trap, goals, fears, mature, option, stable, real world, stepping stone, and hope echoed loudly. In fact, those words sparked a fire within me to re-focus and to keep going because I knew they had entrusted me specifically with their experiences and their strivings as college women.

After completing two initial readings of each transcript and making notes and reflecting on what each woman said during our interviews, I moved on to Phase 2 of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 1996). This meant I had to become even more familiar with the data. Therefore, I decided that I needed to read each transcript several more times in order to generate a formal list

of those initial concepts, words and phrases and label the data into meaningful codes. In this first re-reading I physically wrote and circled on each transcript in pencil, any key words, concepts, phrases / quotes and ideas provided by the participant that I felt were relevant to the study. In the second round, I read through each transcript again, this time with a yellow highlighter in hand. I reflected on the research questions and highlighted the ideas and phrases I felt captured the essence of the participants' interview most succinctly – those salient points that described the participants' experiences, feelings and understandings about college. Next, I reviewed those highlighted areas in all transcripts and made a list of the major codes I believed the data belonged to. Though this task seemed somewhat mechanical, it helped produce eight initial codes which focused on: *family/culture, finances, opportunity, path/preparation, maturity/independence, college as hard work, the participants' perceptions versus reality (what they thought about college versus what they actually experienced in college)* and finally *a distinction between a community college experience and a university experience*. With these eight codes in mind, I then went through each transcript for a third time. I used a blue pen at this point to manually label the highlighted examples that supported the eight codes in each participant's transcript (See Figures 6 and 7. Also see APPENDIX G for longer, more detailed examples).

12	<p>Janette: I didn't really think about going to college not until 11<sup>th</sup> grade I believe because it wasn't really on my mind to attend college but you don't really realize what life is like after high school while still in high school, like I said after high school you think it's over. But, I just sat down with myself and was like I gotta do something. I just can't sit around because I've seen other family members or cousins not go to college and struggle their whole life. And I was like I don't want to do that or I seen people have babies in high school and that was one thing I didn't want to do. So I just looked at the bigger picture of life and figured out what I wanted to do and what I loved to do and I love kids and I want to be in the nursing field because I seen my aunt do it my whole life and I was inspired by her to do it. And so, I came to the conclusion to become a neonatal nurse.</p>
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Figure 6. Example of coding notes from the study

*Note.* This figure (image) is a copy of coding notes from study participant Janette's transcript.

96	<p>Tracie: (long pause). Umm.. I think college is a little expensive. I can say that. It's worth it. When you graduate and you go out to find jobs ... your job finding rate will be so much higher than just a high school graduate. 'Cause now it's like you cant even have a Bachelor's degree anyway.</p>	<p>College is expensive but worth it because you have a higher rate of getting a job</p>
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Figure 7. Second example of coding notes from the study

*Note.* This figure (image) is a copy of coding notes from study participant Tracie's transcript.

I also checked in with my dissertation Chair about the direction to take regarding how to move beyond the eight initial codes and into a discussion of the major themes or as I am exploring in this research, the dominant discourses about the value of higher education. We

decided that before I created a mind map to visually represent the relationship between the codes and potential discourses as described by Braun and Clarke (1996) in Phase 3, I would create a concise table. This table would help me examine and think about the eight initial codes and whether or not they could be collapsed or combined. What resulted was a coding matrix (Table 9 in APPENDIX G) which allowed me to provide examples of each code (and descriptions) along with the proper notation of each participant who made reference to the code. After examining the codes, revisiting the transcripts and spending some time reflecting on my interviews with each woman and what they had said, I was able to collapse the codes even further. I went through three additional ‘rounds’ examining codes for their relation to each other and for potential applicability as a sub-code. At the end of this process, the eight initial codes were reduced to one primary code, *opportunity*, with all other codes falling under it as a sub category. What I realized is that the women in this study spoke at times in ambiguous terms about their higher education experiences – including why they came, what they expected and their future. However, whether they referred to their reasoning as a path, as a key to financial stability or as a way to set an example or be a role model to a younger sibling, what they were saying spoke to higher education and specifically attending the community college, Valencia College as an opportunity. Going to college was an opportunity they wanted and in many instances an opportunity they felt they needed in order to make a way for themselves in the world. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/opportunity>) opportunity refers to an amount of time or situation in which something can be done. It is a favorable juncture of circumstances or a good chance for



advancement or progress. The descriptions and experiences described in Chapter Four and elaborated on later in this chapter reflect this definition.

After solidifying the one major code, I began Phase 3 of the thematic analysis which entailed creating a mind map of that lone code and the relationship of the new sub-codes contained there within. (See Figure 8). It was also at this time that I began to think even more critically about words, their meaning and how what the women had shared in this study was actually represented within those words and meanings. Creating the mind map helped me to flesh out the relationship of the dominant code and sub-codes and potential ways to define and name the dominant discourses.

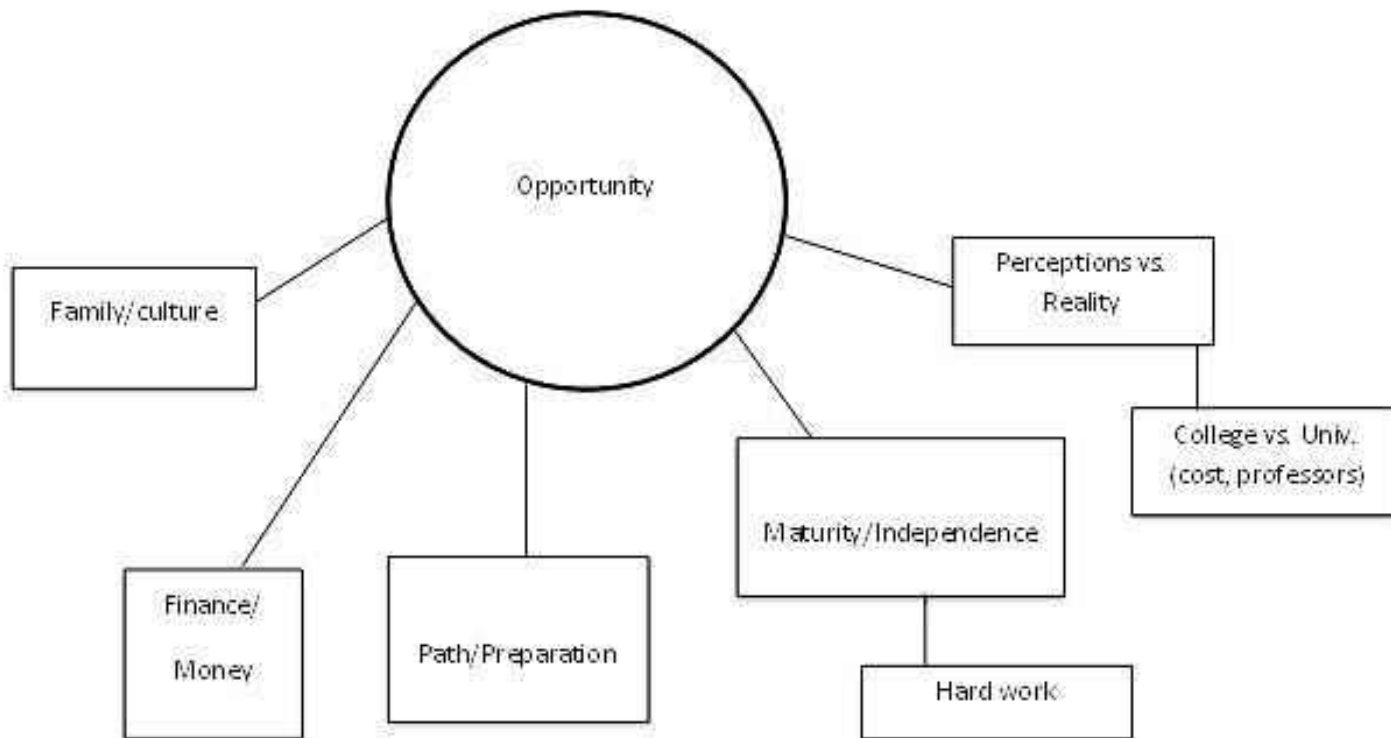


Figure 8. Mind map part I

*Note.* This figure is the first step in examining the relationship between the dominant code and sub-codes.

At this point in the data analysis I returned to the transcripts for a final review. Braun and Clarke (1996) describe Phase 4 as reviewing the discourses in order to see whether they work with the data and whether any additional data can be included into the established themes or discourses. It was while revisiting the transcripts that I discovered that the women discussed economic opportunity in two distinct ways; economic opportunity was most prominently discussed in terms of long term financial stability, and economic opportunity was also discussed in terms of their financial stability in their current situation as community college students. As such, I decided that the formal reporting on this discourse needed to highlight those major trains of thought. It was also at this point that I realized that since economic opportunity was discussed in personal economic terms, it could technically fit as a subcategory under personal opportunity. However, I decided to highlight this point independently as the second discourse in this section. This is largely because while it was discussed in relation to personal economic security, it was also largely connected to what the women described as social obligations. In this way, economic opportunity appeared to serve as a bridge between the two other discourses. The result was the identification of three primary themes or discourses about the value of higher education in relation to opportunity. The women in this study spoke of the value of higher education in terms of opportunity specifically related to *personal*, *economic*, and *social* opportunities. (See Figure 9).

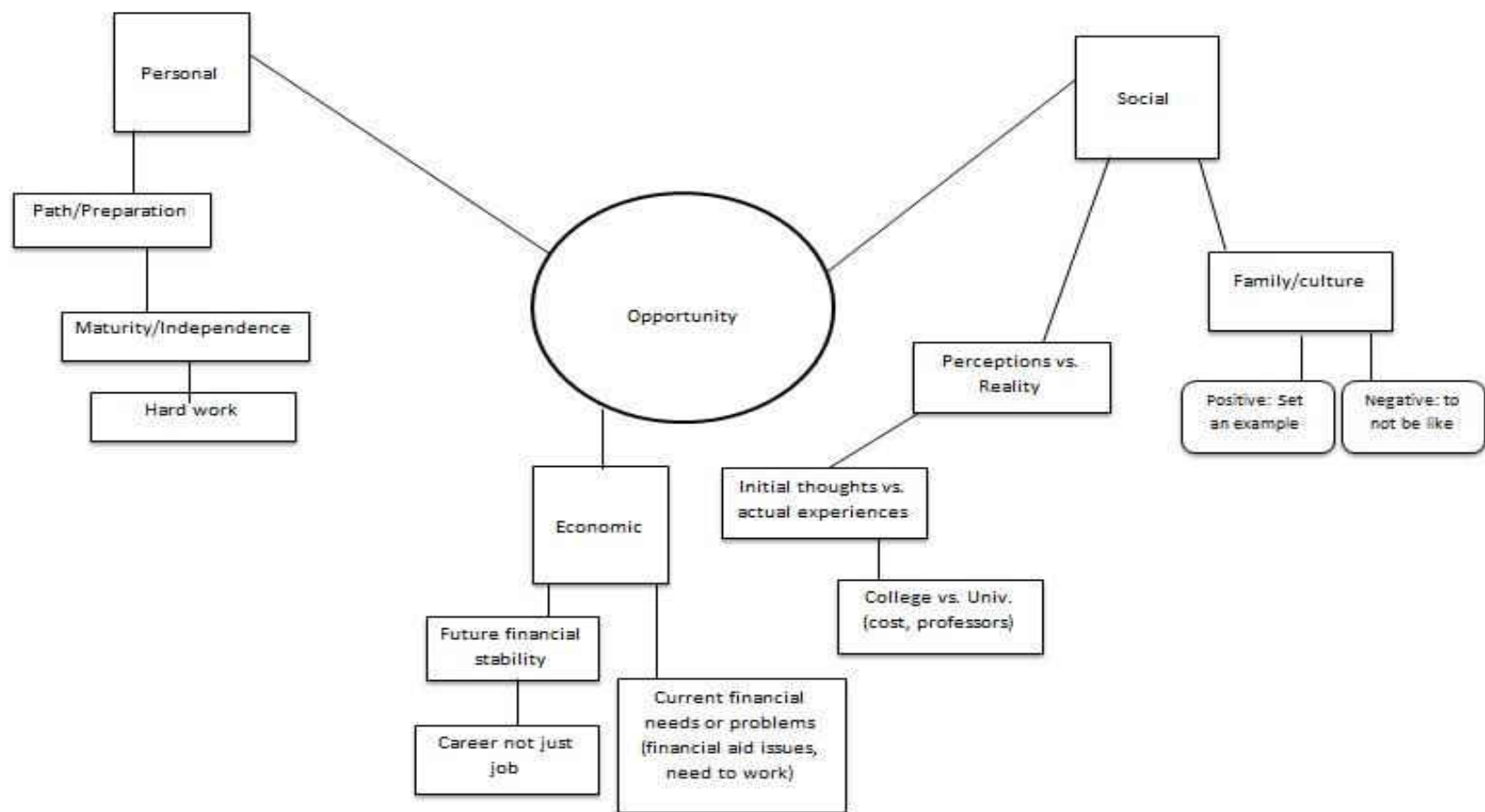


Figure 9. Mind map part II

*Note.* This figure is the second step in the refinement of the relationship of the dominant code and sub-codes into three distinct discourses.

I then moved on to the defining and naming of the discourses, the next step suggested by Braun and Clarke (1996) as part of Phase 5 of the data analysis. This proved to be yet another moment of paralysis in the research process as I began to question whether I had really identified anything novel or worthy of sharing at all. After reassurance from my husband and committee member/ mentor, Dr. Caroline Pratt Marrett, I was able to proceed with the analysis in a way that I believe is both reflective of the women in the study, but also my personal struggle to define those realities. Further, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, the social constructionism conceptual framework used in this study not only helped to bring attention to the unique understandings of the participants, but those meanings takes new direction when examining the discourses through the framework. (This is explored in Chapter Six). Thus, after much reflection on the ways the women spoke of opportunity and taking time to revisit the framework and literature I reviewed as part of this study, I was able to formally name the dominant discourses as such:

- 1. Personal Fulfillment and Intrinsic Motivation*
- 2. Financial Stability and College as Insurance against Poverty*
- 3. Social Obligations: Breaking Stereotypes and Setting Examples*

### Discussing Discourses of Opportunity

For this study, the social constructionism conceptual framework provided a lens through which to uncover how first-generation, minority women at a community college who had participated in a Student Success course understood their higher education experiences as well as their perceptions about its value in their lives. This framework, guided by four main assumptions helps one to understand how people make meaning and ultimately understand things. More specifically, these assumptions bring into focus: 1) challenging traditional ways of knowing or understanding by drawing our attention to what meaning is based on 2) historical and culturally specific understandings, 3) social interactions, and the use of 4) language as social action through which discourses are expressed and maintained. Burr (1995) formally outlined these assumptions as a way for understanding the lived experiences from the perspectives of those in it.

In the forthcoming sections, the essence of each discourse identified in this study is discussed and supported by the thick, rich descriptions provided by the participants in this study. Table 8 summarizes the three discourses identified in the data and how they are defined.

Table 8  
*Summary of Discourses and their Definitions*

Dominant Discourse on the Value of Higher Education	Naming of the Discourse	Definition
1. Personal Opportunity	<i>Personal Fulfillment and Intrinsic Motivation</i>	This discourse is characterized by the participants' desire to broaden their knowledge and take a path that would allow them to 'be somebody.' College was seen as a 'stepping stone' between their present and future realities. This discourse is also marked in large part by a sense of independence or maturity, an ownership or feeling of responsibility, fueled by an internal drive to accomplish something greater to fulfill personal longings.
2. Economic Opportunity	<i>Financial Stability and College as Insurance Against Poverty</i>	This discourse is characterized by the participants' concern with financial stability. It is largely reflected in two ways: 1) firm financial footing as community college students (because of the low cost and easy access of their education) and 2) long term financial independence – specifically related to a struggle-free, comfortable life that a career could provide. College was equated with a career and a career meant financial independence. This secure financial standing would allow them to set an example for future generations including extended family and future dependents. Future economic mobility outweighed any current financial inconvenience.
3. Social Opportunity	<i>Social Obligations: Breaking Stereotypes and Setting Examples</i>	This discourse is characterized by what the participants felt to be a social obligation to not only break or uncover stereotypes about themselves and their communities, but also to address preconceived notions about the college experience itself. These preconceived notions were largely based on mediated images of the college experience. Lastly, these women felt going to college allowed them to break familial and societal stereotypes while also providing a chance for them to serve as a role model for younger members in their families and communities.

