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ASPIRATIONAL ETHOS: AN EXPLORATION OF
SELF-EFFICACY AND MOTIVATION
OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS WHO PURSUE
THE MASTER'S DEGREE

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education
in the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education
in the College of Community Innovation and Education
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Major Professor: Thomas D. Cox

ABSTRACT

First-generation students are estimated to comprise nearly 25 percent of the current national undergraduate college population. First-generation student status is defined as students for whom neither parent attended college (Choy, 2001; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, 2007; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pryor et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2012) or neither parent graduated from college (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011; Pike & Kuh, 2005). It may take these students longer to earn the bachelor's degree, they may be less prepared for the academic and social environment of college, many could drop out before graduation, and the majority will enroll only on a part-time basis because they work more hours per week than they attend class (Choy, 2001; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, & Pascarella, 1996). And yet, many persist to earn the bachelor's degree, and some will persevere to enroll in a master's degree program.

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the influences of academic self-efficacy and motivational factors that adult first-generation master's students enrolled in a public, preeminent research university ascribe to their academic persistence. The first-generation master's students' experience was discovered through one-on-one interviews and journaling exercises, revealing the essence of these adult learners who pursue graduate work and the elements that informed their decision to return to school. The current study also explored whether any of the first-generation undergraduate student experiences influenced how the participants experienced graduate school. Implications of this research will provide insight for college and university faculty, staff, and administrators who work with first-generation master's students. The significance of this study will contribute to an understudied area of research about a distinct student population: the adult first-generation student at the master's level.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What an odyssey this has been over the last five years. After working in higher education for most of my professional life, I thought I knew what I was getting into when I enrolled in the doctoral program. But then I quickly discovered, you never really know until you are in the thick of it. And oh, how fabulous it has been! The coursework, the new colleagues, the lively class discussions about higher education issues, the vastness of ideas and research to absorb, the stretching of old ways and together discovering new ways, it has all—mostly all—been fascinating, engaging, and at times, humbling.

I was fortunate to have the best committee ever! My esteemed chair and mentor, Dr. Thomas Cox, always provided me with new ways to think about my research. We spent some long afternoons discussing my topic, my writing, and my word choices. We would laugh about it, be serious, talk shop quickly, and make great progress all in one session. I think I actually surprised him when I was able to deliver my dissertation without using the word "cozy" on any page of it. Thank you to Dr. Laurie Campbell, who was her usual thoughtful, considered self, always providing spot-on advice, giving great suggestions to improve my dissertation, and always being encouraging and supportive. To Dr. Nancy Marshall, editor extraordinaire, you are the supporter and motivator that I needed to keep me going. You helped me to believe always in what I was doing and to remind me how important the work was. And finally, to my colleague of almost 20 years, Dr. Carolyn Hopp, thank you dear friend. Your support, encouragement, and availability to discuss issues or roadblocks associated with my dissertation—and all other topics not associated with the dissertation—were always a welcome relief. Like I said earlier, I just had the best committee.

The doctoral road is rarely walked alone. I certainly had my detractors when I started out but fortunately, I had many more supporters. My parents and in-laws would be incredibly proud of this

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And finally, to my husband Scott, *el pescador*, the one who was anxious right along with me before every exam, was my audience for every practice presentation, and sang my praises from day one that I could succeed at earning my doctoral degree, *muchas gracias*. He took up fly fishing when I was admitted to the program, reasoning that he also needed to learn something new while I was back in school. Over the last five years, I am proud to share that he has become quite the expert at fly fishing. Because he was such an integral part of my program, his latest catch and release was included in every class presentation I delivered. Thank you from every angle of my heart.

To first-generation college students everywhere, break molds and keep going!

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

<u>Background</u>

Of the nearly 20 million undergraduate students currently enrolled in four-year institutions in the United States, 25% are estimated to be first-generation students (National Center for Education Statistics NCES, 2017). They will be older on average at the time of enrollment (one-third are 30 years of age or older), it will take them longer to earn their degree, and they will be less prepared than their peers for the rigor of college work (NCES, 2017). None of them have parents or guardians who graduated from college and many have parents or guardians who never attended college.

Despite the myriad challenges, barriers, and obstacles in their way, of those first-generation students who complete a bachelor's degree, approximately 32% have aspirations to pursue a master's degree (NCES, 2017). In a study to examine what effects parents have on their children's enrollment in post-baccalaureate programs, it was found that, "76 percent of the students whose parents had a high school education or less did not pursue graduate education after they received their bachelor's degrees…" (Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003, p. 149). This finding is supported by the research on who does enroll in graduate school: students who come from backgrounds with higher family income, students who enroll in graduate school within just two to three years of earning the bachelor's degree, and students who earn the bachelor's degree at a younger age (Baum & Steele, 2017). On average, only 25% of first-generation students will earn the bachelor's degree after four years of college enrollment compared to a graduation rate of 42% for students whose parents have some college experience; only 50% of first-generation

students will earn the bachelor's degree within six years, compared with nearly 56% for their peers whose parents have higher education experience (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011).

Considerable research on first-generation students generates both data and project funding opportunities to study the programming, retention, and graduation rates of both undergraduate and doctoral level students enrolled in higher education. First-generation students are a burgeoning student population, one especially that colleges and universities want to enroll and retain. Factors of enrollment growth in the first-generation student population include economic trends that require higher levels of education, a consistent desire among the disadvantaged for entry into the middle-class, and graduate education that is no longer reserved for the privileged few (Lunceford, 2011; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). Finding ways, therefore, to improve the recruitment and retention of first-generation students by meeting their unique needs and enrollment patterns has developed into one of the newest higher education phenomena. The significant gap in the literature is about those first-generation students who have chosen to enroll in master's degree programs after earning the bachelor's degree. The first-generation student is a growing segment of the student population that many graduate programs nationally are now acutely interested in recruiting. According to Carlton (2015), "…very little research has been conducted on the impact of first-generation college student status on post-undergraduate aspirations" (p. 1).

The focus of this study was the master's level first-generation adult student and is supported by the research survey conducted in 2017 by the Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service. The survey findings included that, "Master's-level education is the

largest segment of graduate education," with many more master's degrees awarded nationally than doctoral degrees (Okahana & Zhou, 2018, p. 18). According to the Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service (2010), in 2007, more than ten times the number of master's degrees were awarded in comparison to doctoral degrees (604,607 to 60,616, respectively). Graduate education on a national level is, therefore, almost entirely represented by master's degree attainment, with a much smaller percentage of graduate students enrolled in doctoral programs.

Some students are recruited directly into the doctoral program from the bachelor's degree with the offer to earn a "master's along the way". These are not the programs of interest in this study. The terminal master's degree, or the master's degree that is the end goal of a student's educational career, is more common in most fields. The data demonstrate that roughly 25% of all students with an earned bachelor's degree in the field of education (and engineering) will go on to earn the master's degree as the highest degree earned (Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Services, 2010). The master's degree will, as well, typically be earned within 10 years of the bachelor's degree (Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Services, 2010).

This qualitative study was an exploration of the issue addressing a gap in the literature pertaining specifically to master's degree-seeking students who are also adult first-generation students. It is expected that the significance of this study will contribute to an understudied area of research for a distinct student population: the adult first-generation student at the master's level.

<u>Statement of the Problem</u>

Student beliefs about what they are capable of achieving academically, positively impacts their rates of persistence and performance (Garza, Bain, & Kupczynski, 2014; Stieha, 2010). The acknowledgements students make regarding specific actions, for example their efforts at learning, whether they feel in control of their studies, or their view of the results of their academic labor as stable and controllable, affect their emotional responses to learning situations (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Referred to as *academic self-efficacy*, the research shows that its development is related to the self-confidence a student experiences when completing academic tasks and is critically impacted by parental, peer, and instructional influences (Korgan, Durdella, & Stevens, 2013). In Bandura's (1977) prolific work on *self-efficacy*, defined as one's perceived capability or belief in performing a task to achieve a specific goal, he posited that as self-efficacy developed, so did an individual's confidence and social adaptation to the immediate environment. The more effort expended on a task and the longer an individual persisted in completion of that task despite difficulties encountered, the greater the self-efficacy and the less likely the person was to become discouraged.

Existing research demonstrates that with tenacity and positively reinforced behaviors which lead to confidence and self-efficacy, undergraduate students adapt to the higher education milieu to achieve their academic goals (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). There is limited research, however, on whether there are similar social-cognitive factors for first-generation students who decide to pursue the master's degree. Hegarty (2011) postulated that "this absence of measurement of motivation in

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graduate students in general" includes both the type and strength of motivation required to complete a graduate program (p. 146). We therefore know only that some first-generation students decide to pursue graduate work and remain motivated to do so despite all the environmental and cultural odds stacked against them.

The Council of Graduate Schools (2008) conducted a study on high school students to explore whether educational aspirations influenced a student's choice to attend graduate school. They found that a higher percentage of Asian and non-Hispanic White high school sophomores reported a higher aspirational level to earn a graduate degree than did Black or Hispanic sophomores. This research study supported earlier evidence that indicated it may be possible to change student aspirations for graduate school. Various strategies that were found effective included enlisting nurturing faculty role models who were committed to maintaining regular contact with undergraduate students; showcasing research opportunities for undergraduate students; presenting workshops and orientations on the realities and benefits of graduate school; implementing better student outreach programs and providing accessible resources to undergraduate students; and finally, simply providing the vision to undergraduate students that graduate school is a realistic and achievable goal (Kinney & Munro, 2007).

Because there is significant evidence that first-generation college students are among the least likely to remain enrolled through undergraduate degree completion, it is important to explore the reasons some of these same students persist and enroll in graduate school. It is equally as important to examine whether the first-generation student experience at the undergraduate level remains an influence on or prepares the adult student at the master's level. In a study on the attrition risks for first-generation graduate students, the researchers were unable to

find any studies, "…that provided a demographic profile of graduate first-generation students" (Seay, Lifton, Wuensch, Bradshaw, & McDowelle, 2008, p. 12).

This study was focused on *adult* first-generation master's students, best defined by Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) as individuals who have developed a self-concept of responsibility for themselves, "…of being self-directing" (p. 64). From a socio-cultural lens, being an adult is defined by doing tasks associated with adulthood (e.g., parenting, elder care, full-time employment, military service) or when individuals reach an age when they may legally marry, vote in elections, or qualify for a driver's license. Rachal (2002) offered that research on the,

> …'adult' should refer to learners who have assumed the social and culturally-defined roles characteristic of adulthood and who perceive themselves to be adult, or, if those qualities are not ascertainable, learners who have achieved an age, such as 25, which would be regarded as adult irrelevant of social circumstances. (p. 220)

Many first-generation college students reach this threshold of responsibility while enrolled in undergraduate programs. The reason, therefore, for establishing the adult benchmark for this study was the evidence that first-generation graduate students spend extended time in the undergraduate program, the typical age being 24-years old for first-generation students in the bachelor's degree (NCES, 2017). First-generation college students also experience delayed entrance into graduate school from their undergraduate program, may lack additional funding resources for graduate school, and have likely changed their academic discipline from undergraduate to graduate school (Choy, 2001; Polson, 2003; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011).

A discussion of Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory (*SET*) and Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (*SDT*) on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, as they relate to key conceptual factors in the literature on adult first-generation master's student, framed this

study. Because there are various constructs of self-efficacy in the theoretical literature, the focus of this study was on academic self-efficacy. Many factors influence the development of academic self-efficacy, including a student's attitude about educational pursuits and scholarly work, parental confidence in the student, and familial and peer support for the student's educational goals (Korgan et al., 2013). For the first-generation college student, interpersonal and environmental factors are often the very challenges and barriers they must overcome to achieve academic success.

The conceptual framework of this study, based on social cognitive theory, highlighted two complimentary theoretical domains appropriate for analysis of the first-generation graduate student: the belief in one's ability to succeed with specific academic tasks (*academic SET*) and the motivations to undertake these academic tasks (*SDT*). A student who feels no inspiration or lacks faith in his/her ability to be successful in school will typically display behaviors of being unmotivated. However, as this same student is able to build up and create a successful *student persona*, i.e. an amalgam of the abilities and capabilities that produce levels of influence and confidence, one of the results is a significant impact on the motivational process (Bandura, 2001). Ryan and Deci (2000) described student motivation as both *intrinsic,* when the student has direct control and impact on the result based on the level of effort expended, and *extrinsic,* where the drive to excel comes from an outside influence such as a reward, feedback, salary increase, or even a job promotion. Hegarty (2011) suggested that Deci's contribution to this theory directly relates to graduate students who if already motivated intrinsically, could strengthen their extrinsic motivation to persist for higher levels of education. The potential results include extrinsic rewards exclusive to the adult graduate student who pursues graduate

education to achieve professional goals.

It is established in the research that self-efficacy influences the degree of effort the student is willing to expend toward a difficult task and therefore an individual's motivation to continue with that task (Bandura, 1997; Dembo & Seli, 2008; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). In comparison to students who may question their academic abilities, "…those who feel efficacious for learning or performing a task participate more readily, work harder, persist longer when they encounter difficulties, and achieve at a higher level" (Schunk & Pajares, 2002, p. 16). Scepansky & Bjornsen (2003) found that motivation was a decisive indicator as to whether an individual was likely to enter a graduate program. Other studies have found that academic achievement paired with self-efficacy for undergraduate students can predict continuous learning, career direction, and a sustained level of enjoyment for learning in the academic environment (Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997). Cox (2008) interviewed graduate students in a Liberal Studies program and found that, "Low efficacy and self-determination deter adults from attempting a degree or cause them to drop out altogether, while feelings of accomplishment perpetuate their persistence and success" (p. 139).

Few studies have specifically explored perceived levels of academic self-efficacy and academic motivation of adult first-generation college students who enroll in master's degrees. The significance of the present study within this larger social cognitive conceptual framework was to explore the relationship of academic self-efficacy, academic motivation, and adult learner characteristics as forces that impel first-generation students forward in higher education and any resultant differential impact on student academic persistence.

This study also sought to understand and reveal the comprehensive issue of being a first-

generation college student and not focus on the more typically studied racial and socioeconomic challenges of these students. Understanding the specific needs and addressing those factors that help first-generation master's students to remain academically motivated are strategies that can be applied broadly across all student populations. Thus, the strategies that work for the retention and graduation of first-generation students would undeniably work for the general student population (Thayer, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

Enrolling in graduate school, "…involves major changes in experience, resulting in various types of perceptual change" (Hardre & Hackett, 2015, p. 454). The perceptions, like feeling competent, remaining motivated academically, and believing in one's ability to achieve success, have been more systematically researched at the undergraduate level. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore and understand the collective defining experiences that adult first-generation master's students attributed to their academic persistence at a large research university in the southeastern United States. It was also the purpose of this study to examine whether the experiences of being a first-generation student remained significant for students at the master's level. The adult first-generation student experience through one-on-one interviews and an online journaling exercise guided the study with a focus on those factors and experiences that informed student decisions to enroll in a master's degree program. A more in-depth focus examined the interactions among the perceived measures of academic self-efficacy, motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic), and persistence strategies that adult first-generation

master's students attributed to their decision to pursue a graduate degree.