*Note.* This table provides an overview of the three dominant discourses identified in this study; including the name and definition of each discourse.

### *Discourse 1: Personal Fulfillment and Intrinsic Motivation*

The third research question for this study was designed to identify and explore the discourses of value from the perspective of students who participated in a Student Success course. The first discourse about the value of higher education that resounded across the participant interviews was related to personal opportunity. In this way higher education was seen as a path that would allow the participants to ‘be somebody’ and live a better life. As such college became a ‘stepping stone’ between their present and future realities. This discourse is marked in large part by a sense of independence or maturity, an ownership or feeling of responsibility, fueled by an internal drive to accomplish something within, something greater to fulfill their personal longings.

#### Going on a Path to Be Somebody and Having a Better Life

There are several examples from the voices of the participants which represent these sentiments. Azariah, the first participant in this study said, “...I think going to college in our society means like going on a path to be somebody... to be successful. A path of success” (Azariah, p. 1, paragraph 2). Lyssa did not necessarily feel like college was necessary to be successful in life, however, she realized it could and would serve as the guideline she needed not only for her, but others as well. She said, “I felt like going to college would teach me a way... give instructions to me, to better myself in life...for our generation... it is access to you know a path that we actually want to take” (Lyssa, p.1, paragraph 2). Further, for Lyssa who had come



from a high poverty neighborhood, college was as she put it, "...an escape to be on my own and experience something new and actually reach my goals" (Lyssa, p.1, paragraph 2).

Similarly for Tracie, the only participant in the study who had no initial intentions of going to college, college provided a chance to leave her past struggles. When asked about this, she noted she wanted to "...get away from where I was and to better myself as a person..." (Tracie, p. 1, paragraph 10). Tracie also saw college as an important factor in upward mobility for those in the black community. She said, "I think college is a stepping stone to a better life for black people...especially in my generation" (Tracie, p. 1, paragraph 12).

Janette, remembered thinking, "...I gotta do something. I just can't sit around..." (Janette, p.2, paragraph 12). This feeling would be reinforced later in our interview when she revealed,

...there's nothing wrong with expanding your knowledge about things and using that knowledge to do great things. Going to college is valuable to me because I want to do great things and I know college is only going to help me learn and grow as a person (Janette, p.15, paragraph 151).

For Celeste, the oldest participant in the study, going to college provided an opportunity to feel whole and complete as a person. This desire to be fulfilled personally was rooted within an inner strength and an example of intrinsic motivation. This sentiment is most evident when she commented:

I think it will make me a better person as a whole because since it is something I always wanted to do, it'll just complete me in the sense that okay, I got married, I had my children, so now I'm able to do something for myself and this is what I wanted to do for myself for a very long time. So, I think it would just complete me (Celeste, p. 9, paragraph 73).

### Opening Doors and New Ways of Thinking

Higher education was also seen as a path to personal fulfillment because it provided 'open doors' to new ways of knowing, understanding and confidence that the participants craved. Celeste felt doors that once had been closed to her were now beginning to open because of her time in college. Specifically, she felt she had grasped a new vocabulary which helped her to feel more confident and empowered. Regarding this she said, "...it's opened for me personally other doors that at one time were just shut down because I was in a different environment..." (Celeste, p.1, paragraph 9). Celeste would go on to describe attending the community college as way to 'open up certain conversations' for her, by providing a different outlook on life and perspective of what could be possible. This sentiment was also reflected by Tracie who said, "...being a college student made me see how big the world is. Like, it's so much stuff in the world..." (Tracie, p.14, paragraph 179). Janette felt going to college would

...help with ethics that I have ... ethics that I used to have and better the things that I do.  
'Cause when you don't experience nothing, you think what you're doing is right. You

think that things you're doing are okay. And when you experience some things, you know that, you'll realize that 'Oh I shouldn't have been doing that, or I shouldn't have been saying that or I'm not doing this right or I'm not saying that right or I'm not thinking about this thoroughly or things like that. (Janette, Page 11, Paragraph 95).

### Growing in Maturity and Taking Responsibility

The women in this study also spoke of their higher education experiences and its value in terms of the overall maturity, responsibility, and independence they gained as a result of participating. These perspectives were largely in relation to transitioning from childhood with few responsibilities and in some instances carefree fun, to more serious, adult responsibilities, activities and relationships. Janette remarked, "It [going to college] makes me feel mature. It makes me feel like I'm doing something in my life..." (Janette, p.1, paragraph 8). Tracie began to see higher education as a way to become more responsible and more mature in her actions as well. She shared,

...Well, at first before college I liked when people did stuff for me... whatever it was. If you could do it for me, I loved you to death. I wanted people to do my stuff and their stuff. Once I came to college and it's just me and my boyfriend, he was like 'Unh unh, I got my own stuff to do, you got to do your own stuff'... It made me feel like this is my stuff, so maybe I should just do it myself and then if I get a bad grade, I can't blame

nobody but myself. So, it [college] made me take responsibility (Tracie, p.14, paragraph 183).

For Lyssa, maturity manifested inside and outside the classroom. Reflecting on when she nearly failed a course because of participating in an extracurricular activity she said,

I learned to be more independent and responsible with everything that was going... [such as] ...me joining the Faces thing, I wouldn't say they are the ones that brought down my grades. I was the one that chose to do that instead of studying more, so just taking responsibility for everything that goes on, knowing that you know, this is my life... (Lyssa, p. 7, paragraph 54).

For Azariah, higher education was not only a way to become more mature, but also independent and helped her gain a sense of freedom which she longed for:

I feel like freedom is huge for me because I feel for my whole life I've fought for freedom, whether it's at home...I feel like I've always been pinned down to rules and regulations and all of this and I feel like in college that all goes away. Your little wings are attached and you fly wherever you want to fly and you do as you please (Azariah, p. 8, paragraph 50).

## *Discourse 2: Financial Stability and College as Insurance against Poverty*

The second discourse largely present in the women's discussions of their higher education experiences focused on the economic opportunity having a higher education would provide. This economic opportunity was discussed in two distinct ways. First, the participants spoke of economic opportunity in terms of the financial stability the community college experience itself provided. This was reflected by discussions of the community college as place that allowed for sound financial footing before transferring to a traditional university. This sentiment was also juxtaposed to a solid educational footing that the community college could offer before that transfer. Although Azariah, Lyssa and Janette had initial hopes of starting at a different four-year college or university, being able to 'get stable' or 'on my feet' before getting into more difficult classes made the women feel comfortable in their community college experience. For Celeste the community college was her first choice for getting established and for Tracie the community college was a pleasant surprise after getting settled.

The second way the discourse of economic opportunity was discussed was as future and long term financial stability that a having a college education would provide. This construction of the value of higher education was thus understood as a means to 'make more money' or to get 'higher pay' and be able to 'move forward' in the world and in a way where the women were ultimately in control of their financial future –a future that was free from 'struggle' or 'that lifestyle.' The choices and options a college degree gave to them would allow them to provide a comfortable life for themselves and any future dependents. Further, these ideas were connected to the women's thoughts that by going to college they were able to fulfill the requirements

necessary for getting to careers as professionals and not just what they often described as a '9-5 job' where they would live 'pay check to pay check.' Hence, college was equated with a career and a career was the link to a secure, steady income and thus, a comfortable life.

In these ways, going to college became an insurance against poverty (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2005). The women's discussions were largely contrasted with their prior life experiences and glimpses into the lives of others' around them who had not gone to college. These visions were often ones of scarcity in resources and limited choices. Thus, going to college lessened that possibility for their own lives.

#### Helpin' Us Get on Our Feet at the Community College

As noted, the community college provided a place where the participants could get and stay financially stable as they prepared for their future studies at a university. Although Azariah, Lyssa, and Janette had interest in starting their college careers at major universities, their start at the community college helped them to establish their financial footing while still allowing them options. Janette said,

I wanted to go to UCF and I knew in my mind that I didn't have the grades or even the scholarships or the money to go there so looking into it and my cousin went to Valencia...She was tellin' me how there was the direct connect and how I could go to Valencia and then transfer automatically or whatever, so that was a good option for me (Janette p. 3, paragraph 20).

Further, after discussing going to the community college with her mother who was paying out of pocket for her expenses, Janette went on to say of her experience,

Even my mom was surprised of the price of things. But, I think it's really good. I'm surprised at one , but ... 'cause I know goin' to a university is way more than what it is here. I think it's really good. I think it's helpin' us get on our feet maybe more... to prepare to go to a university and all the expenses (Janette, p. 6, paragraph 56).

This was also the reality for Lyssa, who was unprepared financially to go to a university. The community college provided a much needed break because as she said, "When I first came to school I didn't have any money. I didn't have any scholarships, no like Bright Futures because at first I was planning to go to Clark [Atlanta University]" (Lyssa, p.3, paragraph 18). This sentiment is echoed by Janette and Tracie who all spent their first few semesters of college looking for employment to help offset their school costs. Janette in particular noted, "...my main thing was getting stable, getting on my feet..." (Janette, p. 4, paragraph 34). This at times kept the women from being involved in campus related activities.

Still for others like Azariah, the community college provided a good start and would still allow them to make the transitions they wanted. She clarified, "I wanted to go to UCF and I thought...well I thought...I could do Valencia and end up at UCF" (Azariah, p. 6, paragraph 35). Even still when confronted with questions about her decision to start at the community college, her answer was filled with references to the financial benefits and opportunities starting at the community college would provide in helping anyone to get a good start. She said,

You know, no one knows someone's financial circumstance, so I would definitely encourage a person who is serious about their studies you know ...it is great to start at UCF or at a bigger thing, but I believe in starting at the bottom and getting at the top... at the bottom a lot of times when we get high so quickly we kind of like stumble up and fall whereas if we crawl first and then walk and then run, things are just better (Azariah, p. 10, paragraph 68).

For Celeste, the only participant in the study who chose Valencia as her first choice, the community college seemed to be a reasonable option for taking as many courses as she needed before transferring to a university, she said,

I've compared prices with some online courses that I wanted to take that Valencia wasn't giving and I was like I'll just wait and take the course next term because the prices were more reasonable here.... And since I was considering going to UCF, I looked up some of their courses and that's why I am going to take some of the courses I can transfer over there with, I am going to take them over here so that when I go over there I won't have to pay half as much (Celeste, p. 8, paragraph 67).

### Getting a Career and Not Just a '9 to 5'

The second and perhaps most prominent way the participants in this study framed the value higher education was in terms of the long-term personal economic opportunity that having a college degree would provide for them. A desire to earn more money and move beyond the



static life they described prior to coming to college proved to be the driving force behind going to college. Tracie said, “I think college is a little expensive. I can say that. It’s worth it. When you graduate and you go out to find jobs ... your job finding rate will be so much higher than just a high school graduate...” (Tracie, p. 7, paragraph 96). Lyssa was the only participant in the study who expressed ‘you don’t really need school to be successful in life...’ but did feel going to college “...opens more doors to actually do what you want to do...Makin’ the kind of money you wanna make and be happy with it...an actual career and not just a job” (Lyssa, p. 1, paragraph 2). This also made her feel like “... I’m actually doing something in life. I’m not just working to make ends meet, you know, I am working for my future so I don’t have to you know live pay check to pay check” (Lyssa, p. 2, paragraph 10).

Azariah, who was working full-time in retail management, felt conflicted about her lack of focus in school especially after reflecting on the choices some members of her family made. She believed she had to go to college in order to set herself up for a more stable financial future.

Everyone has different experiences and my family has been well financially and none of them have college degrees. So I can always take that route and depend on myself without school and you know hold a house down...cuz that’s the example I have, but my father’s words were always like you know that ‘that life’ is a struggle. It’s like you can’t sleep ... like you’re kinda thinking about how you’re going to get it next. Whereas if you have a degree and a career, its consistent income and that is like what I thought ...like what I thought about the most and eventually just went for it... with high hopes of you know it ending in the way that I envisioned. (Azariah, p. 3, paragraph 21).

Azariah also shared,

...I don't care to be rich, but I definitely want to have a comfortable home and a family that there is no struggle to feed and stuff. So I believe that education plays a huge role in that...in my future. I think that's what really made me just go to college... and get somewhere through there. I wanted to do it that way... (Azariah, p. 2, paragraph 15).

Lyssa also said, "I want a better life. Like I don't want to be stuck in a little city where jobs are scarce and everyone's just working just to work...just to pay the bills. I want an actual career that I will enjoy every day, gettin' up and going to" (Lyssa, p. 2, paragraph 10). Similarly, Janette revealed, "I told myself like 'What would I do if I didn't go to college? What would I be doing? ...working a 9-5, living pay check to pay check'... and I don't want that. I want to enjoy my life and not have to worry..." (Janette, p. 8, paragraph 74).

The desire to move beyond just a job was most evident as Azariah, Lyssa, Celeste, Janette, and Tracie expressed their longings to have professional careers as psychologist, counselor, construction manager, nurse, and chef (or dentist) respectively. These professional careers were often ones that they had chosen because of a personal passion or because they had encountered others' passion for the field. It also did not hurt that the appearance of such a professional was something that was respected or highly regarded. In particular, Janette said,

...I've seen other family members or cousins not go to college and struggle their whole life. And I was like I don't want to do that or I seen people have babies in high school and that was one thing I didn't want to do. So I just looked at the bigger picture of life

and figured out what I wanted to do and what I loved to do and I love kids and I want to be in the nursing field because I seen my aunt do it my whole life and I was inspired by her to do it. And so, I came to the conclusion to become a neonatal nurse. (Janette, p. 2, paragraph 12).

Janette continued later in our interview about why she felt nursing was a good field for her. She explained,

I want to do nursing because I like to help people and I feel like that's a good field for me. Like everything else I thought about doing like being a teacher or I don't know the other things I thought about, but nursing was something that just clicked with me like why I really wanted to be a nurse, it was really stupid... I was like I like the uniforms and how they look and how they go about in the hospital and things like that. But, um... talking to my aunt, she made me realize how it would affect me or it would be good for me because I like to help people and I like to see different situations and try to help and.... I like communicating with people and making connections with people. (Janette, p. 7, paragraph 58).

Although Tracie did not go to college immediately after graduating high school, when it came time to make a decision about what to actually pursue, it would be her past experiences that ultimately influenced her decision. An encounter with a high school teacher who shared a passion for cooking inspired her. She also found stability in the idea that "...everybody needs to eat..." (Tracie, p. 8, paragraph 102). Though she was still somewhat undecided at the time of

our interview, her other option to become a dentist was fueled by her desire to help others like her who could not afford dental services.

Similarly, Azariah and Lyssa's desires to go into the mental health field stemmed from their desires to help others.

I still have to figure out what I want to do. But in a perfect world, I would like to be a doctor of some sort...Medical or psychological doctor. I feel like psychology has always been my calling...I wish to have my own private practice (Azariah, p. 18, paragraph 149).

...I wanted to do psychology because I like helping people and listening and I... I knew I wanted to get into counseling psychology during my first semester... (Lyssa, p. 10, paragraph 72).

Finally, for Celeste the idea of going into construction management was driven by a yearning to go into a career that could be an asset for a future family business and one in which she could work hard.

...most of my family's in construction and because my father as young as I can remember um a part of him taking care of us was taking like a rundown home, renovating it and selling it and we move on to the next home. That's how he would do it and he worked. He used to have two jobs as well. He was always busy and he always kept us busy. He always told us if we wanted anything in life, we had to work for it. That was

another thing he used to tell us all the time, ‘life doesn’t come easy, life isn’t fair and whatever you want, you have to earn it’ (Celeste, p. 8, paragraph 69).