Research Questions

Making the decision to enroll in a master's degree and navigating all the post-baccalaureate options is a formidable task for most graduates. Having succeeded at the undergraduate level is not insurance for success at the graduate level. The commitment to pursue a graduate degree requires substantial amounts of time, funding, and personal support beyond what was required at the undergraduate level. At the graduate level, other factors beyond absolute academic ability become necessary for success. Hardre and Hackett (2015) posited that at the graduate level, "personal and professional identity development, social support, peer relationships and community, motivation, goals and goal attainment, success expectations and self-efficacy interact with academics to influence retention and achievement" (p. 454). These adult learner influences are represented as the outer rings of an earlier conceptual framework, *Andragogy in Practice,* developed to illustrate the range of domains that impact adult learning (Knowles et al., 1998, 2005). Included in this conceptual model are goals and purposes for learning identified in the outer tier, with individual and situational differences indicated in the middle tier. At the center of this conceptual model is a core of six adult learning principles, which include the self-concept or self-direction of the learner (self-efficacy) and the motivation to learn (intrinsic and extrinsic values) (Knowles et al., 2005).

Qualitative data were collected through interviews and document analysis from journaling exercises of adult first-generation master's students to explore the factors and

experiences they ascribed to their persistence for the graduate degree. The following research questions guided the study:

1. Do elements of being a first-generation undergraduate student influence the student experience at the master's level? If so, what are those factors and how do they influence the master's student experience in graduate school?

2. What are the past and current experiences of adult first-generation students who are enrolled in a master's degree?

3. In what ways, if any, do self-efficacy and motivational factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) influence the decision of first-generation students to persist toward the master's degree?

Illustrated in Table 1 is the relationship of the conceptual framework to each of the research questions analyzed in this study.

Table 1

Relationship of Conceptual Framework to the Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question	*Self-Efficacy*	*Motivation: Intrinsic or Extrinsic*	*Andragogy*
R1	Isolation, imposter syndrome, ability, effort, sense of belonging	Professional goals, satisfaction, pride, achievement, talent	Beliefs, attitude, intention, engagement in learning
R2	Faculty and family influence, mentoring, social, cultural, sense of belonging, self-directedness, readiness to learn	Social mobility, personal achievement, status and access, professional employment, institutional	Conviction, motivation, subject matter and situational differences
R3	Cultural, personal, ability, effort, social modeling, mastery	Rewards, familial, social mobility, pride, status	Self-direction, confidence, readiness to learn

Significance of the Study

Current research indicates that first-generation undergraduate students (FGS) have limited access to the cultural capital required to be successful in college: their parents did not attend college and consequently cannot guide them through the higher education system (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). These FGS, therefore, typically arrive at college without the academic, financial, social, and basic readiness skills to be successful (Lundberg, 2007; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). Despite students working through these challenges at the undergraduate level, these same issues can be evident again for first-generation students at the graduate level and are often just as pressing (Lunceford, 2011).

The overarching significance of this research is its potential to contribute to what is known about the academic persistence behaviors of first-generation students who earn the bachelor's degree and elect to enroll in a master's program. This study will inform the institutional practices of graduate student recruitment methods and the enhancement of first-generation graduate student advisement for academic success. The coverage of special issues that advisors, faculty, and administrators need to be aware of when mentoring first-generation master's students will be reviewed. This academic exploration will add to the nascent literature on higher education policies that are in place or need to be implemented for first-generation master's student recruitment, retention, and graduation.

By exploring the experiential phenomena of first-generation master's students, this study responded to a gap in the literature. Few studies have examined how educators can modify admission processes, new student orientations, course offerings, and programming options to

better meet the needs of first-generation master's students. Few studies have revealed the aspirational ethos of the first-generation master's student in describing how self-efficacy and motivational factors have informed their pursuit for the post-baccalaureate degree. The bulk of self-efficacy research has been quantitative, creating the need for data to be collected in different ways. Although qualitative studies include fewer subjects, "they would yield rich data sources for examining the role self-efficacy plays in academic motivation" (Schunk, 1991, p. 228).

Adapting programs and resources for the retention and academic success of this expanding population is not only timely but long overdue. The NCES (2017) projected that from 2015 through to 2026, the graduate student population in the United States will grow from 2.9 million to 3.3 million students, an increase of nearly 12 percent. Note, this figure is inclusive of master's, doctoral, and professional school students in medicine, law, and dentistry, although the large majority of these students, 80 percent or more, will be enrolled in master's or graduate certificate programs (Okahana & Zhou, 2018). Further analysis through interview and journaling sub-questions in this phenomenological research study helped to establish the essence of the collective first-generation adult graduate student experience and their strategies employed for academic persistence. Furthermore, it was revealed whether and to what degree this culture-sharing group of first-generation master's students perceived self-efficacy and motivational factors as playing a fundamental role in their educational persistence.

Rationale for Methodology

This research study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to allow for a deeper, richer understanding of the adult first-generation student who persists to the master's degree. Quantitative research, by its formulaic and statistical structure, does not allow for interaction between the researcher and the participant. With its focus on statistical analysis and interpretation of data, quantitative research cannot give voice to the participants nor deeply discover and describe the meaning of participants' lived experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). A qualitative, phenomenological approach was therefore most appropriate for this research study where the purpose was to understand the participants' experiences of being an adult first-generation master's student from their perspective and in their narrative.

The first-person narrative interview was utilized to sample graduate students enrolled in a College of Community Innovation and Education (CCIE) at a major metropolitan research university in the southeastern United States. As reported by the Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service (2010), postsecondary education statistics published by the U.S. Department of Education indicate that master's degrees in education continue to be earned at a greater rate than in any other field. The college is one of the few academic units within the university that does not enroll students directly into the doctoral program—an earned master's degree is a requirement for doctoral admission into the CCIE. In contrast, other colleges on campus utilize a process of admitting students directly from the bachelor's degree into the doctoral program, thus allowing students to "earn the master's along the way." The graduate programs of interest in this study were primarily referred to as "professional" graduate programs,

typically housed within colleges of education and the health and social sciences. This represented a delimitation by excluding graduate students in the other colleges at the university that potentially admit directly into the doctoral degree, as well as those students admitted directly into master's programs but in other colleges at the university.

The researcher had full and ready access to key participants for this study but did anticipate two immediate limitations: potentially a low response rate and conceivably a conflict of interest with current or previous students she had met and advised. A delimitation of this study, as with most qualitative studies conducted on site at one school, was that the participant group would be small, drawn specifically from one college and housed within one large research university in the southeast. For these reasons, findings from this qualitative research study were not generalizable to the larger population. The graduate student experiences and guiding framework, however, will contribute to the current body of research and provide a basis for future study.

There were conceivable time constraints on the availability of student participants in the study, as well as the potential for a low participant volunteer rate in the study. Most importantly, out of the realm of control as the researcher, was the participant self-designation as a first-generation student. It was therefore necessary to rely on the participants' understanding of the definition as it was provided in the initial questionnaire, as there is no viable method through which to verify this student status. Serving in my current role as a student affairs administrator at the university, whereby it was intended to explore the experiences of first-generation master's students, also presented a limitation.