She also shared, “I wish I would have done it before instead... In other words I wish I would somehow made provisions for myself ...opposed to just letting it go because I wanted to raise children...” (Celeste, p. 10, paragraph 87).

### *Discourse 3: Social Obligations: Breaking Stereotypes and Setting Examples*

While the literature has discussed the value of higher education in terms of the social benefits society as a whole receives for having a more educated citizenry (Porter, 2002), the women in this study took a slight departure in the way they spoke of those social benefits. Primarily, the women’s discussions of the value of higher education as it relates to social opportunity were fueled by what they often described in terms of a social obligations. More specifically, while they felt higher education could help them fulfill their personal and economic desires, it also provided a chance to set an example first for themselves, but also for others. In this way, the value of higher education was about confronting and breaking stereotypes. Stereotypes were often discussed in personal ways, but also in relation to the community college experience itself. Further, social obligations also involved setting examples for others around them. This section will highlight those constructions.

## Breaking Stereotypes Within the Family and Community

The participants in this study, diverse in their backgrounds and experiences, highlighted how being in college allowed them to break stereotypes. These stereotypes varied and were at times complex. Sometimes they even came from within family or cultural communities. As Azariah suggested,

I feel like if you go to college, you're looked up on. Like no one looks down to you. Whereas if you don't, you're like... you're you know... This is like my culture that I am speaking of... like as long as you're there, you're good. You're gonna be good. But if you're not, you're suddenly stereotyped as like a nobody or as someone who's just setting them-self to fail in life (Azariah, p. 1, paragraph 2).

Lyssa's comments on not wanting to be stereotyped were multi-layered, touching on issues of potential racism, ageism and sexism. She felt being in college would lessen those stereotypes in her own life and ultimately provide an example for her sister and other family members. She stated,

... honestly I do not want to fall into a statistics... 'Oh you're black, you're gonna be pregnant, you know from the ages 18 to what 20 or 21 with no husband, you know... on welfare, depending on the government.' I definitely do not want that at all...that was another reason why I had to go to school because I'm like I don't want to be stuck in people feelin' sorry for me because I didn't go to school or something. I don't know. I do not like to be stereotyped because I'm not like the ordinary... I wouldn't say ordinary,

but I'm not what society thinks a black woman is. I'm smart, I don't depend on anyone, not even a man, I don't care if you know we've been dating... you know, I have a boyfriend we've been dating for five years and I don't ask him for anything. If I need something I go and get it on my own....people think black women just have babies and on section 8... you know, just doin' pay check to pay check. Now days you have to be a stripper or have a big 'ol booty or be drop dead gorgeous according to the internet... I don't like that at all. And was another reason why you know, I am taking my education serious because I want to show my sister and I want to show my family and everyone else that... that you know you don't have to be that. You don't have to settle for less... even if you don't have the money, there are ways to get money and finish your education to make your life better (Lyssa, p. 14, paragraph 104).

For Tracie, breaking stereotypes had as much to do with confronting what her family felt about college. She said, "...They was thinking like that's a waste of time because they didn't go....I gave them that attitude like I don't care if y'all don't support me, I'm still gonna go. So they just started to support me" (Tracie, p. 4, paragraph 42).

Azariah also had to confront her family's stereotypes about a community college versus a traditional university. She said, "...they felt like by going to college I would waste myself. Like if I had the intelligence and capacity to attend a university, why not?" (Azariah, p. 5, paragraph 27). She would go on to say she shut those doors and felt assured in her personal decisions.

## College As Seen on TV and in the Movies

That would not be the last time a participant in the study would allude to stereotypes or perceptions of a community college versus a traditional four year university. In fact many of the perceptions the women had about going to college were based on images or ideas they had seen on television or film. Some of these constructions also involved comparisons between community college and university settings. Janette remarked, "...before college, I thought it was going to be hard, difficult... I thought it was gonna be like how we see on TV" (Janette, p. 14, paragraph 129). Tracie remembered, "I was really scared about my professors. Like...you know what you see on TV" (Tracie, p. 6, paragraph 62)... Tracie went on to explain that it looked "...so hard and people always failing...girls being wild...and it's not like that whatsoever. It's so different. It's so friendly and it's so warm and it's so open and it's so... Like they help you to help yourself. I didn't know it was like that" (Tracie, p. 17, paragraph 230).

Lyssa, Janette, and Azariah also drew clear distinctions regarding their perceptions of the community college and that of a university experience. These constructions were based largely on their ideas that universities were fun, celebrated and more likely to be accepted by others, but also just as likely to care less about them as students. The community college thus provided them with help in a smaller, more family like environment. Lyssa remarked,

...All my professors... they actually got to... get to know you and your name and they were open to have office hours if you need to discuss anything, so I feel like that plays a big part in helping... the students be successful in a way because if you feel like no one cares about you then, it's like oh what the... or like why finish or... That's how in a



smaller community...maybe in a bigger one as UCF they don't really care, but at Valencia, they take the time to help you (Lyssa, p. 12, paragraph 94).

At one point in the beginning of our interview Janette mentioned that although she had not been accepted to the universities of her choice, her parents made her feel like she got accepted to the 'biggest university ever.' Her time at the community college also ended up being beyond her expectations. She stated, "I wasn't expecting a community college to be like this. It's basically, kinda like a university..." (Janette, p. 13, paragraph 117).

Azariah recalled,

I remember thinking about a smaller college because I had friends that went to UCF and told me about how huge the classes were and stuff and I wanted a more personal... being where my mind was at the time, I needed to have a connection with the professor. I couldn't be like an anonymous in an auditorium with like 300 students. I wanted a way more condensed environment (Azariah, p. 6, paragraph 38).

That condensed environment became what Tracie liked most, "...when I got here everybody was all relaxed and everybody was like... they understood me...It felt like family a little bit" (Tracie, p. 4, paragraph 48).

## Setting Examples and Being a Role Model

All of the women in this study wanted to set examples for others in their lives, particularly for younger family members. Tracie said, “It [being in college] makes me feel like I’m accomplishing somethin’. Like it makes me feel like I’m bein’ a role model to my younger siblings... (Tracie, page 2, paragraph 18). She would go on to tell me later in our interview

... Where my mom stays it’s not really like a how can I say it? ... It’s not like a live-able area. You know, they have the gun shooting and the drug sellin’ and my brother sees that like every day and for me to be in college and for him to see me in college... I just hope it makes him feel like he can do that too and not be a statistic (Tracie, p. 10, paragraph 129).

For Lyssa being an example also translated into being able to one day provide financial support for her family. She explained,

I wanted to be able to support my family. If they need me then, I’m there. I want to be able to take care of my mother because I don’t want her workin’ all of her life. And I want to show my sister that going to college means... well, not means, but going to college is a way to get what you want...because my sister she is right behind me (Lyssa, p. 15, paragraph 108).

Beyond college helping her to feel a sense of completeness, Celeste felt going to college helped her to set examples for her family and others in her community. Reflecting she shared,

Not too long ago I was wondering how we could get... I seen a group of young females just out in the street fighting and I said, 'I wonder if I could do something to show them that in the street fighting isn't the way to go, they need to get an education and just pick themselves up'.... even if I can inspire one person that is much younger than I am to go to college, it would make me happy (Celeste, p. 10, paragraph 85).

Janette also wanted to set an example for others in her family noting,

I think it's important for me personally because no one in my immediate family went and I really did it to be an example to my niece because my niece really, really looks up to me. I did it really for her and I do it for my mom and my dad...of course myself (Janette, p. 8, paragraph 74).

She continued by saying she wanted to let those younger family members around her know "...that there is an option to go to college..." (Janette, p. 9, paragraph 78).

## **CHAPTER SIX: MAKING MEANING AND DEVELOPING NEW INSIGHTS**

*It all springs from the character biography; out of our character's past comes a point of view, a personality, an attitude, behavior, a need and a purpose.*

-Syd Field (1994, p.41)

### Introduction

As part of my reflections on the women in this study and what essentially became their educational biographies in Chapter Four, as well as the dominant discourses as discussed in Chapter Five, I found myself asking whether there was still more, whether there were additional layers to be uncovered. In fact, after I had written what I thought to be my final chapter, I called my Chair, frantic asking, *What had I been writing these last few months?!* As we discussed the organization of the last few chapters of the study and my desire to be loyal to the voices of the women, our conversation moved beyond a discussion of their voices and focused in on a discussion of the framework and what if any new insights could be offered. Dr. Cintrón encouraged me to push beyond my expectations (and self-imposed limitations) and begin to think critically about the nature of qualitative research itself. This chapter therefore takes two unique, yet connected directions as I offer my final understandings as researcher. One direction focuses more explicitly on making meaning within this study through the lens of the women in it and the other focuses on the new insights about qualitative research that I gained and learned to appreciate.

### Digging Deeper: Uncovering Complex Layers

At one point in my interview with Azariah, she revealed, “I kind of fear finishing college with how today’s world is and then being as if I never even got a degree. That, I am deadly afraid of...” (Azariah, p. 4, paragraph 21). Further, Lyssa stated, “...You can get a college degree, but if you don’t know what to do with it then, you’re just gonna be...probably still working at a regular job...” (Lyssa, p. 2, paragraph 12). Reflecting on these two thoughts brought me to a deeper revelation as it dawned on me that while the value of higher education was strongly represented by the discourses identified in Chapter Five, the value of higher education also extended beyond those discourses and had a much more profound meaning and role in the lives of the women. The essence of who they were and the security of their very futures was inextricably linked to what they had come to believe the experience of going to college could provide for them in the form of opportunities. As such, higher education became in many ways a critical life-line. The experience that participating in higher education provided was paramount to the women’s very livelihoods and the protection and defense against the harsh realities of society. This brought me to yet another understanding. For the women, going to college was not a romanticized view or version of higher education that many and even the one I had. The women’s relationship with college was only seen as beneficial to the point that it served as a practical tool in helping them to move beyond where and who they were at the time of the study, to a place, position and person they aimed to be. Said differently, the idea of college and what it could do for them was seen as a catalyst to self-actualization. Yet, there seemed to be ongoing and at times conflicting negotiations between those realities. This is most prominently

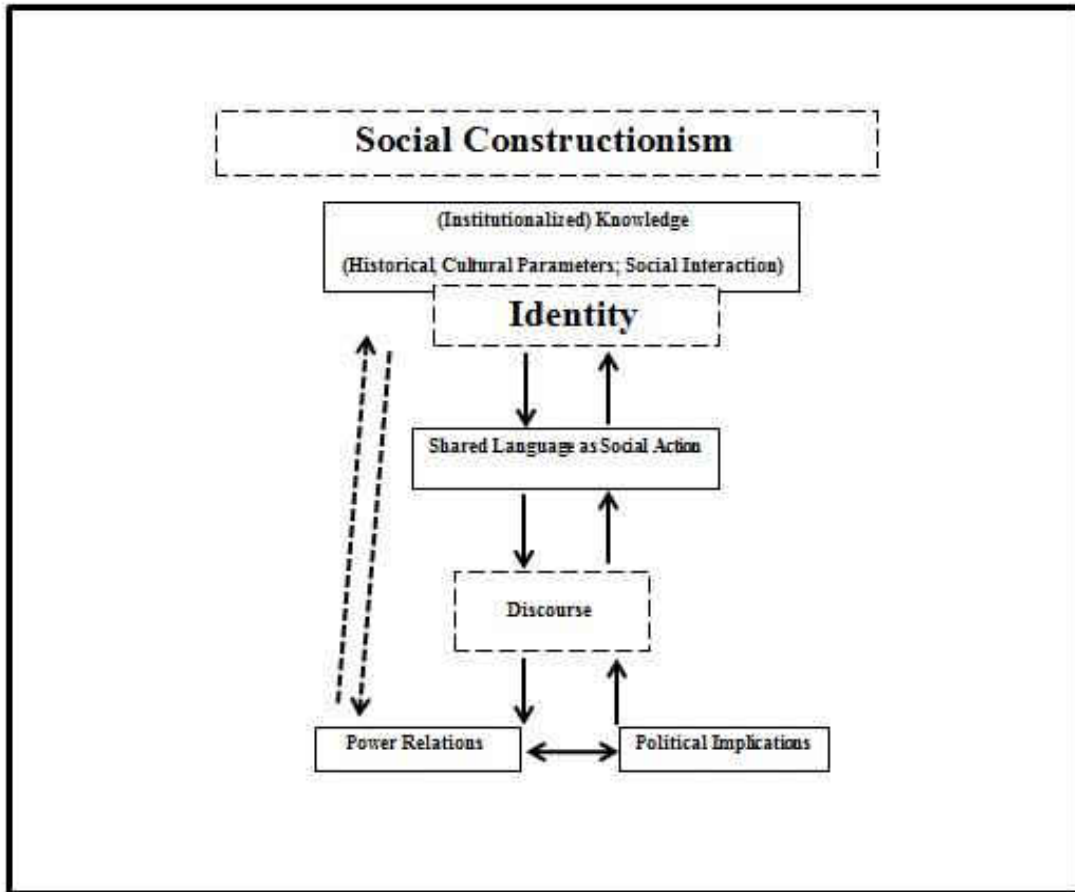
represented by the opening quotes for each of the women's profiles used in Chapter Four. For Azariah, feeling 'in and out' was connected to feelings of wanting to attain a goal that those in her immediate circle had not yet done; specifically becoming someone she herself could admire. For Lyssa, the 'pressure' that she described as being put on her shoulders became a welcome weight as she began to see college as a guide to streamline her own shortcomings in order to become someone who was both respected and independent. Even for Celeste, the oldest out of the women in the study, going to college was seen as a way to 'complete' an aspect of herself that she had not previously been able to fulfill even though she described a full life as a wife, mother, and employee over the years. For Janette going to college was an answer, a path to 'find herself' and as a way to help to others in the world. Finally, for Tracie, making it to college in spite of and yet because of many personal struggles made her feel like college was where she was 'supposed to be all along.'

#### *Examining Connections Between Discourse, Identity, and Power*

After meditating on these sentiments, I once again revisited the framework used for this study and specifically Burr's (1995) discussion of the relationship between discourses, identity, power and knowledge in Chapter One. Particularly, discourses that form (or help to form) identity as I have suggested in the above paragraph have implications for what people do and that has connections to social structures and practices; thus bringing into question the very nature of knowledge and truth. This line of thinking becomes central for conceptualizing a theory that can be used for examining how first-generation students think about and understand higher

education. As documented in the literature reviewed for this research and in the instance of the first-generation women in this study, they often come to the community college with complex lives, realities and demands. As reflected in this study, classes like the Student Success course helped inform a new aspect of participants' identity— a college student identity. However, through the study I learned the women's experiences and surrounding circumstances were about more than establishing a college student identity. Participating in higher education or going to college served as the connecting link between their current and future realities, an identity beyond that of just a student. Through this research experience, it was strongly evident that the women's desire for higher education and the impact that it had in and on their lives allowed them to exercise a form of power over their destinies. Asserting themselves and using higher education as the mechanism to control their future was both positive and necessary.

Thus, I decided to revisit the initial figure of the conceptual framework provided in Chapter One. Although, identity was central, it was originally placed to the far right in the figure, somewhat as a by-product of social interactions and experiences. However, after reflecting on the data, I felt that the position of identity should be at the top, centered, and under, yet connected to knowledge. It would be represented by dotted lines as opposed to solid lines since meaning making and understanding is a negotiation process, constantly changing. Figure 10 reflects these changes.



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Figure 10. A model of the social construction of identity

*Note.* This figure is my re-conceptualization of social constructionism based on my experiences with the study participants and Burr, V. (1995). *An introduction to social constructionism*. New York: Routledge.



*The Process: Becoming a Qualitative Researcher*

From the beginning to the end of this research has been a whirlwind of ideas, emotions, and constant reflection. I think I became so focused on the final product that at moments, I forgot to truly acknowledge what in all actuality became the most rewarding aspect of this type of research ... the process. Yes, I was able to highlight the voices of five women, whose stories may never have been told, but selfishly, I can also say learned a great deal about myself through the process of multi-tasking within and outside of the study. Sometimes these two facets cooperated, sometimes they did not and I have come to realize that even what I felt to be conflicts were necessary.