Nature of the Research Design for the Study

First-generation master's students persevere academically beyond all parameters established for them by culture, economics, and birthright. This qualitative study, therefore, explored the impact of academic self-efficacy and motivational factors on the educational aspirations that adult first-generation graduate students ascribed to their decision to enroll in a master's degree program. Insufficient research has been conducted on the situational experiences of adult first-generation students who pursue advanced studies. Therefore, disproportionately little is known of the dynamics regarding why only a select few first-generation students choose to enroll in graduate school. The result is that this small but elite group of students remains a significantly under-examined phenomenon.

Data for the present study were collected through semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews. The interview questions were designed to elicit participant responses about academic self-efficacy and motivational factors that contributed to their decision to pursue the master's degree. As a method of triangulating the data, participants were asked to participate in a two-week online journaling exercise that took place after the interviews concluded. The purpose of the journaling was to capture additional experiences of the adult first-generation master's students that were not revealed during the interviews. The journaling exercise has been demonstrated to promote participant privacy and comfort with personal experiences that may be painful upon recollection (Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson 2012).

Definition of Terms

For purposes of this study, the following terms were used:

First-generation college student (FGS): Undergraduate students for whom *neither parent attended college* and therefore have no type of college experience, the most commonly accepted definition in the higher education research for this term (Choy, 2001; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, 2007; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pryor et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2012). Various working definitions have been employed in the literature to define first-generation students, including students in family units where neither parent earned a college degree but may have some post-secondary experience or students in family units where only one parent earned college degree, inclusive of an associate's degree. It was determined for this study that Choy's definition, later adopted by the Higher Education Research Institute, would draw a more homogenous group and was more absolute as a defined term. To eliminate redundancy, the acronym FGS or reference to "this student population" was used to indicate first-generation undergraduate college students.

First-generation master's student (FGMS) was defined as a former first-generation undergraduate college student who had successfully completed a bachelor's degree and persisted to enroll in the master's degree (Portnoi & Kwong, 2011).

Continuing-generation college students: This term, for comparison reference, defines students who have at least one parent who had some postsecondary education experience, including one parent who may have earned a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2017).

Second-generation student: According to Pike and Kuh (2005), this is a student whose parents (or guardians) earned at least one bachelor's degree.

Andragogy: The study and science of adult learning.

Adult learner: This term was defined as an individual who has developed a consistent self-concept of responsibility (Knowles et al., 1998, 2005).

Assumptions: In the adult learning framework, assumptions distinguish the adult learner from the child learner. The assumptions include that adult learners have a need to know, prefer self-direction, express a readiness to learn, bring experience to the learning situation, and demonstrate a motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 1998, 2005). What is most important in this adult learning framework is that as individuals grow older, "…the mature adult becomes more independent, and wholly self-directing" (Pew, 2007, p. 17).

Self-efficacy: For this study, the term was two-pronged. It is an individual's belief about having any measurable control over events and expected results that impact one's life and whether one has control over how these events are experienced (Bandura, 2001). For example, whether one thinks pessimistically or optimistically is thought to hinder or enhance, respectively, an individual's motivations and expectations.

*Academic self-efficacy (*ASE): This was defined as the belief in one's ability to be successful academically, i.e. performing academic tasks with higher levels of confidence.

Motivation was defined as being "moved to do something," when an individual is eager and stimulated to move toward an end or result (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It implies a willingness to do something and then a desire to repeat the behavior, as related to *intrinsic* (internal) and *extrinsic* (external) rewards.

Intrinsic motivation: An individual's internal drive or motivation to perform a task because it is

inherently interesting or enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Extrinsic motivation: An individual's external drive or motivation to perform a task or activity

with the expectation of earning a reward or accolade upon achievement (Ryan & Deci,

2017).

Pursue: In the context of this study, pursue was understood to infer the enrollment in a master's

degree program by a first-generation college student with the anticipated award of the

degree upon successful completion of a program of study (noun, *pursuit*).

Persistence: Within the student environment, it is the continued state of action in being a student.

Resilience: Within the student environment, a term that refers to a student's ability to recover

quickly from challenges or difficulties. *Hardiness*, or the ability to successfully adapt to

difficult or challenging experiences, has been reviewed in the literature as a synonym

for resilience, according to Vanden Bos (as cited in Seay et al., 2008).

Aspiration: As used in the study and in this context, the term was understood to be a student's

ambition, goal, and hope of going to graduate school to earn the master's degree.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

 For purposes of this study, the following assumptions were made:

1. It was assumed by the researcher that first-generation graduate students display

remarkable depths of resilience and persistence in pursuing higher education goals

despite myriad challenges. The researcher has witnessed first-generation student

struggles, has shared in their academic successes, and regularly considers their depths of persistence in her position of Executive Director of Graduate Affairs in the college.

2. It was assumed that from the challenges of first-generation undergraduate student experiences, most first-generation students would not consider returning to higher education to pursue additional academic credentials.

3. It was assumed that first-generation graduate students have knowingly and by positive reinforcement developed coping strategies that allow them to be successful in academic environments.

4. It was assumed that first-generation graduate students through perseverance, ability, effort, imminent reward, and some luck, have cultivated the motivation to continue their higher education pursuits and are successful through resilience.

5. It was assumed that first-generation master's students would be able to identify their coping strategies and to articulate and accurately report on self-efficacy and the motivations for their academic success.

6. It was assumed that all participants would understand the questions throughout the interview.

7. It was assumed that all participants would be honest and truthful in their responses.

8. It was assumed that the first-generation master's students understood the specific definition of FGS used in this study and correctly self-identified themselves.

9. It was assumed that all the participants had earned the bachelor's degree and were currently pursuing a master's degree.

Because much of this was anecdotal, the researcher focused the study on the collective

experiences of adult first-generation master's students, especially those aspects that students attributed to their motivations for returning to the academic environment to pursue graduate study.

Delimitations with this qualitative study primarily included that the selected population for the study were currently matriculated graduate students within the university setting. The scope of this study was on those factors related to the personal contributions from first-generation students to their success in higher education. Additional delimitations were the conceptual framework around which the study was focused, the research questions, the selected demographic and educational questions on the questionnaire, the interview and journal questions, and the protocol. Many of the delimitations were purposefully selected by the researcher: 1) to interview a smaller group of participants in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the collective experiences of first-generation students who pursue post-baccalaureate work, 2) to elicit deeper and more considered responses from participants expecting the issue to be both personal and emotional, 3) to focus on one culture-sharing group of graduate students at a major research institution that is now a school of choice among many public universities in the state of Florida, and 4) to focus the study on the positive outcomes, i.e. the resiliency, of these students. First-generation students were defined for the purpose of this study as students whose parents had no college experience, including two-year college or university enrollment. The purpose of this research was not a comparison study and therefore, first-generation students who decided not to pursue graduate school after earning the bachelor's degree were not interviewed.

Summary

The importance of this study is the exploration of the collective defining experiences that adult first-generation graduate students ascribed to their aspirations and pursuit of the master's degree. The focus of this study was on the perceptions of academic self-efficacy and the motivational (intrinsic and extrinsic) factors that adult first-generation master's students attributed to their decisions to enroll in the graduate degree. Moreover, the study explored the experiences of the first-generation master's student to understand the essence of the adult learner who pursues graduate work and the elements that informed his or her decision to return to school. The significance of this study within the larger social cognitive conceptual framework was to explore the relationship between academic self-efficacy and motivation as forces that impel adult students forward and any resultant differential impact on student academic persistence.