I struggled over words, particularly how to phrase ideas, meanings, and whether what I interpreted was 'right.' I was constantly thinking about this study and saw it in everything from church sermons, to television shows and newspaper articles. It is because of that, I feel more equipped, more confident and ready to conduct qualitative research that acknowledges how the process is as important as the finished product. Through this process I was invited into the lives of a very special group of women, my discipline, my practice, and myself (Glesne, 2011). I was not always sure of what I was looking for or where or even how this research would end, but I made important steps forward figuratively and literally. I can honestly affirm that "True research does not end. Instead, it points the way for yet another search" (Glesne, 2011, p. 275). This search will likely take many directions. I am a qualitative researcher.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FINAL REFLECTIONS: TO BE CONTINUED**

*Adaptation is defined as the ability 'to make fit or suitable by changing, or adjusting' – modifying something to create a change in structure, function, and form, which produces a better adjustment.*

-Syd Field (1994, p.204)

### Introduction

Syd Field speaks of adaption in reference to transforming a story from one medium or format to that which appears as the final version we see on the screen. I became all too familiar with adaptation during this research process as I aimed to transform the voices and experiences of the participants in this study into one that would both tell and honor their lives and also draw attention to the need for more exploration to be done. There was countless restructuring, thinking, and re-thinking in order to produce a complete, reflective piece that illuminated those voices as well as my personal reflections and how the two came together. This was at times frustrating, confusing and many days appeared endless. However, it was when I came to terms with what this work had become – one that was just as much about that process as the product itself – that I was able to get over mental blocks, move past the half-way mark, and finish the task I started many months earlier.

Therefore, in this concluding chapter, I will discuss the implications of this study's findings for faculty/ staff and advisors of the Student Success course and programs, community college administrators specifically and larger higher education organizations, associations, and

governing bodies. I have chosen to start with faculty/staff and advisors of the Student Success course because these professionals have some of the first interactions with students like those who participated in this study. Beginning with these key figures may have the most direct impact in advance of other college administrative and larger state policies change. Many of these implications impact the teaching pedagogy, curriculum, communication, and marketing plans for American community colleges, taking into consideration the ways value was constructed by the women in this study. These implications also raise pertinent questions for the institution of higher education as a whole. While the findings from this study cannot and should not be generalized, the implications offered within this chapter serve as areas for future consideration when dealing with similar student populations. Moreover, the recommendations in this chapter reflect what the participants of this study said, my personal reflective notes, and the research literature. This chapter will conclude with my final reflections on this research process and my next steps.

### Significance of the Study

To revisit the reason I first pursued this work lies largely in the fact that literature on first-generation, minority community college women who have taken a Student Success course is non-existent. While there is a plethora of literature on each of these areas, there was nothing that explored these elements together or that looked at students' perceptions of the value of higher education. Further, because there have been challenging social conditions that exist for many students and particularly for those like the participants in this research, this study aimed to gain

insight into the experiences and realities of this growing demographic of the college-going population.

Three dominant discourses about the value of higher education were identified from the data regarding the understandings and experiences of these students. The participant profiles in Chapter Four along with an exploration and discussion of the three major discourses in Chapter Five and Six provided insight into the lives and realities of the women in this study.

### Implications

The implications section of most research helps to neatly conclude a study; providing a connection between the findings of the study and the action or impact those findings can have on various groups or the field of research itself. While I do believe there is some truth to that and I will provide implications in several areas, I believe the implications and later recommendations offered in this chapter serve more as points for critical discussion and not as a final conclusion. Particularly, it is my hope that what has been identified as dominant discourses regarding the value of higher education discussed in previous chapters will be used as starting points of conversation related to the expectations, experiences, and perceptions the value of higher education holds especially when interacting with first-generation students in a Student Success course at a community college.

### *Implications for Student Success Faculty, Staff and Advisors*

I took on the challenge of conducting this study because of my personal experiences as a teacher of a Student Success course. My class served as place where students could learn strategies to do well in college, but also proved to be a place to hear from students about their perspectives and gain insight into their experiences and expectations. Hope (n.d.) discussed the course as a key place to help students uncover their identity as college students. As discussed in Chapter Four, the course did help to inform the participants' identity as college students in meaningful ways, but after reflecting on the framework and the totality of the participants' transcripts, I realized the course was about more than informing a college student. The course was equally important as a mechanism in informing the whole person, as was their understandings of the college experience itself. The women in this study found that the Student Success course was important for helping them to feel organized, make connections and communicate with others. The women also discovered strategies to help them with their other classes, just as important, the course was instrumental in helping them think about and plan their long-term goals. While these findings were consistent with the overall objectives of Valencia's Student Success courses, I believe what the women revealed in the study about their prior experiences, future expectations and the overall value of higher education in their lives, draws attention to the need to go a step further in the Student Success course. The Student Success course then becomes the ideal place for deep student reflection and discussion about those future expectations, understandings and the value of higher education (in its multiple ways of being understood and described). Therefore, teachers of this course whether they are full-time faculty, college staff and/or advisors, should be cognoscente to include reflective moments into their

pedagogical strategies and classroom curriculum. Braxton (2000) suggests having teachers, activities and pedagogies that affirm who students are is important. As such, affirming past experiences, discussing the students' perspectives on the value of higher education and other values, also recognize voice and can lead to more engaging and important in class and out of class meaning-making moments.

Further, while the Student Success course at Valencia College requires that students complete several mandatory assignments that focus on goal setting, career and academic planning, any additional assignments or group projects should focus on helping students make connections to the campus and or community in which they live. The women in this study did not always feel connected to the campus community. In fact it was their desire to take on a more active role; they felt unable to engage at the time of this study because various more pressing obligations. Thus, providing moments for students to engage in the community as part of the Student Success course could be beneficial. Project, problem or experiential-based projects in which students are charged to create or produce programs or products that help them to think more critically about their lives, and/or other students could be an effective way to accomplish this objective.

Additionally, while most Student Success faculty also hold another position on campus, as a staff member or college advisor, it should not be assumed that they are knowledgeable of the population in which they are serving. As Valencia College (and other community colleges) continue to face an influx of students, much like the participants in this study, it is important that they undergo continued training in order to stay well-informed of the issues facing these groups

of students. Therefore, in addition to changes in pedagogical and curricular strategy that were noted, Student Success faculty, staff and advisors should obtain on-going formal and informal training, covering issues of the students they teach. This may also include exploring student development theories from which to draw from and incorporate into practice. These theories should extend beyond traditional persistence theories and include ones that acknowledge the economic, social and cultural backgrounds of their students. As such, teachers should feel free to incorporate lessons on areas of importance to students, such as those identified in this study.

Finally, teachers should also be made aware of the larger issues, outside of college, facing students. That may include covering issues and topics from relevant news sources and higher education literature. As teachers stay abreast of key higher education matters, they should also incorporate those articles and additional pieces of information into a ‘real deal’ or ‘twenty-first century skills’ series in their respective courses. These series would discuss those important issues, but also provide moments for critical discussion, reflection, and validation of student experiences and expectations. This can also clear up any confusion about the college process. Further these series can cover topics related more specifically to making transitions from college (and university) into the working world. In these ways, teachers of the Student Success course become much more like brokers of the community college and institution of higher education itself.

### *Implications for Administrators*

The first-generation, minority women who participated in this study recognized the value of higher education in their lives largely in terms of opportunity. While this opportunity seemed uncertain at some points, going to college gave the women a chance and a choice they wanted and needed to improve their lives. Whether spoken of in terms of personal fulfillment, financial stability or as a social obligation, higher education and their first steps at Valencia College placed them on a path to personal success. In the same way American community colleges have democratized higher education for thousands of students throughout the twentieth century, they will continue to play a leading role and starting point in the twenty-first century for thousands more students similar to the ones in this study. Student Success courses at community colleges have and can still play an even greater role in not only helping students to adjust to the intricacies of college, but provide an outlet for students to reflect on their experiences and expectations. As such, it may be beneficial for Valencia College (and other community college administrators) to consider offering the Student Success course to students before they reach the community college doors. Though the Student Success course at Valencia is currently offered as a joint or dual enrollment class, this course offering can be expanded to more schools. Offering the course to juniors and / or seniors in high school for credit gives students a ‘heads up’ as to what to think about, what to consider and as a way to explore the expectations and demands they will face as college students. Further, offering college credit can provide an incentive and make a difference in a student’s choice to continue their studies at Valencia, a place and system that is familiar. During my dissertation defense, it was also determined that there should be a discussion of strategies community college administrators should take to incorporate families and / or younger



siblings into introducing new students to the college. Considering the women in this study felt their long term success was to ensure stability for their families and in many ways wanted to be able to set examples, community college administrators can offer a “Family Day” or a “Bring your Sibling” to campus day. Such activities will help students like those in this study reinforce and recommit to their purpose while also being able to show the next generation what they are experiencing.

In addition to more clearly exploring dual enrollment and the inclusion of students’ families, it is important to expose those students taking a Student Success course to their major or degree program early on. As part of the Student Success course at Valencia students do conduct research and write a Career Exploration paper in which they research and conduct an interview with someone in their perspective fields of study. The women in this study felt it was important to do more than just this assignment as made evident in all their interviews. The students were ready to get through their initial courses so they could get to the ‘real work’ of their field. The Student Success, course in collaboration with other departments such as Career Services, could help students become more engaged in their major interests. Providing such an opportunity early on may prove to be beneficial and help students to establish greater connections. Further, offering students workshops in various fields, mentors along with major and degree program orientations in their field as part of the Student Success department initiatives would be beneficial. Researchers (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Lincoln, 2009; Mellow & Heelen, 2008; Mullin, 2010, Tschechtelin, 2011) affirm this sentiment by suggesting community colleges need to overhaul student educational experiences (as a whole) and not only provide clear pathways to careers, but also provide students with resources directed towards those

careers. These suggestions and potential extra support needed to provide or restructure services may come at a significant financial cost to the institution. I do believe an investment or investigation into how to implement these changes can not only benefit the institution, but most directly benefit the students. In this way, the Student Success department can become not just a department or course that students only utilize at the beginning of their collegiate journey. Instead the Student Success department becomes a true hub of the best ideas, practices and resources for students and faculty across the campus; ultimately reflecting the institutions commitment to student success and creating an institutional culture that mirrors that sentiment.

Further, considering the women spoke to the value of higher education in terms of opportunity, it may be beneficial for Valencia to create a marketing and communication campaign around that discourse. Exploring why students value higher education and its deep personal meaning in their lives can serve as effective marketing and messaging tools when communicating with students. These marketing strategies may also extend to the recruitment and long-term retention planning by administrators at the community college. Specifically, in the close of Chapter Five I discussed how opportunity, spoken of in three distinct ways by the participants in this study, still had as its basis the need for women to preserve themselves and their livelihood. College had become the essence of who they were and who they would become. As more students are expected to begin their higher education journeys at community colleges, it may be promising financially for community college administrators to revisit their branding campaigns (and mission statements); highlighting the role community colleges can play in helping students reach their personal desires at a significantly lower cost than traditional four year state, private and liberal arts institutions. The first part of rebranding is directly reflected by

four of the women in this study who originally had no plans of attending Valencia. While their sights were set on larger state universities and an HBCU, Valencia became a very realistic option when they weighed the cost of obtaining a degree and their ability to transfer to a university. If community colleges that offer low tuition costs can successfully tie their dedication to students becoming whole individuals and actualizing their personal aspirations for significantly less than four-year institutions, community colleges may be able to not only capitalize, but distinguish themselves as the ideal first and best choice for students. The second part of rebranding would be in the area of revisiting the college mission. The wording (and practice) of the mission must be one that highlights the commitment to student success; including the development and commitment to helping students develop skills and credentials necessary for the twenty-first century global economy, while still understanding their unique circumstances and goals. These implications are important areas of consideration and offer suggestions for further exploration as the community college prepares for, and becomes home to more students similar to those in this study. In whatever the community college decides to do, the heart of any changes or exploration should consider how students come to understand the value of higher education in their lives. This, in itself, has implications for student retention decisions. Considering how students construct this meaning can also help the community college create strategies based on those beliefs thus helping the college use resources more effectively and match student values and perceptions. As such, Valencia College administrators may benefit by conducting more thorough institutional research.

## Implications for Student Success Administrators

Having discussed implications this study has for Valencia administrators and potential marketing campaigns and rebranding strategies, it is equally important to give attention to specific implications this study has for Student Success administrators. Specifically, it may be beneficial to revisit the purpose and thus, structure and curriculum of the Student Success course. With historical ties to University 101 courses, which were born out of a desire to quell potential storms and at the same time connect students and members of the university in the latter half of the twentieth century, the current model of most Student Success courses might be antiquated. The participants in this study revealed that, while the course was informative in its role of helping them to understand what they needed to do to be successful college students, the course and overall higher education experiences included more than these important issues. The students in this study, who each led uniquely complex lives, wanted and needed the opportunities that going to a community college would provide in their journey to reach a place of self-actualization in their personal, financial and social realities. Recognizing this need, Student Success administrators may want to consider and build upon the dominant discourses identified in this study and refocus the emphasis of the Student Success course. The course can and should more directly focus on twenty-first century skills and competencies. Critical, relevant discussions and moments of reflection are also important. Further, this new emphasis may require rebranding of the course itself, including changing its name. As noted in Chapter Two, Student Success courses have a multitude of names and formats at colleges and universities across the country. Valencia's course was formally termed Student Life Skills. While obtaining

skills as a student is important, the women in this study found that their experiences helped them as young women navigating a path to their success. As such, names and curriculum that speaks specifically to obtaining twenty-first century skills or competencies as well as personal and professional development should be used. In another potential restructuring move, Student Success administrators may consider creating collaborative partnerships with professionals, inside and outside of the college, who can serve as mentors for students. This may help students not only grow academically, but professionally and personally.

In conjunction with the college-wide administrative teams, it may be worthwhile to create ongoing Student Success programming or seminars that students are required to participate in throughout the duration of their time at the community college. As mentioned in my dissertation defense, one such seminar could cater specifically to women or minority groups. The women in this study made reference to their ethnic minority status or cultural influences as important areas of consideration on their journey. While these common identifiers, did not stand out in the study as a significant factors in their lives as college students, they were important factors none-the-less. Students like the women in this study could benefit from having the opportunity to meet with or be part of a group of similar such students who could serve as a source of support and as a connection to the campus. Further, it also might serve the students well for community college and Student Success administrators to create an “exit” Student Success course or professional development course as students prepare to transfer into the university or pursue their professional careers. These implications should also be weighed against past departmental research and in conjunction with strategic planning. Budgets and costs to implement these, or any changes, are

important considerations. Lastly, more research on the students who take this course should be considered to support policy and structural changes.

### *Implications for Higher Education Policy-Makers and Governing Bodies*

It was clear the women in this study represent the new face of the community college student. These women, from varied demographic backgrounds, all saw higher education as an opportunity to improve their lives. Their experience at the community college was setting them on a path towards that goal. Recognizing that these students and ones like them see college as a mandatory part of their existence – a life-line, it is important for higher education policy makers and governing bodies at the state and federal level to consider such perspectives. These higher education agencies and other organizations, concerned with the study of higher education and the students who attend them, have the opportunity to develop a Student Success or twenty-first century college resource center. While the federal government and most states have offered some form of resources, or enacted initiatives to help keep students in school, there should be a centralized unit or agency dedicated specifically to exploring the best practices in research, teaching and programming. These units would be specifically dedicated to increasing students' opportunities for success and maintain ongoing evaluations related to college and university practices in the areas of student success.

## Recommendations and Areas of Consideration for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, my reflections on the process itself, the implications provided in this chapter and the literature reviewed for this study, I will now provide several recommendations and areas of consideration for researchers and practitioners who may be interested in better understanding the experiences, expectations and values of first-generation students and how that can impact student success. As a starting place, it may be beneficial to more thoroughly explore each of the major discourses offered by the women in this study. They spoke of the value of higher education in their lives as opportunity – a chance and a choice that going to college would provide for their long-term well-being. With these points highlighted, researchers may want to conduct qualitative research studies that focus on the value of higher education as it relates to personal fulfillment and intrinsic motivation, financial stability and college as insurance against poverty. Lastly, researchers might also consider a study that focuses on the social obligations of similar groups of women and the role or impact of breaking stereotypes as well as setting examples for others. As noted during my dissertation defense, this research shared the experiences and perceptions of first-generation minority community college women. Although the notion to combat stereotypes within their ethnic or cultural communities was identified as part of the discourse related to social obligations, this did not play as significant a role as I had expected. A qualitative researcher may want to more thoroughly explore the impact or role one's ethnicity or culture has on students' overall perceptions of higher education. The questions used as part of the interview protocol in this study can serve as a starting point for shaping research questions and more carefully exploring college students' perceptions in these specific areas.

Moreover, in this study, only the experiences of first-generation, minority community college women who completed a Student Success course within one academic year were explored. There could be a benefit to exploring the experiences of first-generation, minority male students during and after their first year of college, recognizing their college going and completion rate is lower than that of minority women. Understanding what their experiences have been and the value they place on higher education can help to serve as effective recruitment and retention strategies for community colleges. Further, it might prove to be worthwhile to compare the responses and, ultimately, discourses of the value of community college students and those who attend traditional four year institutions. This can be explored by conducting qualitative research in the form of focus groups (in semi-structured and less structured, discussion focused formats) with students at state, private and technical colleges/universities. It may also be worthwhile to conduct a study that explores the perspectives of the value of higher education of a larger group of non-first generation community college students. Their perspectives could also be viewed in relation to those provided by a larger group of first-generation students and help the institution establish comparative data. These comparisons may provide key insights into curricular changes and offerings for the Student Success course and other community college (or university) policy changes.

At the time of the study when I was recruiting students, I spoke with a potential participant who as a first-generation student, who actually completed three Student Success courses during her first year. It might be beneficial to interview similar students about their perspectives after having had such an intense set of experiences during their first year. Moreover, while I was primarily concerned with uncovering or identifying dominant discourses



or major themes about the value of higher education that were present in the women's discussions of their higher education experiences and understandings, it might be valuable to take this or other such research a step further and conduct a discourse analysis. A traditional discourse analysis in qualitative research looks at the relationship between participants' language. Braxton (2000) suggests since discourse can exist on multiple levels, analysis can take place on several levels as one explores the content itself and the pragmatic and metaphorical features of it. In this way, one can even isolate cues in speech and identify participants' beliefs and decision-making patterns – a useful approach for understanding how students construct their realities.

Up to this point, the recommendations I have made have all been based on using qualitative research methodology. I believe strongly in qualitative research as it helps to garner thick, rich descriptions of the students' perceptions and lived experiences. However, it may be beneficial to explore the value index (survey) offered by Alves (2010) which would involve conducting a quantitative study with students from the community college and/or compare their responses to those in university settings. This would allow the researcher to look specifically at the emotional and future goals of students and whether there is a correlation to the quality, program, image or perception of a college across student groups. Further, exploring how students conceptualize value on other self-reporting surveys could have implications for marketing to potential students and realigning students' expectations with college curriculum and offerings.

Additionally, anyone interested in qualitative research and exploring the values and perceptions of students may aim to conduct a longitudinal study on a similar population and monitor them after they have completed their associates' degree and transferred to a university to

begin their bachelor's degree. Participants could be interviewed again at the end of their bachelor's degree program. I personally plan to maintain a relationship and follow up with the women who participated in this study as long as they allow me to be in their lives. Such a longitudinal study can help to explore whether their values, expectations and plans have changed over time. As the students mature, what do their expectations in relation to the historical times and demands reveal or suggest as other potential areas for research of students and higher education institutions.

Moreover, I do find it important to note that any researcher considering extending such work should consider taking a critical approach. This research should rely on qualitative methodologies and contemplate non-traditional frameworks, such as those based on cultural, economic, psychological and sociological factors that impact students. It may also be beneficial to explore the role of (higher education) institutional theory in the lives of students. Qualitative methodology and the frameworks mentioned here, including the use of grounded theory acknowledge the perspectives, experiences, truths and lives of students within socially constructed realities. Finally, scholars in the field should not be afraid to collaborate with other departments and across disciplines in these areas when considering ways explore the experiences and perceptions of students. This can add deeper levels of understanding and potential theoretical accuracy and applicability in similar research.

### Researcher Final Reflections

*“Every worthwhile accomplishment, big or little, has its stages of drudgery and triumph, a beginning, a struggle, and a victory.”*

– Anonymous

I came across this quote when I was in the first stages of writing my proposal for this research in the spring 2012 semester. I posted it above my workspace and looked at it often. I reflected on it during times that I felt pain or fear about completing what seemed at the time to be the most insurmountable work I had ever faced. Now at the point of completion as I share my final reflections, I can truly say that everything I have gone through in the three and half years since I started my program, every worthwhile accomplishment and even my missteps guided me to this moment. Paradoxical I know, but I came to live in and accept a space of paradoxes during this process. It was not always easy and in fact, it was quite the challenge. However, it would be those same obstacles that helped me get out of my own way and at the same time truly enjoy the fruits of what had now become my reality.

That reality would not be possible without the very special people and events surrounding my time at both UCF and Valencia. Drs. Rosa Cintrón, Caroline Marrett and Catherine Penfold Navarro in particular, gave me just what I needed and for that I am eternally grateful. It was through my experiences with these women whether in the classroom, through an email or workshop that I began to think about a dissertation topic.

I am especially humbled by and grateful for my students. From fall 2011 through spring 2013, they inspired me and though my role implied I was there to help them figure out who they

were as they started their college careers, my students in many ways, helped me to really figure out who I was by the end of mine. Teaching at Valencia was such a rich experience and I can say that it was beyond rewarding. It was in the classroom that the best of me emerged. I was able to create, teach and enliven students and myself for one hour and fifty minutes each session. The women from Valencia who participated in this study were so full of hope, shared so freely, and offered me a new view from which to understand their unique experiences and lives. I continue to speak to them on a regular basis and have taken on the role of mentor and even advocate. I am grateful I get to experience their joys and pains as they continue to navigate their higher education experiences.

This process has most certainly required discipline and critical astuteness. To get through my courses, to prepare and successfully defend my comprehensive exams, to defend my dissertation proposal, to teach, mentor, to be a great wife, and to move across the country took some interesting adapting and maneuvering. However, with each major milestone, I became more confident and honestly, a more complete Antonia. In addition to all the work that was required to get to this point, going through this process also required a lot of faith. I could not have done it without the help of God, and the prayers of my family and friends. In fact, this journey has been much more of a spiritual journey and one in which my own identity and integrity have been challenged. At a pivotal moment in this research when things seemed particularly daunting, I thought for a split moment that it would be easier to give it all up. My husband shared a book he was reading by Palmer (2007) as part of his first year of studies at Teachers College. It was about the heart of a teacher and it spoke volumes to me. I was reinvigorated by words to not only acknowledge who I am in this world, but to acknowledge

every experience and the gifts I have to offer. Part of that was realizing that through this research and future research I can impact students, higher education institutions and our future. It also reminded me that the work I did, the relationships I made with the women because of their participation not only in my class, but in this study, was life changing for me and them. It is truly amazing to me that all of these wonderful things and rich relationships were able to happen in such a short period of time. I feel humbled and blessed that I was able to experience all that I did.

Though this study has ended and I was able to uncover some of the dominant discourses of the value of higher education in the lives of the participants in this study, the real work has just begun. The views offered by the women gave me a new level from which to view higher education and added another piece to the larger puzzle as I continue with this type of work. There is still much to do. For the women in this study and those like Sue who I mentioned in the introductory chapter, going to college can be life altering. I have come full circle as I realize while there will likely be many challenges to face in further exploring the vastness of these women's perceptions and stories, I am excited and hopeful for the many new prospects to make a difference not only in this field, but in the lives of students directly. Alas, like the stories we see on the big screen, I will end here but say that the stories of the women in this study, many others like them, and even my own is still a work in progress and as such, 'To be continued...'

**APPENDIX A:  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview protocol introduction: Hello and thank you for taking the time to participate in this research study. I appreciate you sharing your perspectives and experiences regarding the value of higher education in your life. As a student myself, I am interested in learning more about first-generation, minority women and their experiences at a community college. I am looking forward to hearing about your experiences and unique story – because I know we all have meaningful stories to share.

Explanation of researcher role: My name is Antonia Sheel and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education and Policy Studies program at the University of Central Florida. I also teach Student Success at Valencia College's East campus.

Explanation of the research study: The purpose of this research study is to uncover the ways first-generation, minority female students who participated in a Student Success course perceive the value of higher education in their lives. Based on your response to the email blast, announcement or word of mouth and our initial phone conversation, you meet the study criteria. Is that correct? (*Pause*). Wonderful, I am excited to hear from you and look forward to sharing your responses in my dissertation research. Dissertation research is essentially a very long research paper. Within my particular paper, I have done some initial research to help me better understand experiences of college students in general and the role of college in our society. Reviewing that information helped me come up with the questions that I would like to ask you in order to understand your unique perspective. For this interview, I will ask you several questions in what is considered a semi-structured format. That means, I have set questions I will ask you

as a guide, but we will also have time to ask and address other questions that also might be helpful in me understanding your perspectives.

Explanation of the interview process: This interview process will take approximately one hour to one hour and thirty minutes. With your permission, I will be audio-recording the interview. This will help me to capture more of your thoughts, in your words more accurately. I want to let you know your name and identity will be protected and no one will be able to associate what you have revealed with who you are. I plan to use pseudonyms and if you'd like you can help me create it. I will now identify you by that name. If you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions at any time of the interview, we can stop or skip that area. I will also be taking a few notes during the interview that will just help me as I play back the interview later. These notes will also help me as I begin to tell your story as part of the research. Is this a good time for us to start and if so, do I have your permission to begin recording our interview? *(If no, ask for the study participant to suggest a different time, if yes, begin recording)*.

Once recording has started: Now that I am recording, I am going to review those things I just said. I appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule to talk to me about your perspectives on the value of higher education in your life. Education has meant so much in my life and is one of the reasons I decided to pursue the doctoral degree. (Tell them about my path from an undergraduate student at Howard University to my time at UCF). I enjoy learning. I also enjoy helping others including students such as you to be successful while in college. As we get started, my questions will focus on your demographic information and history before becoming a student at VC. I will also ask you questions about your experiences as a student, how and why you decided to pursue higher education, the Student Success class you took and



finally, I will ask you questions about your future plans. There is no right or wrong, desirable or undesirable answers. Feel free to express your opinions, whether they are positive or negative. I just want you to share with me what you really think and feel. There are no anticipated risks, to you as a participant in this interview other than the small amount of risk associated with confidential studies where a breach of confidentiality might occur, but as I mentioned measures will be taken so this is very unlikely to occur. With your permission, I am audio-tape recording the discussion so that I do not miss anything you have to say. When we are finished with any audiotapes data will be stored on a password protected computer. Your responses will be kept confidential and no one will know who said what since the pseudonym we discussed will be used as an identifier instead of your name. There is no compensation, or other direct benefits to you for participating in this research. Please note, it may be helpful for you to share your story and the information you provide may also help the college create better programs for students. You may also choose not to respond to any or all of the questions without an explanation. You may also decline to participate in this interview without any consequences. If you have any questions about participants' rights, you can direct those to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) office at UCF that makes sure that I am following guidelines. I will give you all that contact information at the close of our interview today.

*(Start the interview questions).*

*Relationship between the Research Questions, Conceptual Framework and Interview Protocol Items*

<i>Research Question</i>	<i>Conceptual Framework</i>	<i>Interview Questions</i>
1. How do first generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course describe and understand their higher education experiences?	Assumptions: 1. Critical Stance Toward taken-for granted Knowledge 2. Historical and Cultural Specificity	O1 - O3; PH1 – PH7; F1, F2; R7-R9; V1-V15
2. What discourses about value are present as the first-generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course discuss their understandings and experiences in higher education?	Assumptions: 2. Historical and Cultural Specificity 4. Knowledge and Social Action Go Together	V1-V15; R1 – R9
3. How did participation in a Student Success course inform the first-generation, minority female students' identity as college students?	Assumptions: 3. Knowledge is Sustained by Social Processes 4. Knowledge and Social Action Go Together	SS1 – SS12; R9

**Demographic Information (D) (/Part of Pre-Screening)**

- D1. Name, age, major, where are you from?
- D2. First-generation to attend college? What about first in family?
- D3. Marital Status
- D4. Children - number, ages
- D5. Employment? (where? position?)
- D6. Number of courses currently taking
- D7. When did you take the Student Success course (Was it required, recommended etc..)
- D8. At what point did you take the course in your program?

**Research Question # 1 - How do first generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course describe and understand their higher education experiences?**

**Opening Questions:**

- O1. Can you tell me what you think going to college means in our society?
- O2. What is it like to be a college student?
- O3. How does going to college / being a college student make you feel?

**Prior History about Higher Education Experiences (PH)**

- PH1. Tell me about yourself. How did you get to this point? What made you decide to pursue a higher education?
- PH2. What is your earliest memory or idea about going to college?
- PH3. When it came time for you to apply to college, what was going on in your life?
- PH4. Tell me about the people in your life who were involved in your decision to go to college? What did they say? How were they involved?
- PH5. Tell me what you were thinking about when you made your final decision. What ultimately influenced or prompted your decision to apply to college?
- PH6. Did you feel supported in your decision to attend college, if so how?
- PH7. How did you feel when you applied to college? What were you thinking about when you anticipated your first month or even first semester of college?

**Research Question #2 - What discourses about value are present as the first-generation, minority female community college students who participated in a Student Success course discuss their understandings and experiences in higher education?**

**Value (V)**

V1. How did you decide on attending the community college, Valencia College? / tell me what you thought about Valencia's image as a college?

V2. Florida has 28 community colleges and 11 public state universities, did you consider any of them as options? Why or why not?

V3. Can you discuss some of the demands on your life when you first became a college student – family, work or other related?

V4. Once at Valencia, how would you describe your transition into being a college student? Is there anything that could have made your transition into Valencia smoother or better?

V5. Tell me about your initial experiences at Valencia? What were the best parts, worst parts? What were your feelings?

V6. Would you consider your experience at Valencia challenging, why or why not?

V7. Do you feel part of the Valencia community? Why or why not and in what ways?

V8. How are you paying for school (scholarships, loans, family, working etc...)? When considering the tuition price, what are your thoughts on that price for the quality of Valencia?

V9. What is your major again and how did you go about choosing this particular degree?

V10. What types of classes did you take during your first year?

V11. How do you feel attending Valencia will affect you in the long term?

V12. Valencia has an ethnically diverse student body. How do you feel Valencia prepares these students to be successful?

V13. More women attend some form of higher education than men. What do you think about this and why do you think this is? How does this make you feel?

V14. How important is it for you as a minority woman to go to college?

V15. How important is it for you as a first-generation student to go to college?

**Research Question # 3 – How did participation in a Student Success course inform the first-generation, minority female students' identity as college students?**

**Student Success (SS)**

SS1. Tell me about the student success course you took.

SS2. What did you learn in the course?

SS3. How would you describe the Student Success course in terms of what it meant to you as a new college student? What about as a first-generation college student?

SS4. What types of assignments did you do while in the course?

SS5. Was there something in the course that was meaningful or helpful to you that stuck out? In what ways did the course help you? Describe the aspects that helped you the most.

SS6. Do you or did you ever use any of the school services (counseling, tutoring etc..) Why or why not?

SS7. The major learning outcomes for Valencia's Student Success course are for students to:

- a) Identify their learning styles to help them develop and practice effective study strategies across disciplines.
- b) Demonstrate critical thinking by analyzing ideas and principles related directly to college and life situations; including constructing academic and career action plans.
- c) Communicate effectively individually and with groups in written and verbal formats.

On a scale of one through five, to what extent do you feel your participation in the class helped you with each of those areas, with one indicating the course did not help and five indicating it was a major help in those areas. [I will repeat each of them].