The study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of adult graduate student aspirations, including any potential barriers to first-generation graduate student academic success. It was expected for the study to reveal trends in first-generation master's student enrollment, inform higher education policies, and enhance institutional practices. Providing attention to the experiences of this emergent population will focus simultaneously on their contributions and aspirations, potentially highlighting a need for new or expanded resources.

The organization of this study includes five chapters, appendices, and a reference list. Chapter 1 is the introduction and background, statement of the problem, purpose and significance of this phenomenological research study, and the research questions on the

collective defining experiences that adult first-generation master's students attribute to their academic persistence. The focus of the study was on adult first-generation master's students' perceptions of academic self-efficacy and the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that influenced their decision to enroll in a master's degree. An exploration of the strategies for academic persistence as they relate to first-generation adult students who pursue the master's degree are described. Chapter 1 also includes the rationale for the methodology, nature of the research design, definition of terms, and the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 introduces an overview of the literature of first-generation undergraduate students and the characteristics of their collective college experiences, overlaid with a discussion of graduate students, graduate education, first-generation student status at the post-baccalaureate, and adult learners. Chapter 2 concludes with the conceptual framework used in the study, providing a summary exploration of both self-efficacy and the academic motivations of adult first-generation students who pursue graduate study. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology and research design of the present study, including a statement of the problem, the participant population and sample selection, data collection and analysis, limitations and delimitations, and ethical considerations. Chapters 4 and 5 present the participants, the data, observations, and a comprehensive analysis of the findings with recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The following literature review provides broader insight into what inspires an undergraduate first-generation student to pursue a master's degree. Additionally, academic persistence is explored with an emphasis on self-efficacy and motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic) and how they factor into the decisions of adult first-generation students who pursue graduate study. Context for this study is provided by opening with a discussion of undergraduate first-generation students and their collective characteristics and challenges in the academic arena. The literature review then explores the issues related to graduate students, aspects of what comprises a successful graduate student experience, and the barriers and expectations of graduate students in general, all with an emphasis on adult first-generation master's students. The focus is an analysis of the literature and theoretical implications on the interactions of self-efficacy and motivational theory. An exploration of the strategies for academic persistence, as they relate to adult first-generation students who enrolled in the master's degree, was also conducted.

First-Generation Undergraduate College Students

In higher education, the academic success and failure of first-generation undergraduate students has garnered much scholarly attention. To date, the definition of the term, *first-generation student,* has also generated scholarly debate. According to Peabody (2013), while "…the phrase 'first-generation college student' may have originated in 1979, the concept has

been in place for some time" (p. 3). Established through the Higher Education Act (1965, 1998) and according to the current Florida Statute:

> A student is considered First Generation in College if neither of the student's parents earned a college degree at the baccalaureate level or higher or, in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, if that parent did not earn a baccalaureate degree. (Section 1009.701(5)(b), Florida Statutes)

This definition allows for either parent to have enrolled in some college classes, makes no distinction between enrollment in a two-year college or a four-year institution, and focuses exclusively on the parent *not having earned* the bachelor's degree. In contrast, there is established research that identifies a more restrictive interpretation of first-generation student: a student for whom neither parent has any formal education beyond high school (Choy, 2001; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, 2007; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pryor et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2012). Acceptance and application of this interpretation to the first-generation college student status was consistent with the fundamental concept that a student's level of understanding about college and the post-secondary environment is the most significant element impacting the first-generation experience (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

Despite the lack of national consensus on the definition of the term, the data on first-generation students are unforgiving: they evidence much lower rates of college readiness and therefore take more remedial college coursework, are older (average age: 24), have dependents, and more often enroll only on a part-time basis because they work more hours per week (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). Pascarella et al. (2004) found consistently among their studies that, "…first-generation college students tend to be significantly handicapped in terms of the types of institutions they attend and the kinds of experiences they have during college" (p. 275), all directly attributable to the characteristics of these non-traditional college students. Davis (2010)

disputed applying terms like "handicapped" to first-generation students—he believed such terminology continues to limit access to higher education, promotes the segregation of students, and is a practice of exclusionary ideology. He affirmed that if first-generation students are prevented from getting into four-year colleges because they lack the cultural capital to do so, they also would never be able to acquire the cultural capital because they do not enjoy the same access to the types of colleges and universities that lead to the four-year degree (Davis, 2010).

The bulk of research on first-generation students enrolled in undergraduate programs has been effective in identifying those environmental traits, individual characteristics, and institutional practices that encourage their retention and attrition. The findings reflect that we know a great deal about this student population with respect to their academic preparation for college, their transition to post-secondary education, their on-campus engagement and peer/faculty relationships, and their progress to degree award. Typically, the research studies on first-generation students fall into three general categories. They include comparison studies of first-generation students to other college students, first-generation students preparing to move from high school to college, and the persistence of first-generation students in earning a bachelor's degree and their career outcomes (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The literature is consistent on each of these four topics: first-generation undergraduate students are at a remarkable disadvantage when enrolling in college with an acute lack of both family support and firm educational plans; first-generation students experience more than the typical performance and academic competence anxieties of college students; they combat cultural, social, familial, and academic transitions about which they have little knowledge or means to resolve, at least initially; and, they are more likely to leave their undergraduate

programs early without graduating and therefore have lower rates of persistence throughout the bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001; Gardner, 2013; Garza et al., 2014; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Stieha, 2010). First-generation students also typically arrive to college with little knowledge of the college environment, less or weaker academic preparedness, and an inability to acquire the funds to pay for college (Mehta et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2003). Feelings of inadequacy in the college environment, according to Thayer (2000), can be common among this group and are exacerbated by first-generation students who may begin college with several disadvantages. First-generation students may lack the knowledge of college campuses and environments, they may not have honed good student study skills (e.g., time management and class note taking), and may have a limited to no fundamental understanding of bureaucratic operations within higher education (Thayer, 2000).

Parental and Family Influences

The significance that differentiates first-generation students from their peers is simply that they did not grow up in an environment where their parents or other adults in the family attended or completed college (Choy, 2001; Mehta et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2003). In his advocacy for first-generation students, Davis (2010) submitted that,

> …first-generation student status is not about the number of years a parent attended college or the number of academic units that parent accumulated. It is about being competent and comfortable navigating the higher-education landscape, about growing up in a home environment that promotes the college and university culture. This latter perspective is what *non*-first-generation students have when they begin their postsecondary education. In other words, the *absence* of the non-first-generation student experience is what first-generation student status is all about. (p. 4)

Because of this cultural difference, first-generation students reported their parents to be less supportive of their college enrollment and less encouraging of their academic goals (Choy, 2001; Rodriguez, 2003). The parents and family members of this student population also may not understand or appreciate the stresses, time, and effort that is required of the student to be enrolled in college. Families of these students may discourage them from enrolling in college in the first place, which can eventually lead to resentment and alienation between the student and the parent, or they may expect them to move out of the family home immediately if not contributing to the family welfare (Mehta et al., 2011; Striplin, 1999).

First-generation students come from family units where there is no immediate role model to emulate or ask questions of about the college selection, application, and enrollment processes. There are no examples in their immediate family of a parent—or sometimes even a relative, acquaintance, or member of the community—who achieved success in higher education, creating a distinct experiential knowledge gap about the social mores and customs of college life. Choy (2001) directed that while parental involvement in a child's education varied by culture, the evidence reflected that first-generation college students were much less likely to receive any type of help from parents in navigating the college admission process. First-generation college students reported receiving little support—financial, emotional, directional—from their parents to attend college (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Research indicates that as early as middle school, the educational expectations parents have for their children are already determined by their own educational levels. By the time a child is in eighth grade, if the parents did not go to college, there was a fifty percent likelihood that the child would not aspire

to go to college; for students whose parents did go to college, that same aspiration for college became just over ninety percent (Choy, 2001).