SS8. Throughout the semester did you speak with or meet with your Student Success teacher outside of class time? If so, for what reasons?

SS9. Do you think the things you learned in the Student Success course will help you in the future, how so?

SS10. After taking the course, do you think your ideas about yourself as a student changed? How?

SS11. What words would you use to describe yourself? What words would you use to describe yourself as a student?

SS12. Do you think being in college changes people in any way, if so how? In what ways has it changed you?

### **Future (F) \*Research Question #1**

F1. Tell me about any educational plans you may have after you leave Valencia?

F2. What are your future career goals?

### **Reflections (R) Research Question # 2**

R1. Are you pleased with your decision to attend VC, describe specifically why?

R2. Is there anything that could have made your experiences thus far at Valencia better? On your part? On the school's part?

R3. Tell me about any conflicts you may have experienced during your time so far at Valencia.

R4. Tell me about how you feel transitioning into your next steps, your next semesters?

R5. Think about how you felt about college when you first started, now think about how you feel about college now. In what ways are those feelings different or the same? What if anything contributed to those change in thoughts.

R6. Again, thinking back to when you started college, do you think your ideas about the purpose of college have changed since first starting? Now think about where you are now, have your ideas about *your* purpose or decision to attend college changed?

R7. Think about the various experiences you have had at Valencia, have your ideas of Valencia changed, if so how?

R8. Do you feel confident that your experiences at Valencia are preparing you for your future, if so, how?

R9. My primary interest in this research is to understand how you value higher education in your life and how the Student Success course informed your identity as a college student. Is there anything I didn't ask you or anything you feel that is important to share about your time, experiences or understandings as a college student that I haven't asked you?

Follow up to the interviews: Thank you for sharing your perspectives and experiences with me today. I truly do appreciate them, especially since you have taken the time out of your other responsibilities to help me. Once I have reviewed the interview and typed them out word for word in what it is called a transcription, I will contact you so you can review this for its accuracy and ask questions or provide additional commentary. This review is part of what is called the respondent validity in which you as a study participant are able to confirm that the interview fully expresses is what you were trying to say. Please also note, I am available to meet or discuss with you the research and what I am writing at any time during this research process.

Do you have any questions or concerns at this time? (*Pause*)

Now I'd like to give you some contact information. If you have any questions or concerns later about this research, you may contact me, Antonia Sheel at (412) 901-9193. Again, I am a doctoral student in Higher Education and Policy Studies in the College of Education and Human

Performance at the University of Central Florida and I teach Student Success on Valencia's East campus.

*(Turn off tape recorder. Thank them again, and say goodbye.)*



**APPENDIX B:  
FIELD NOTES OBSERVATION DOCUMENT (SAMPLE)**

FIELD NOTES OBSERVATION DOCUMENT

Date:  
Researcher:  
Participant (Pseudonym):  
Location:  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ (Total Length: \_\_\_\_\_)  
Field Notes # \_\_\_\_\_

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes

Reflections for follow up:

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FIELD NOTES OBSERVATION DOCUMENT

Date: 6/4/13  
 Researcher: *Anjuna*  
 Participant (Pseudonym): #1 (*Arvid*)  
 Location: *BSU Student Center (Asterand Lobby)*  
 Time: 6:45 to 7:45 (Total Length: 1 hr 45 min)  
 Field Notes # *1* (a little less)

#3 on audio  
 transcript

- mentioning applying for college

- find out sibling tags... what are they in prep for college

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
puts finger on nose to brace... - dries - does a little head/ hand motion - this - why did you decide to pursue... next steps on man... looks bored (ask 20 min distance... applied late... something was late, it was a minute) if not at a unit, you're looked down upon... mind was more clear (faps hand)... wishes she did like college student (pause 1:30 - people loud walking) tapping on floor when asking what her purpose (she wants to know what she is doing) - partly like "up there" - can't wait to be in class saying "Student Success" - just (Pause) - 2:44 - pause 2:58 (Canting by) - Student Success course	- out time - issues - learning type of person - finished up 1 did questioning out of order - diff. between uni w/ college - had to do stuff for herself - can't be motivated - Freedom of college life feels good She actually brought this up

} less in quiet space

Reflections for follow up:  
 Overall interview went well. The setting was quiet for the most part, but we did have several interruptions from loud people walking by. The conversation was fluid/ comfortable, to feel like what is asked helps me understand the research questions. I look forward to transcribing data & reading over what she (over) said. She said several powerful key phrases

### Descriptive Notes

hmm... taps face (when talking about transitions...)

- vocal entries... "liked how teacher was reflective..."

- playing w/ fingers (while talking about various resources)

- Students shld be able to work around

34:50 - Future plans

39:20 - throws hands up...

41:56 - yawns - little bit

- what if you're not sincere?

she feels like her experiences are not challenging?

- yawning...

47:32 - absconding between work & school

- felt pressure... she has to run pressure @ school; manager @ work...

- You will choose one over the other... guarding the ground.

- yawning 3rd time

### Reflective Notes

do  
back on SIS impact  
(as VC)... diff student  
perspectives that can  
be given to each SIS  
student....

perhaps have students  
be peer reviewers or  
responders

**APPENDIX C:  
IRB DETERMINATION**

VALENCIA COLLEGE  
Human Research Protection (HRP) Institutional Review Board (IRB)

IRB Determination Form

**Title of Research Protocol:** The perceived value of higher education among first-generation, minority female community college students: A social construction Interpretation.

**Principal Investigator (PI):** Antonina Sheel

**Date Received by IRB Chair:** 5/7/13

**IRB Number:** 13-0014

Based on the IRB Protocol Initial Submission Form (or, as appropriate, the IRB Continuing Review/Termination Form or the IRB Addendum/Modification Form) submitted by the Principal Investigator and for the project identified above, the following determination has been made by the Valencia IRB:


- The research is exempt from IRB review. Exemption category:
- The research is eligible for expedited review and has been approved.
- The research is eligible for expedited review but requires modifications and re-submission before approval can be given.
- The research is subject to full review and will be discussed at the next IRB meeting, currently scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_ (date)
- The research has been subjected to full review and has been approved.
- The research has been subjected to full review and has been disapproved.

**Period of Approval:** 5/10/13 to 5/10/14  
(cannot be retroactive)

Exemption from Valencia IRB review does not exempt the PI or Co-PI from compliance with all applicable Institutional, Federal, State, and local rules, regulations, policies, and procedures.

Although the IRB has determined that this application is exempt from IRB review, the Principal Investigator is encouraged to read, understand, and apply the attached Investigator Responsibilities document, which is required of Principal Investigators whose research protocols are approved under the Valencia IRB full or expedited review process.

If you have any remaining questions about Valencia's IRB process, contact the IRB Chair at [irb@valenciacollege.edu](mailto:irb@valenciacollege.edu)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of IRB Chair or Designated Representative

5/10/13  
Date

C: IRB File, IRB Members, PI Supervisor/Administrator



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Antonia M. Sheel**

Date: **June 17, 2013**

Dear Researcher:

On 6/17/2013, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	The perceived value of higher education among first-generation, minority female community college students: A social construction interpretation
Investigator:	Antonia M. Sheel
IRB Number:	SBE-13-09435
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in IRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 06/17/2013 02:21:40 PM EDT

IRB Coordinator

**APPENDIX D:  
RECRUITMENT EMAIL**



June 2013

Dear Students,

Greetings!

I am writing to see if you would be willing to participate in my study, *'The perceived value of higher education among first-generation, minority female community college students: A social construction interpretation.'* The purpose of this study is to document the way first generation, minority female community college students who have participated in a Student Success course describe and essentially define the value of higher education in their lives. I want to gain a better understanding of the various factors or influences that inspired your journey as well as your experiences while in school. I would also like to uncover how participation in a Student Success course informed your understandings and experiences as a college student. Finally, I would be honored to be able to document your future goals.

I am specifically looking to include first-generation, ethnic minority female participants who have completed a Student Success course within the last two semesters (fall 2012 or spring 2013). For the purpose of this study, a first-generation student is a student in which neither parent has received a college degree at the Associates or Bachelors level. (This also includes adult relatives you may have grown up with such as an aunt, uncle or grandparent). Also, for the purpose of this study, an ethnic minority student is defined as any student belonging to any non-white ethnic or racial group.

If you feel you fit this category, I am asking for your participation in a one-on-one semi-structured interview to better understand your perceptions and experiences while pursuing a higher education. The interview should take no longer than one hour and thirty minutes. Lastly, at the end of the study, you will be asked to review the common themes in the final draft of the research findings to help ensure I have accurately captured what you have said. This should take no longer than 20 to 30 minutes. There are no consequences if you are unable to complete this aspect of the study. Altogether, these activities should take no longer than 2 hours of your time.

A little more about me: I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education and Policy Studies program at the University of Central Florida. I have worked as a Student Success adjunct instructor for the last two academic years and have enjoyed working closely with my students to hear from them about their interests and needs as they aim to be successful in college. I am easily able to work around your schedule so that any interviews do not interfere with your class, home or work responsibilities.

There are no anticipated risks for you participating in this research other than the small amount of risk associated with confidential studies where a breach of confidentiality might occur. However, measures will be taken so that this is very unlikely to occur. You may refuse to participate in the data collection/research portion of this study and are free to withdraw from it at any time. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. You will not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. There are no incentives for participating in this study except those that might be gained through being able to share your unique experiences.

Thank you greatly for your consideration.

If you are interested or think you might be interested, please feel free to contact me directly at: [antoniasheel@knights.ucf.edu](mailto:antoniasheel@knights.ucf.edu) OR [ashrel@mail.valenciacollege.edu](mailto:ashrel@mail.valenciacollege.edu) OR 412-901-9193 (cell)

Information regarding your rights as a research participant may be obtained from:

IRB Chair  
Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
Valencia College  
701 N. Iconlockhatchee Trail  
Orlando, FL 32825  
Mail Code 3-32  
Email: [irb@valenciacollege.edu](mailto:irb@valenciacollege.edu)

OR

IRB Coordinator  
Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
University of Central Florida (UCF)  
12201 Research Parkway, suite 501  
Orlando, FL 32826-3246  
Telephone: (407) 823-2901

Best regards,

Antonia Sheel

**APPENDIX E:  
PERMISSION TO USE COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL**

9/12/13

RE: Permission to use copyrighted material in dissertation ... - Antonia Sheel

RE: Permission to use copyrighted material in dissertation research  
- 9/12/13

Snyder, Tom <Tom.Snyder@ed.gov>

Thu 9/12/2013 10:22 AM

To: Antonia Sheel <antoniashell@knights.ucf.edu>;

Dear Ms. Sheel,

The Digest of Education Statistics is a federal government publication and is considered to be in the public domain. No permission is needed to reproduce the content of this publication.

Thanks

Tom Snyder

Supervisor

Annual Reports and Information Staff

National Center for Education Statistics

U.S. Department of Education

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From: Antonia Sheel [mailto:antoniashell@knights.ucf.edu]

Sent: Thursday, September 12, 2013 9:46 AM

To: Snyder, Tom

Subject: Permission to use copyrighted material in dissertation research - 9/12/13

Greetings Mr. Snyder.

My name is Antonia Sheel and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Central Florida. I recently defended my proposal *The perceived value of higher education among first-generation, minority female community college students: A social construction interpretation*.

I am writing because I would like to ask permission to include items created by Snyder and Dillow (2011) in my dissertation research. The first item is the figure "Enrollment, degrees, and expenditures in degree-granting institutions: Fall 1960 through fall 2009 and 1960-61 through 2009-10" (Figure 11). Note: I plan to specifically use the figure referring to college enrollment. I would also like to include data from the table "Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions, by attendance, status, sex of student and type and control of institution: Selected years, 1970 through 2009" (Table 204). Note: I plan to specifically refer to community college enrollments in millions for fall 1970 through 2009.

I most certainly plan to attribute proper citation and credit to your work.

<https://pod51038.outlook.com/owa/#viewmodel=ReadMessageItem&ItemID=AAMkADIwNDRIYmFhLTUyNDkxNDg3NC05NmUwLWI3N2EQZDA2YWUxOABGA...> 1/2

9/12/13

RE: Permission to use copyrighted material in dissertation ... - Antonia Sheel

Would you kindly respond with a formal letter certifying whether or not this is possible, and / or direct me to the appropriate person who may be able to provide me with an answer? Thank you in advance and I look forward to hearing from you in the very near future.

Snyder, T. D., & Dillow, S. A. (2011, April). *Digest of education statistics: 2010* (NCES 2011-015). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

Best Regards,

Antonia M. Sheel  
Higher Education and Policy Studies Doctoral Candidate  
Holmes Scholar  
University of Central Florida  
Email: [antoniasheel@knights.ucf.edu](mailto:antoniasheel@knights.ucf.edu)  
Cell: 412-901-9193

\*Special note: During the dissertation defense, the researcher was asked to update figures. At that time she was able to update Figure 1. The figure in which this original email was referencing. The same message applies to the updated figure. Because it is a federal government publication, it is considered public domain and no permission is needed for its (updated) use.

<https://pod51038.outlook.com/owa/NewsModel-ReadMessageItem&ItemID=AAMKADIINDRfYmFhLTUyNDIiNDg3NC05NmUwLW3N2E0ZDA2YWUxOABGA...> 2/2

**APPENDIX F:  
PARTICIPANT MEETING LOG**

PARTICIPANT MEETING LOG

Participant's Name (Pseudonym)	Date of Interview	Time of Interview	Location of Interview	Notes
Azariah	June 4, 2013	6p-7:45p	Waterford Lakes Boston Coffee (Orlando, FL)	-This was a good location if I need a place outside of VC -Interview went well...seemed quite long, but got rich info to do her profile -Stayed after a few minutes to discuss my higher education experiences
Lyssa	June 7, 2013	3p – 4:30p	Starbucks Coffee, University Blvd (Orlando, FL)	-Comfortable interview; seemed somewhat loud because of where we were sitting -Definitely enlightening...Lyssa provided interesting commentary -We laughed a lot; she was very open in discussing her experiences and thoughts
Celeste	June 14, 2013	3p-4:15p	Valencia College, East Campus (in front of Building 6) (Orlando, FL)	-Went well despite not having access to building -Celeste was very enthusiastic... has had a long journey and this is a goal she plans to complete -Seemed to have gone by faster than first and second interviews -Stayed after and talked about business ideas and hair
Janette	June 24, 2013	4p-5p	Valencia College, East Campus - Building 3 Lounge (Orlando, FL)	-Space was a quiet, good meeting space; she was waiting for me when I first arrived -Janette was somewhat quiet , almost shy even despite describing herself as outgoing -Stayed after to discuss future plans (on both parts)
Tracie	June 30, 2013	4:40p-5:30p	Panera Bread, University Blvd (Orlando, FL)	-Tracie arrived a few minutes late, we had lunch, Panera was a comfortable location -Very calm/casual interview -Only participant who NEVER considered going to college; she is now enjoying her experience -Stayed after to discuss hair, identity, school and life in general

*Note.* This table reflects the meetings held with each study participant, including the dates, times, locations and initial meeting notes

**APPENDIX G:  
GENERATING INITIAL CODES (PHASE 2)**

Round 1 - Pen  
 Round 2 - Highlighter  
**ANTONIA SHEEL**  
 Round 3 - Blue Pen

Study: THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG FIRST GENERATION, MINORITY FEMALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION INTERPRETATION

Transcription of interview with **#1-Azariah**  
 Date: June 4, 2013  
 Location: Waterford Lakes Boston Coffee (Orlando, FL)  
 Time: 6p - 7:45pm (1 hour and 45 minutes)

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1	Antonia: I am here with Azariah and we are going to start with a few opening questions. Can you tell me what you think going to college means in our society?
2	Azariah: Umm... I think going to college in our society means like going on a path to be somebody... to be successful. A path of success. I feel like if you go to college, you're looked up on. Like no one looks down to you. Whereas if you don't, you're like... you're you know... umm... This is like my culture that I am speaking of. Like I don't really know of like America, like in my house... like as long as you're there, you're good. You're gonna be good. But if you're not, you're suddenly stereotyped as like a nobody or as someone who's just setting them-self to fail in life.
3	Antonia: Can you maybe tell me about your culture? You said in my culture that means 'you would be a nobody'.
4	Azariah: Yeah, Dominican Republic. Like if you don't go to college. Like you... How can I describe it... Like you let down those who love you. Like seriously as extreme as that sounds like there is no other option within the culture of my family. Like, you have to go to college.
5	Antonia: What is it like for you to be a college student?
6	Azariah: Right now... Umm is this where I can be completely honest?
7	Antonia: Yes, definitely.
8	Azariah: It was a little bit stressful because I had so much going on in my personal life and being that I was a freshman, everything was new to me like if I don't have my agenda, I am screwed. College... is like you're thrown in there. No one... it is so true, no one is telling you like when this is due or when this payment is due or this application or this new financial aid thing.. it's just like you're really on you own. And um I don't have a problem being on my own but I have like work, school and then super big problems behind that, I kind of like get lost. Or if I have like this big issue and like this big project, for some reason my mind like, I get like dizzy with the things.
9	Antonia: Do you mean dizzy as in like physically dizzy or...
10	Azariah: Not literally, but like my head just starts to spin. Sometimes its hard



ANTONIA SHEEL

Study: THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG FIRST-GENERATION, MINORITY FEMALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION INTERPRETATION

	<p>to control my life and I'd like to control it. (sneezes) and when I don't control it I just feel like I am like stuck in pits, like..</p>
11	<p>Antonia: This next question is similar to the one I just asked, but despite those things going on, how does going to college or being that college student make you feel?</p>
12	<p>Azariah: Okay, being in college it really makes me feel good. Like I know a lot of people who complain and stuff... the only thing that bums me out about college is math and that's because I think I've been a personal wall with mathematics... like that is the only thing that makes me feel like Oh my God college, ya know? When I have like a test or something, I feel like I can never surpass math levels for some reason. But, overall, getting to school, sitting in a class, hearing lecture, taking notes, I'm a learning type of person so I do like that. I love reading, I love learning. Like math is the only thing that kind of like kills my parade. Besides that, being a college student it is such a blessing. Also being where I come from and seeing like all the people in my family who didn't have that opportunity, it's definitely like awesome that I am in college.</p>
14	<p>Antonia: Now I am going to ask you to tell me a little more specifically about yourself. How did you get to this point? What made you decide to pursue a higher education?</p>
15	<p>Azariah: I think what made me decide uh to get a higher education was the vision of being someone because that was something my father always engraved in me and um to have a better quality of life. I think that you know if I work to get like a better job... like you know I will be more like satisfied. Not that I am materialistic, but just like comfortable. I don't care to be rich, but I definitely want to have a comfortable home and a family that there is no struggle to feed and stuff. So I believe that education plays a huge role in that... in my future. I think that's what really made me just go to college... and get somewhere through there. I wanted to do it that way. Also... to be honest, I feel like it was just the next step. I don't know if it is something that I really pursued. I just felt like high school was done, now the next chapter is college. Like I never felt like it was never 'do I wanna go?' I felt like it was just the next thing. You know like when you're done eating, you wash your hands. I felt like that was the transition. Like it was that easy. Like it was never 'think about it.'... oh and also a huge reason I think was definitely my father. Like I didn't think about it. It wasn't like am I going or not, it was I am going, but I do feel like behind that 'I'm going', my father</p>

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**ANTONIA SHEEL**

Study: THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG FIRST-GENERATION, MINORITY FEMALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION INTERPRETATION

	has to see that I am going. He was a huge influence in that...in my education.
16	Antonia: What is your earliest memory or idea about going to college? You mentioned in your culture you felt like it was the natural next step, so what was your earliest memory or conversation about what going to college was.
17	Azariah: Well, ever since ... hmm... (looks off...) not middle school ... I would say high school ...like freshman year is when we would have like these presentations like for me ..well, high school is what I did in Florida, before that I was in New Jersey. When I was in sixth grade, eighth graders were like sooo big. I wanted to be in eighth grade so bad because those were the big kids. Like high school wasn't even looked at in middle school. And then when I got to high school..it was like...(trails off). And my best friend was a year ahead of me so I remember I would see like ATLAS accounts from other friends from church and stuff and I would be like OMG. I would see my boyfriend's sister sign up for courses and um you know the... well the part where you're doing that process of classes and oh man! I was like if that's... I'm not ever going to be able to do that. Those were the memories I had of college actually. College was scary, but it was a stone I had to like jump on no matter how like scary or bad it was, I had to step there. But earliest memory of college were definitely intimidating; that's what I feel.
18	Antonia: When it came time to apply to college, what was going on in your life?
19	Azariah: Uh well, I was extremely depressed my senior year and actually seeing a psychologist at the time. So, I wasn't really... I wasn't really okay mentally um, I didn't really care about things. I didn't... I wasn't in a place where I could make good decisions now that I look back. Um, so...(long pause)... That's how my senior year went and ...well, I did it. I just applied and that's it.
20	Antonia: What were you thinking about when you made your actual final decision?
21	Azariah: Definitely my future and my father. ... because my father was in prison... every letter from him was just emphasizing the importance of education... so I don't know why that... I'm just so sensitive to that. Like to not only not disappoint him, but just because of what I've witnessed. Everyone has different experiences and my family has been well financially and none of them have college degrees. So I can always take that route and depend on myself without school and you know hold a house down...but,

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Got into the route the family did

ANTONIA SHEEL

Study: THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG FIRST GENERATION, MINORITY FEMALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION INTERPRETATION

<p>PP (margin) \$ (margin) PIF (margin)</p>	<p>um cuz that's the example I have but my father's words were always like you know that 'that life' is a struggle. It's like you cant sleep ... like you re kinda thinking about how you're going to get it next. Whereas if you have a degree and a career, it's consistent income and that is like what I thought ... like what I thought about the most and eventually just went for it... with high hopes of you know it ending in the way that I envisioned. I kind of fear like finishing college with how today's world is and then being as if I never even got a degree. That. I am deadly afraid of, but you know there's still the effort, so... [trails off].</p>	<p>- don't want to be thinking about it - fear finishing college - it's being wealthy like she - don't</p>
<p>F (margin)</p>	<p>22 Antonia: Would you say it was your father that ultimately fueled your decision to go to school?</p> <p>23 Azariah: Yeah, my father came... firstly, coming from third world and knowing all the sacrifices my father made just for me to fly into this country, you know, ...let alone have a living here with ... he didn't have any... well, he got his GED, but he ... well he went to college actually. He got accepted, but dropped out and then started to sell drugs and that was the route so... They all actually had ambitions. Like the uncle that I was raised with..he went to college to do engineering, but never finished. So he ended up just having a business...my dad just did the drugs as business and... But yeh, they all ended up having businesses... liquor stores, clothing stores and they just ended up going from there...so that is how they were successful. They just like used their brain alone.. with street smart kind of thing not like book smart. My mom didn't go to school. She got pregnant with me when she was 17 so she was barely out of high school, but she finished high school and my father got his GED and then my dad went..he just started, but he never finished. He never got a degree and then he left that country and came to the United States.</p>	<p>Street smart - don't</p>
	<p>24 Antonia: Tell me about the people in your life who were involved in your decision to go to college? (Did you feel supported in your decision?) What did they say? How were they involved?</p>	
<p>CSU (margin) \$ (margin)</p>	<p>25 Azariah: No one at all positively. Um, I feel like my uncle who don't know... They don't know..so to them, first of all I mentioned college, but by college I mean university as well. College is also looking down. If you're not in a university, then there is something wrong with you. That's just ignorance in my opinion. It is like you barely finished high school, you don't even know what you're talking about and you know, the difference here is just like money to me.. I get that the level of education somewhat, but I feel like if I'm a good student, I'm going to get somewhere and they wouldn't</p>	

ANTONIA SHEEL

Study: THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG FIRST-GENERATION, MINORITY FEMALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION INTERPRETATION

	take that.
26	Antonia: Who wouldn't take that?
27	<p>Azariah: My uncle and he went on a trip over to the Dominican and told my mom, 'they like talk to your daughter because she's going to go to a college.' And you know... it was all out of love. I was a good student in high school, so they felt like by going to college I would waste myself. Like if I had the intelligence and capacity to attend a university, why not? I understood that, but I felt like let me be. Like if I don't want something that huge right now, like.. (changes voice to mimic uncle) 'Oh no, but when you graduate you're degrees are gonna say Valencia' and I am like _____. They didn't understand the transfer stuff. At the end, I am probably going to end with a degree that says UCF.. it says UCF. So um, yeah [cough] So yeah, I never even had conversations about college. There would be times when my uncle would be like 'Oh you're in fourth...' because high school is 1, 2, 3, 4 (motions with hands)... it's by numbers... so sometimes, he didn't even know if it was my senior year. Their like that distant from me, so I did go through all of it by myself. Um, when I said the school had 'college' at the end and not university, I got like a 'Are you serious?' thing and for a little bit, I was put through some things like I had to hear comments from different family members, but I learned to just shut those doors cuz it is my life and I think it was the first time I ever made a decision for me and not them... besides the fact that my dad was in the back of my head, my father didn't put any negative pressure on me. He told me 'you know what you're doing as long as what you're doing is good for you in the end.' He cared about where I would end and that's something that I strongly appreciated.</p>
28	Antonia: How did you feel when you applied? What did you think about when you anticipated your first month or semester of college?
29	<p>Azariah: Oh man, I remember applying, it was like 'here goes nothing'. Like I was so numb to my realities it was like 'that's done.' I applied late, everything just came like a miracle - my financial aid... I was super late and I had a lot of problems with that because my parents are international... so that was stressful. I remember doing everything annoyed, like what's the next step to just get there. But I actually felt really good because it was like refreshing and there was no longer a routine. I was going to school at night which I found really cool. I almost felt like I was living the college experience, but that kind of faded out a little bit when my job got so demanding. I felt like I wasn't involved as I should have been in school, but I just loved going to class and learning. I just loved the change. That's what</p>

F -  
C vs U

F

M

F

⊕ -

PP \*

(issue w/ financial aid since international)

**ANTONIA SHEEL**

Study: THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG FIRST-GENERATION, MINORITY FEMALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION INTERPRETATION

	I liked. My first semester I did very well as well.
30	Antonia: You liked the change from what?
31	Azariah: From high school..the coming home at 2:30 and that's it...being home. I hated that. So, I liked working and ... I liked keeping myself busy. The busier I was, the less I thought..and that's what I needed at the time...to keep my mind off of like you know my circumstances.. the bad ones.
32	Antonia: If you don't mind sharing, what would you say were the bad circumstances?
33	Azariah: Some legal issues and family issues. (Long pause as she looks away)...
34	Antonia: How did you decide on attending the community college Valencia? Tell me what you thought about Valencia's image as a college?
35	Azariah: I wanted to go to UCF and I thought..well I thought Valencia... I felt the money and stuff like I could do Valencia and end up at UCF. So and um also my senior year was a very hard year as well, so my um my decision making wasn't good. Valencia was like something I just ... it was the closest and easiest thing so that's where I went.
36	Well Valencia had well, not a negative or positive from what I remember. Valencia was a 1 like one point number one, I believe in the nation... Wasn't it? I heard.. I don't know. And then, the only thing about Valencia that I didn't want was to see people I knew. Like I wish I was just an unknown and umm... this is the first one that they would go to. Like it is either UCF, Valencia or Seminole... the majority. So um...
37	Antonia: So you're saying that from your high school peers? Where did you go to high school?
38	Azariah: Uh yeh, Timbercreek high school. So I just didn't want to be known in college. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I wanted to be very isolated. I didn't want any distractions. I didn't even want group work. I just wanted to be by myself and a book and a professor and like... Oh and actually (coughs), I remember thinking about a smaller college because I had friends that went to UCF and told me about how huge the classes were and stuff and I wanted a more personal... being where my mind was at the time, I needed to have a connection with the professor. I couldn't be like an anonymous in an auditorium with like 300 students. I wanted a way more condensed environment.
39	Antonia: You said, 'being where your mind was at the time', meaning in

Handwritten notes in the left margin: *at the beginning*, *CSU*

Handwritten notes in the right margin: *to go to end up at UCF*, *didn't want to be known in college*, *didn't want to talk to anyone*, *didn't want any distractions*, *didn't even want group work*, *I just wanted to be by myself*, *and a book and a professor and like...*, *Oh and actually*, *I remember thinking about a smaller college*, *because I had friends that went to UCF and told me about how huge the classes were and stuff and I wanted a more personal...*, *being where my mind was at the time, I needed to have a connection with the professor. I couldn't be like an anonymous in an auditorium with like 300 students. I wanted a way more condensed environment.*

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	terms of what?
40	Azariah: Personal issues, stress, depressed. I felt like I .. I felt like um I still wanted to be cared for as a student. I felt like if I could give that professor eye contact that would be possible. Like they would be there if I needed them. Whereas I felt in a university I felt that wouldn't be.
41	Antonia: Once at Valencia, how would you describe your transition into being a college student? Is there anything that could have made your transition into Valencia smoother or better?
42	Azariah: I liked it, I feel like if my mind was more clear and I had more time on my hands and not so many necessities to ... I wish I could just be a 100% college student. I feel that would be huge and different. There are times where I feel like because of my responsibilities outside of school, I am not as involved as I want to be... not even as I need to be. I would like to have like you know, a club in school and be in charge of something. I feel like that, but I don't... sometimes I don't even feel like I am in school. I am that disconnected from the campus and stuff. But, I'm not doing bad in school. I just feel like I'm in and out. I don't care to see people. I don't care for nothing, I just want to get my work... Learn and read and go.
43	Antonia: Do you think maybe that's characteristic of other students here at Valencia or would you say that that's just you for now?
44	Azariah: Umm, (cough), in my classes. I always see like the same rush to leave, but if I'm walking, I LOVE to walk through campus and see people studying. To see people with papers in their hand alone or even in groups, I love that and wish that I could do that. I'm not just in my little room on my desk. Why can't I do it in school, in that environment? Umm.. So I like when I see students like that but in class wise, I always feel like a rush to go from everyone. I'm never really in a rush to go but I never want to get involved with other humans.
45	Antonia: And you don't want to get involved with other humans because what?
46	Azariah: Umm well, ... (looks off)
47	Antonia: Is it just the nature of your busy schedule? What do you mean by that?
48	Azariah: I think it stems from kind of like what I've been through with

Cyru

A →  
I wish I could just be a 100% college student

lots of going to school  
she's for school

A (?)