Undergraduate first-generation college students indicate that they were discouraged by their parents from attending college, typically due to a lack of understanding and a fear of the unknown by the parents of college costs, financial aid packages, and the college enrollment process in its entirety (Pascarella et al., 2004; Vargas, 2004). A deficit exists for first-generation students in that parents who are unable to encourage their children to attend college may also be unaware of the financial, personal, and social benefits of enrolling in college. Mehta et al. (2011) postulated that because parents of first-generation college students lack the knowledge of what it takes to be successful in college, they also tended to place unreasonable demands on their college enrolled children (e.g., continuing to contribute to family chores and responsibilities, including financial obligations) and demonstrated an inadequate understanding of the time and energy required to be successful in college.

The research demonstrates that some first-generation students who have attended college may return home to a familial environment that is unfamiliar with the stresses and rewards of college enrollment (Stieha, 2010). Once undergraduate first-generation students have enrolled in college and return home, they typically experience a culture shock of balancing one world where their family and friends have not gone to college and that of another world where their friends are all enrolled in college and understand the lived experience (Payne, 2007). These same students report strained family relationships, including family members who perceive the first-generation student as having changed or grown away from the family unit, resulting in relationships that may need to be renegotiated (Ward et al., 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Collective College Experiences

While much of the research reviews the differences between first-generation students and their peers, there is significant research related to their collective experiences in college. A unique phenomenon evidenced among first-generation students is a common feeling of not belonging in the academic environment, a belief that they will be "discovered as imposters", people who do not belong in college but are pretending that they do (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017; Davis, 2010; Rodriguez, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996). Exacerbated by 'feeling like a fish out of water', first generation college students often lack a general familiarity with the college academic environment because they do not have role models to emulate or immediate family members or friends to ask questions of and guide them. First-generation college student struggles are compounded by not understanding or knowing the norms, traditions, or bureaucracies required to be successful in this foreign environment (Mehta et al, 2011; Pike and Kuh, 2005). Demetriou et al. (2017) found that first-generation students often believed and stated concern that the institution had made an error in their admission and they were therefore not enrolled in college on legitimate terms.

The research demonstrates a higher incidence of negative feelings from both anxiety associated with academic success and lower levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy among first-generation students (Dembo & Seli, 2008; Mehta et al., 2011; Terenzini et al., 1996; Vuong et al., 2010). The lower rates of enrollment in highly selective institutions contrasted with the higher rates of enrollment in community college was offered as one outcome of the increased incidence of the imposter phenomenon among first-generation college students (Davis, 2010).

Undergraduate first-generation students typically report perceptions that both the campus environment and faculty were less supportive of their needs than those of other students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). FGS were less involved in campus activities and events, were more likely to live off campus, and reported fewer interactions with student acquaintances connected to the college campus (Demetriou, 2017; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Rodriguez, 2003). Exacerbating these issues of not feeling connected to the campus community, undergraduate FGS typically chose institutions based on a local distance from their home, lived at home while attending college, and favored the ability to both work and attend school simultaneously (Lundberg, 2007; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004). As a result, first-generation students reported a lower satisfaction level on both social and academic engagements, as well as a lower grade point average, in college (Davis, 2010; Mehta et al., 2011). First-generation students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, were among those college students least likely to remain enrolled in college and complete the degree (Choy, 2001; Engle &Tinto, 2008; Thayer, 2000).

The volume of research on first-generation students has traditionally affirmed the barriers to their academic successes and challenges in the completion of programs (Choy, 2001; Gardner, 2013; Mehta et al., 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Stieha, 2010). The evidence is extensive with the myriad reasons why they fail in college, the causes for their attrition, and the resultant financial debt and professional stasis so many first-generation students experience when they are unsuccessful in college. According to Demetriou et al. (2017), too few studies focus on the success of these students in their college endeavors. A growing area of research, therefore, is with a focus on the experiences of successful college students in post-

secondary higher education, with the broad intention of applying retention and graduation strategies to all college students. For purposes of this literature review, successful student was defined as, "a student who has been retained and is within one semester of 4-year undergraduate degree completion" (Demetriou et al., 2017, p. 20).

Having early access to college selection, enrollment information, mentoring programs, and gateway courses has benefited undergraduate first-generation students by providing the assurance that college is a reasonable, attainable goal (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). This finding validated subsequent research that found many factors contributed to a positive college experience. The factors included the ability of students to develop a positive identity in the role of a student, active engagement and perceived value in their coursework, participation in undergraduate research, seeking out positive role models and mentoring relationships with faculty, and involvement with student organizations and community service (Davis, 2010; Demetriou et al., 2017; Mehta et al., 2011; Tinto, 2017). Engagement in these activities for first-generation students boosted their self-confidence, provided them a new student identity, and afforded them the opportunity to feel as though they *belonged in college* (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Demetriou et al., 2017).

The student identity, however, was not just a result of first-generation students displaying academic ability. Collier and Morgan (2008) suggested that first-generation students, "must master the *college student role*," defined as the successful fit between student and faculty expectations and the mutual understanding between the two (p. 425). Barber, King, and Baxter-Magolda (2013) posited that college students who were challenged to expand their more typical roles, including their belief and value systems, were more likely to grow from the college

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experience, moving from a reliance on external motivations to internal motivations. This identity

development framework of *self-authorship* is especially critical to first-generation college

students as a marginalized population, both as a construct in academic persistence and in how

effectively they are able to navigate their changing social and cultural experiences (Auton-Cuff

& Gruenhage, 2014; Barber et al., 2013)

Graduate Students and Graduate Education

Introduction

This section of the literature review explores the issues related to graduate students,

specifically those for first-generation students who aspire to the master's degree level. Aspects of

what comprises a successful graduate student experience, the barriers and expectations of

graduate students in general, motivations for graduate school, and an exploration of graduate

student academic experiences and behaviors while pursuing the master's degree are described.

The focus is an analysis of the literature and theoretical implications on the interactions among

academic self-efficacy, motivational theory, and academic persistence as an influence on adult

first-generation students who pursue the master's degree

Characteristics

The college degree is especially valued among first-generation students, as it represents

opportunity for greater social mobility and occupational success. At the graduate level, it

provides access to advanced professional careers, higher salaries, and even broader opportunity.

Olive (2014) asserts, "First generation status may influence the desire of higher education" (p. 74). Yet only limited research has been done on graduate students in general, their goals for pursuing advanced degrees, what they expect from their educational experiences, and what influences their choices. Hardre and Hackett (2015) submit that the motivational and affective perceptions like confidence and competency that predict the success of undergraduate students are, "…critical factors [that] remain understudied among graduate students" (p. 455).

As recently as academic year 2016-2017, the data demonstrate the majority of graduate degrees awarded were at the master's level, comprising 83.4% of all graduate degrees conferred (Okahana & Zhou, 2018). Baum and Steele (2017) extrapolated from 2015 United States Census data that 12 percent of all adults in the United States, aged 25 years or older, held an advanced degree which included the master's, doctoral, or professional degree. This 12 percent represents 25.4 million people or nearly 37 percent of the students who had completed bachelor's degrees (Baum & Steele, 2017). The evidence also suggests that within 10 years of earning the bachelor's degree, 40 percent of individuals will enroll in a graduate program—and these graduate school enrollment percentages are directly proportionate to increases in family income and are more likely to occur when students earn the bachelor's degree at a younger age (Baum & Steele, 2017).

The first-generation student who earns the bachelor's degree and aspires to earn the graduate degree is much less likely to enroll in the master's degree. The research reflects many of the same reasons confronted by the FGS in the undergraduate academic world, e.g. economic, demographic, familial, and academic preparation, are still present when contemplating graduate school. Notably, though, first-generation students are, "…as likely to be employed…and to make

comparable salaries as their peers during the first few years after college" (Engle, 2007, p. 27). A U.S. Department of Education 1998 national study of first-generation students supports this later finding: the FGS population persisted and achieved credentials at lower rates while enrolled in both two-year and four-year institutions. The study concluded that even when controlling for impediments that are commonly associated with first-generation students, "first-generation student status still had a negative effect on educational attainment" (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Aspects of the First-Generation Graduate Student Experience

In the comprehensive *Moving Beyond Access* study conducted by Engle and Tinto (2008) using U.S. Department of Education data, the researchers found that first-generation college graduates are as likely to aspire to pursue graduate education but are consistently less likely than their peers—nearly half as likely—to earn an advanced degree. It is therefore both important and relevant to understand the identifiable characteristics and traits of those first-generation students who earn the bachelor's degree *and* transition into graduate school. Tate et al. (2015) offered, "Because of the internal and structural barriers faced by such marginalized populations, it is important to investigate psychological and contextual factors that impact their intentionality" (p. 429).

Many of the characteristics of first-generation undergraduate college students are seen in first-generation master's students. The mindset of academic inadequacy, feeling isolated from the campus culture, straddling social and family barriers, and not developing strong relationships with faculty, mentors, or on-campus peers continue to plague the first-generation graduate

student (Lunceford, 2011; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). Despite overcoming all the barriers to earn the bachelor's degree, when these same students enroll in graduate programs, their challenges are compounded. They have escalated the reality of living in two disparate worlds, that of their family and graduate school. They must again work to develop supportive relationships with faculty and on-campus peers, discern institutional practices, and convince themselves that they belong in graduate school, a wide-ranging skillset that is critical to a student's socialization and well-being (Choy, 2001; Lunceford, 2011).

Research demonstrates that the first-generation student status for some remains integral to the master's level first-generation student. From their phenomenological study among first-generation master's students, Portnoi and Kwong (2011) found four factors that comprised the graduate student experience and added to student self-efficacy: interest in the graduate coursework, active engagement in the academic experience, support received from the program faculty, and relationships developed with on-campus peers. Facilitating graduate students' enjoyment of the academic material in their academic programs by engagement with both the faculty and their program peers is a documented strategy that adds to their self-confidence and resiliency (Lunceford, 2011).

Student persistence, self-efficacy, and resilience have all been offered as correlates of academic achievement more than just ability itself. Prominent researchers in the field of higher education, such as Tinto, Bandura, and Bergerson, advocated that student persistence is tied to being integrated into the campus, self-efficacy is strongly correlated with academic persistence and the desire to press ahead (motivation), and that an individual's family plays a primary role in the academic success of first-generation students. In their research study on grit and student

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persistence, Bowman, Hill, Denson, and Bronkema (2015) found that students who self-identified as "gritty" were more satisfied with the college experience, were more engaged in campus activities and felt a greater sense of connectedness to campus, and recounted having more interaction with faculty. These findings suggested that the more resilient students more quickly recognized the opportunities that advanced degrees would afford them and that this in turn may make them more likely to be persistent—or "grittier" (Bowman et al., 2015).

The research suggests that for first-generation master's students, academic achievement and motivation are highly dependent on an amalgam of personality traits and characteristics. The challenges and barriers that first-generation students face in pursuing advanced degrees can be overcome with strong peer interactions, engagement with faculty, academic work in which they are interested and with which they are challenged, and a college environment to which they feel connected (Hardre & Hackett, 2015; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Polson, 2003). The research findings demonstrate that with tenacity and some highly focused institutional resources, first-generation graduate students adapt to their higher education environments and succeed (Portnoi & Kwong, 2011) and their first-generation student status remains highly significant for these students at the master's level (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

<center>Barriers and Expectations</center>

Graduate education requires a substantial and long-term investment from an individual. Portnoi and Kwong (2011) found three areas of support that enhanced the first-generation graduate student experience: offering students time to adapt to the new "rules of the game"; helping students overcome feelings of inadequacy and alienation; and third, addressing the need

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for students to balance their dissimilar worlds, including the professional realm, home and family life, and graduate school. Graduate students, once seen as just an extended next step from the undergraduate students, are now more often the subject of research studies. The graduate student, it was once thought, was capable of handling the responsibilities and challenges of graduate study just by virtue of being older, more mature than the typical undergraduate student, more focused, and goal-oriented (Polson, 2003). The research supports that master's students often find themselves back in school without any peers, with an overload of personal and professional responsibilities that strain their time and financial resources, and enrolled in an academic environment which may have changed drastically from when they were enrolled as an undergraduate student (Baird, 1995; Polson, 2003). While the evidence is robust that first-generation undergraduate students experience significant challenges in their undergraduate programs, these challenges are predictably compounded for the student returning to graduate school (Lunceford, 2011). In her study on the graduate school aspirations of first-generation students, Carlton (2015) revealed two significant findings: FGS were less likely to apply to graduate programs and the primary reason was due to heavy undergraduate financial debt burdens that FGS must assume because of limited familial resources.

As noted earlier, graduate education is a growing segment of the college student population, despite the recent decreases in international student enrollment across all states and in all program areas (Roll, 2017). According to the 2017 Council of Graduate Schools and GRE Survey (Okahana & Zhou, 2018), enrollment in master's programs in the fields of Education, Health Sciences, and Business were the strongest, collectively representing 44.3 percent of all new graduate student enrollment in fall 2017. The authors of this graduate school survey also

found enrollment in these fields represented the largest proportion of graduate students enrolled on a part-time basis, with more than half of all graduate student enrollment being female (57.9%) and white (60.1%; Okahana & Zhou, 2018).

Institutions are in a constant state of reassessing and re-examining the types of resources and services available to assist in graduate student retention and degree completion, especially because master's degree programs "…have lower completion rates overall than doctoral and professional programs…" (Baum & Steele, 2017, p. 8). Furthermore, Baum and Steele (2017) identified several characteristics of the typical master's degree student: they were more often female, black, from lower-income backgrounds, and had earned the bachelor's degree at an older age.

Graduate students are frequently identified as being highly focused, serious and committed to their graduate work, spending more time on their academic coursework in general and specialized subject areas in particular, and being even more motivated than their undergraduate counterparts (Baird, 1995; Wyatt, 2011). While the student characteristics are different, many of the same institutional values and services offered at the undergraduate level are necessary to help the graduate student make a seamless transition into the master's degree program. Such support includes dedicated graduate student housing, access to professors and mentoring relationships, specialized graduate student orientations, readily available information about institutional policies and practices, and an understanding by faculty and administrators of student time constraints and outside obligations (King, 2017; Wyatt, 2011).