Just to learn at school

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Round 1 - Pencil

Round 2 - Highlight

Round 3 - Blue Pen

#1 #2 #3

Opportunity

Study: THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG FIRST-GENERATION, MINORITY FEMALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION INTERPRETATION

M (minority), F (female)

Transcription of interview with #2 Lyssa

Date: June 7, 2013

Location: Starbucks Coffee, University Drive (Orlando, FL)

Time: 3 to 4:30pm (1.5 hours)

AC (academic capital)

F (family)

P/R (peer relations)

H (hard work)

Cy U (college/university)

1	Antonia: I am going to start with a few opening questions. Thank you for joining me Lyssa. Can you tell me what you think going to college means in our society?
2	Lyssa: Umm I feel like it means a way (pause)... cause to me... like where I'm from, a lot of people don't make it to college. And to me I feel like it's a way to get out of that situation, the lifestyle that we're in in West Palm Beach. I want to say it's a lot of poverty but it's a lot of like you know, teens... pregnant teens. It's really, you know..it's really up in West Palm Beach. Going to college to me was just like an escape to be on my own and experience something new and actually reach my goals because if I stayed home I don't feel like I would have met that. Because I'm not really an open-minded person because ya know school... school, you don't really need school to be successful in life, but I like a STRICT guideline, so I felt like going to college would teach me a way to like still give instructions to me, to better myself in life. Really, I think as far as going to college in our society, for our generation, I would say college is access to you know a path that we want to actually take. We don't have to settle for less. Going to college means that..it opens more doors to actually do what you want to do... Makin the kind of money you wanna make and be happy with it...an actual career and not just a job. That's how I see it.
3	Antonia: What is it like being a college student?
4	Lyssa: Hmm... (pause) ummm... I like being a college student but uh, (pause) I guess right now it's not as scary as I thought it would be. I thought college was like professors don't care about you. Maybe at other universities, but not at this university. Like I am very hands on with my professors. I like the experience because I am learning, but it's not like drain upon me. I'm at my own pace.
5	Antonia: Um, how does going to college or being a college student make you feel?
6	Lyssa: It makes me feel proud because a lot of people you know still... They look up to me and my sister as well. It just makes me feel like I'm

O M (minority)

PP

O #

P/R (peer relations)

escape

access

career

related to it as a university

ML

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	<p>actually doing something in life. I'm not just working to make ends meet, you know. I'm working for my future so I don't have to you know live pay check to pay check.</p>
<p>7</p>	<p>Antonia: Now I am going to ask you some questions about your history with higher ed. Tell me about how you ended up here. Who are you, tell me your story. How did you end up here.? Why did you ultimately decide to pursue a higher education?</p>
<p>8</p> <p>PP</p> <p>F--</p> <p></p> <p></p>	<p>Lyssa: Well, I always wanted to go to college just because it is was built into me. [changes inflection in voice] "oh you're gonna go to college and become a better person and my mom never finished college so she wanted me to go and experience all of those things. I came from a single-parent household. I would say I was a C average student in high school and I always thought about going to college, but never knew where I wanted to go per say until my senior year and I was looking into different schools and I wanted to go to Clark ... but the way their financial stuff is set up [Laughs], I couldn't afford that at the moment. And one of my friends was actually up here and she recommended me to try out Valencia, just to look into it and see if I like it or not. I came up here a few times and I liked the city itself, so I said why not give it a try, it's in my budget. So, that's how I ended up here in Orlando and... what was the other question?</p>
<p>9</p>	<p>Antonia: Umm.. just why did you end up here, why did you decided to pursue a higher education?</p>
<p>10</p> <p></p>	<p>Lyssa: Yeah, uh, I want a better life. Like I don't want to be stuck in a little city where jobs are scarce and everyone's just working just to work... just to pay the bills. I want an actual career that I will enjoy everyday, gettin' up and going to.</p>
<p>11</p>	<p>Antonia: What do you think the purpose of college is?</p>
<p>12</p> <p>↑C</p> <p>M</p> <p>Contender</p> <p>H</p>	<p>Lyssa: To teach you the... like think outside of the box. Some teachers would say that. Most of my professors want you to think outside the box because nowadays... society is not just college... because you can get a college degree, but if you don't know what to do with it then, you're just gonna be... probably still working at a regular job because your not doing what you should be doing with it and (pause).. yeah, it teaches you to be independent, responsible, and stay on top of everything because that's life. You know, no one is gonna give you second chances in life... it's you</p>

looked at another school CAL



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	know, all about first impressions and taking it and running with it.
13	Antonia: What would you say was your earliest memory or idea about going to college?
14	Lyssa: It was in middle school. I wanted to go to Bethune Cookman to be a 14k dancer. I didn't really know anything about the college itself, I just knew I wanted to go to college to dance. So, I guess that's what got the ball rollin. It was just like oh fun band, black people, let's have fun! (laughs). It was so that's when I first got introduced to college. It wasn't based off of ummm grades or school work or anything, I just seen the fun side of it. So that's why I'm like I want to go to college for that!... not really thinking college was as much work as... that was back in middle school.
15	Antonia: How did you come across them? Did you see something on TV? Did you know somebody?
16	Lyssa: I was actually in the band..in the band lifestyle since sixth grade to high school and so when we would go on parades to Bethune Cookman parades and FAMU parades I would always see them at the half time shows at the Classics. And I was like I want to be on that team. I have to be on that team, so I'm going to that college, so I can dance. (Laughs)
17	Antonia: When it came time for you to apply to college did you feel prepared?
18	Lyssa: Honestly NO! I did not. My school did not do a good job at you know setting the seniors in the right path. I was.. I had filled out a few applications on time like UCF, but I didn't get accepted and Clark... Clark Atlanta University and I like.. when they was like writing the essays, I was just like going to my teachers like you guys never really taught me how to do this and they were like 'Oh well go to your guidance counselor.' And my guidance counselor.. it was so hard to get in contact with them so it was basically like I was doing it on my own and my mom didn't have any experience on how to go about doing this, like how to fill out scholarships and stuff, so I was just like I was stuck. When I first came to school I didn't have any money. I didn't have any scholarships, no like Bright Futures because at first I was planning to go to Clark. And I didn't ... And they accepted very late and they wanted the money like two weeks later and they wanted a lot of money, so I was just like I wasn't expecting all of this. If that was the then mom how come we didn't save up for this? So she was

PIR

PIR  
CGU

PIR  
PP

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	just like I'm sorry, I didn't know. So, yeah.
19	Antonia: Did anyone help you find out information about college? You mentioned your teachers didn't help you in terms of preparing you to write essays and stuff, but was there anyone that helped you find out about information at all?
20	Lyssa: (long pause). No, it was a teacher, my math teacher, yeah it was because of my math teacher, he sent us to the library and he had us sit and look up... no, actually he put on the projector... he put on all the HBCUs and umm he helped us make an account for this website - this college website where you can type in the college name and it shows you like the students, the graduate rate, the instate fee, the out of state fee and that's when I sort of got a feel for what school I want to go to, but yeh...
21	Antonia: And what grade was that in?
22	Lyssa: That was in my 11 <sup>th</sup> grade.
23	Antonia: After that point, tell me about the people in your life who were involved in your decision to go to college? What did they say? How were they involved? What did they do for you?
24	Lyssa: Everyone did. Like.. I would say everyone like pushed me... well, not pushed me, but I feel like it was put on my shoulders that I had to go to college. So I was just like okay, I'm ready. (laughs). Everyone was like 'Oh, you gotta go to college.' Because they looked at you like if you didn't go to college you weren't going to be anything. I feel like my biggest pusher was my mom because at first I did just want to stay home. I'm like you know I can find me a nice... my aunt works at a bank and she was like 'oh, I'll find you a nice. you know get you a nice job at the bank and you can go to the community college there and save your money and work to go to Clark'... the school that I wanted to go to. But then my mom was just like, 'No, you're leaving the first year because a lot of people who don't leave the first year end up getting comfortable and staying and having babies... and just all that stuff (laughs) so she really pushed me. You know, going to college everyone just expected for me to go to college. They didn't really ask me 'Oh, are you going to college?' They just assumed, 'Oh you're going to college' just because, I don't know why. I would say my mom was the only one who really talked to me.
25	Antonia: Why do you think everyone just expected you to?
26	Lyssa: Because I was a very like active student. I always did dancing or I was in track or in the band... umm, just all around. So they just... My

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ANTONIA SHEEL

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P/R	personality was not like... well, I would say honestly, the ratchet girls really stayed home.
27	Antonia: The what?
28	Lyssa: The ghetto girls and I wasn't really that so they just assumed they just assumed that I was going to college. So yeah, (giggles).
29	Antonia: How does that make you feel that they just assumed that you would go to college?
O-	30 Lyssa: I don't know. I guess a good thing because you know the people that they didn't expect to go to college was like the failures of the community. It was really a small city and everyone knew everyone and they... just based on how they grew up or the mistakes that they made or the decisions that they made, they weren't makin good grades in school, they were just like, 'Oh she's not going to college.' You know, I made pretty good grades, especially my senior year I made straight As but uh it didn't really help my GPA, but yeah... (laughs) 'cause I waited last minute, but they just assumed that I would go to college and mingle and I don't know... I always talk about being in Delta... being a delta so that just .. (trails off)
31	Antonia: How were you exposed to Deltas?
32	32 Lyssa: My band director, she wanted to be one, but... She was a Delta, but not... you know, like one of the business ... you get in Delta through like the business way like if you already graduated?
33	Antonia: Oh Alumni?
34	34 Lyssa: Yeah, that, that way. Yeah. And like the Classics, I would see them, their colors and stuff and I'm like I want to do that. It was so cute, so yeah.
35	35 Antonia: You also mentioned a few moments ago, you felt like going to college was put on your shoulders? What do you mean by that?
F-O	36 Lyssa: Like (pause)... Oh you just knew you were going to college and that's why the pressure and I was like you guys know I'm going to college, but you not even helping me try to figure out which ones are ... should be the best for me or your not even helping me figure out what scholarships are coming up or any of that. So... that was just like uh..that was crazy.
37	37 Antonia: So how did that make you feel... to know that you were going to college, know that they expected you to go to college, but you didn't maybe necessarily have the support in the things that you needed to do?
M Independent #	38 Lyssa: [Long pause]. It made me feel like okay, now I'm really gonna be by myself, like independent in this. But my mom helped me when it was time to get everything done financially like okay, I don't know... And that was another reason I chose Valencia because I was like I want to start off at

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	<p>a small college because honestly I didn't really know what I was supposed to know to attend like a big university. I felt like I was gonna be left out and I was going to fail because no one really... Like at my school it was really like a C school and I would only went there because of like the band... the band was awesome and the teachers really didn't do much for me so I'm like maybe going to this college I can get a fresh start and know what I need to know because I was gonna take the.. those prep courses, you know when you're first going to Valencia, they have you take that test. I was gonna take it again like maybe I didn't pass these tests because I don't really know so maybe I should take this reading and writing all over again for the... to help me once I get in college, so ....(trails off)</p>
39	<p>Antonia: Once you made your final decision to come to Valencia, how did you feel? What were you thinking about when you anticipated your first day or even your first semester?</p>
40	<p>Lyssa: How did I feel? I was excited. I'm like okay, it was a new beginning, a fresh start, fresh teachers and you know professors, they don't really know me. So, I can focus more. I don't have any distractions. That's it. I didn't have any distractions, so I'm like okay, my head is in the books, I'm ready to go..ready to start this.</p>
41	<p>Antonia: You said that's when you didn't have any distractions... what are your distractions now?</p>
42	<p>Lyssa: Work and I had joined the Faces Modeling Group at umm...UCF and I joined that in the Spring. That was the biggest mistake. The practices were 10 at night to 4 in the morning and I had a 7'o clock class in the morning. When I would wake up, if I would wake-up-I would be very drowsy in class and I was like ready to go. I fell behind in my work, everything.. Like all my grades were like Cs in Spring and I'm like I was happy to make that because I didn't think I would make it. I had professors like helping me because I would interact in class, you know tell them what was going on and yeah...</p>
43	<p>Antonia: So you ended your spring semester with Cs?</p>
44	<p>Lyssa: Yeah, so now this semester I'm like I'm not doing nothing!...anything. I'm just ... well of course work, but all that extracurricular activity, I cant do it. I thought I was doing it in Spring until everyone was like 'You can do it, you can do it.' And then like okay, the modeling group, it was somewhat like a sorority/fraternity type thing. It was like a process you had to go through... You know modeling scouts.</p>

#  
 chose to be able to do it (not that)

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	you know if you have a pretty face, you will make it, no this one was about stickin with your brothers and sisters quote un quote... like how a fraternity is and going through this long process. Our process was like too much where like you couldn't secretly tell anyone, you was going through this process.
45	Antonia: Really?
46	Lyssa: Yes, this modeling process! (laughs for a long time) I'm like really, I gotta go through all of this?! But it brought us closer, my intake brothers and sisters... Yes, I have intake brothers and sisters. (Laughs). I'm like what?! It was a challenge. It was, it was a challenge.
47	Antonia: Were they from UCF or were they from Valencia?
48	Lyssa: Valencia and UCF
49	Antonia: Okay.
50	Lyssa: Yeah... (pause) and I was also taking classes at the time and they were balancing out... I..I thought I was balancing it out, but it was kicking my butt...because I really wanted to be in there and I hate quittin stuff, so I'm like I'm not gonna quit, I'm gonna make it. Yeah, it was really difficult.
51	Antonia: How would you describe your transition into being a college student?
52	Lyssa: Umm... Can you restate that?
53	Antonia: You've told me about your second semester, but how would you describe your transition to being a college student?
54	Lyssa: (pause) It was.. I wouldn't say it was a big transformation because like my...my classes that I had my first semester were like prep courses so it was like it wasn't intense. It was like very, I know this. I felt very comfortable so.. It wasn't... I felt like I was doing good. Yeah, it was a good start for me if that answers the question... I learned to be more independent and responsible with everything that was going on like as such...me joining the Faces thing, I wouldn't say they are the ones that brought down my grades, I was the one that chose to do that instead of studying more or during my down time I would sleep because I didn't get rest, instead of studying more, so just being relia... taking responsibility for everything that goes on, knowing that you know, this is my life and my professors are just there to teach me and what I do with the information after that, and if I study or if I just sleep or put my extra time into

Table 9  
Coding Matrix

Round 1	Participant					Round 2	Round 3	Round 4
8 codes	#1 Azariah	#2 Lyssa	#3 Celeste	#4 Janette	#5 Tracie	5 codes Family/ Culture	2 codes	1 code
<b>Family/Culture</b>								
Role model/be an example	X	X	X	X	X			
Not be like	X	X		X	X			
To make proud/to help financially	X	X	X	X	X			
Pressure from	X	X	X	X	X			
<b>Perception Vs. Reality</b>						<b>Perception Vs. Reality</b>		
College is hard or scary	X	X	X	X	X	*College Vs. University		
Image of college on TV/Movies		X	X	X	X			
Like the college setting, staff, professors, activities...	X	X	X	X	X			
<b>Finances / Money</b>						<b>Finances / Money</b>	<b>Finances / Money</b>	
Don't want to struggle	X	X		X	X			
Want comfort /stability	X	X		X	X			
Employment after college (Career)	X	X	X	X	X			
College cost...	X	X	X	X	X			
Need for job while in school		X		X	X			
<b>Maturity/Independence</b>								
Do it on own, independent, freedom	X	X		X	X			
Different understanding of world		X		X	X			
Growth in thought	X	X	X	X	X			
Growth in action	X	X	X	X	X			
<b>Path/</b>						<b>Path/</b>		

<b>Preparation</b>					
College as a guideline		X			
College as next step	X	X		X	
Ways of knowing/operating in world	X	X	X	X	X
Path of success	X	X		X	
Just want to get it done	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Opportunity</b>					
Stepping stone to better life	X	X	X	X	X
Learning experience	X	X	X	X	X
Growth as a person; personal development	X	X	X	X	X
Open new doors		X	X	X	X
<b>Hard work</b>					
Desire for challenge	X				
Desire for work in field	X	X	X	X	X
Life isn't fair, work hard			X		
<b>College Vs. University</b>					
Perception of students	X	X	X		X
Cost	X	X	X	X	X
Nurturing environment	X	X		X	X
Perception of faculty	X	X		X	X

**Preparation**

\*Maturity/Independence  
\*Hard work

**Opportunity**

**Opportunity**

\*Path/Preparation  
\*Maturity/Independence

**Opportunity**

\*Finance/Money  
\*Path/Preparation

\*Hard work  
\*Family/Culture

\*Maturity/Independence  
\*Hard work

\*Perception Vs. Reality  
\*College Vs. Univ.

\*Family/Culture  
\*Perception vs. Reality  
\*College vs. Univ.

*Note.* This table provides an overview of the process by which I, the researcher began to examine and reduce initial codes based on participant transcripts.

**APPENDIX H:  
THE REPORT: MATRIX OF FINDINGS (PHASE 6)**



THE REPORT: MATRIX OF FINDINGS (PHASE 6)

Table 10  
*Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data Triangulation*

Major Finding (Dominant Discourse)	I	F/R	RV	T	E
Personal Fulfillment and Intrinsic Motivation	X	X	X	X	X
Financial Stability and College as Insurance Against Poverty	X	X	X	X	X
Social Obligations: Breaking Stereotypes and Setting Examples	X	X	X	X	X

*Note.* I=Interview, F/R=Field Data/Researcher Reflexivity, RV=Respondent Validity, T=Thick, Rich Description/Examples, E=External Audit.

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