<u>Self-Efficacy</u>

Introduction

Empirical research on first-generation college students, student retention and attrition, and academic persistence has provided a rich overview of motivational theories from many different disciplines. The purpose of the background section that follows is to describe and explore Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory of self-efficacy (SET), noting the intersectionality of environmental influences that he believed shaped human behavior and the perceived concept of self. An emphasis in this chapter will be on academic self-efficacy. The nature and construct of self-efficacy is important in the postsecondary environment because it has been demonstrated to influence student effort, motivation, perseverance, and level of achievement (Bandura, 1997, 2006).

Background

In simplest terms, *efficacy* is the ability to produce an intended, effective result. *Self-efficacy*, therefore, is the belief that individuals have about their abilities to influence events that affect them and the control over how these events are experienced (Bandura, 1997). A key component to Bandura's theory on self-efficacy, beyond individuals believing that they have the required knowledge or skills, is that they must also have the belief that they are in control of the outcome and have the power to effect results by their own actions (Bandura, 1997, 2002). These beliefs are critical to individuals when making choices, while performing tasks, and expending effort when being challenged. These personal self-beliefs are central to an

individual's continued motivation and level of persistence for all experienced events. Bandura (2006) elaborated that,

> Efficacy beliefs influence whether people think erratically or strategically, optimistically or pessimistically. They also influence the courses of action people choose to pursue, the challenges and goals they set for themselves and their commitment to them, how much effort they put forth in given endeavors, the outcomes they expect their efforts to produce, how long they persevere in the face of obstacles, their resilience to adversity, the quality of their emotional life and how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and the life choices they make and the accomplishments they realize. (p. 309)

Self-efficacy is domain-specific, where an individual may feel competent with a specific task or situation but then not feel confident in succeeding at another task or in a new setting (Pajares, 1996; Zimmerman, 1995). However, developing self-efficacy in multiple areas does increase an individual's confidence in mastering new domains and in experimenting with new ideas (Ormrod, 2008). In the academic environment, the research suggests that students with higher self-efficacy believe in their abilities to be successful academically (i.e., academic self-efficacy, *ase*), are more likely to complete arduous tasks and assignments, and therefore, are motivated to continue and persist with their studies despite setbacks or challenges (Choi, 2005; Dembo & Seli, 2008; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1986). Self-efficacy, according to Multon, Brown, and Lent (1991), was postulated, "to influence choice of behavioral activities, effort expenditure, persistence in the face of obstacles, and task performance" (p. 30). Students with higher levels of self-efficacy are also less fearful in the academic environment and approach academic tasks with less anxiety (Dembo & Seli, 2008). Within this theoretical model, achieving academic success is, therefore, directly related to the confidence college students must have in their academic abilities (Vuong et al., 2010). According to Valentine, DuBois, and Cooper (2004), "…even among

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equally able students, self-efficacy theory predicts that students with higher self-efficacy for a given problem will perform better than students with lower levels of self-efficacy" (p. 114).

Bandura (1997) submitted that a student's positive efficacy can influence the academic decisions they make, how much effort they put into their studies, how long they will persevere, and how resilient they are when challenged by obstacles. Strong self-efficacy also promotes choices that are consistent with adaptive goals and the continued exertion of effort on tasks but only within a given domain with which an individual is already familiar (Tate et al., 2015; Valentine et al., 2004).

There has been significant debate in the literature about whether academic achievement is actually influenced by self-beliefs (intrinsic motivations). Self-efficacy advocates promote that it is critical to academic achievement as it influences aspirations, goal-setting behaviors, motivation, and commitment to personal accomplishments (Bandura, 1997; Bandura & Locke, 2003). In their study on the extent to which self-efficacy beliefs predicted student academic performance and perceived career options, Lent et al. (1986) found self-efficacy contributed significantly to academic success, persistence, and vocational interests in the science/technical field. The study recommended further investigation of *career self-efficacy*, which is directly related to this study of first-generation students who pursue graduate work for career options and advancement.

Opponents of the cognitive theory offer research to support that academic achievement is enhanced through student accountability initiatives and mandated graduation requirements or extrinsic motivators (Valentine et al., 2004). Distinguished educational theorist Tinto (2017) offered that a sense of belonging to the college community and a perceived value on the program

of study, in addition to a developed and reinforced self-efficacy, are essential for students to persist in their pursuit of post-secondary education.

Proponents of self-efficacy also acknowledge that there are disadvantages to these self-beliefs. These include distorted memories or misleading results for which an individual bases self-efficacy for performing a new task, overconfidence, and ignoring personal weaknesses that build a false premise of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Ormrod, 2008). Negative self-efficacy can also be a result: students who are met with constant failure and therefore are not able to build or strengthen their self-beliefs, can develop low self-efficacy where they are unwilling to take on new tasks, their grade point averages decline, they may lose all faith in their capabilities, and can even experience heightened levels of depression and stress (Bandura, 1997; Vuong et al., 2010). Tinto (2015) affirmed, "A strong sense of self-efficacy cannot be assumed" (p. 257). Many first-generation students enroll in college and pursue graduate work but may not necessarily be confident in their academic abilities to navigate higher education. Furthermore, self-efficacy is not exclusively an academic issue. First-generation student perceptions of their ability to manage their college enrollment, in addition to off-campus responsibilities and challenges, also impact their perception of personal success.

In contrast, a strong sense of efficacy enhances one's accomplishments and personal well-being, resulting in increased confidence levels to master new realms and inspiring the willingness to test out new ideas (Ormrod, 2008; Pajares, 1996). High levels of self-efficacy in the academic environment also help the individual to remain calm when presented with more challenging assignments, increase persistence and focus on a specific task because of earlier success and mastery, and encourage setting even higher expectations for future performances

(Ormrod, 2008). Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy are able to rebound quickly from setbacks and challenges, according to Bandura (1997), and approach threatening situations with confidence. They are able to maintain consistently strong levels of effort despite failures or ongoing challenges. For first-generation students, self-efficacy is a critical component to their academic success especially because they may approach tasks, social and academic, with lower levels of confidence (Tinto, 2017; Ward et al., 2012). They must believe in their ability to succeed in college and to manage their responsibilities outside of being a college student to continue putting forth the effort into this task. The evidence has shown that even incremental success in the academic domain fosters the continuous development of an academic skillset which further augments student confidence.

Construct Development and Influences

There are four critical sources of information through which individuals, in this case students, develop their self-efficacy beliefs. These include mastery experiences, social modeling or vicarious experiences, introspection, and social persuasion (Bandura, 1997; Ormrod, 2008; Pajares, 2003). With mastery or performance experiences, when students are successful with a particular project or assignment, they gain confidence from the success and believe that they are able to succeed again in the future and master new domains (Bandura, 1997; Ormrod, 2008; Valentine et al., 2004). The performance outcome is the most important source of individual self-efficacy, as it provides the most authentic evidence of the ability to succeed (Bandura, 1997). It is also affirmed in the literature that both positive and negative experiences can influence an

individual's self-efficacy, the first building confidence in the individual's competence with a task, the latter diminishing confidence and thereby, eroding self-efficacy (Ormrod, 2008).

In social modeling, also referred to as vicarious experience, students learn from others who are accomplishing a task and thereby emulate similar behavior, experiencing success vicariously (Bandura, 1997). Comparison of one's abilities to the perceived abilities of others is the second most influential element of academic self-efficacy (Korgan et al., 2013). The reverse learning experience can also occur if an individual observes someone fail at a task or in a situation, this can lower self-efficacy (Ormrod, 2008). Pairing students with strong role models and mentors in these situations, especially those with similar skillsets, has proven successful. In the process of social, also referred to as verbal, persuasion, students are influenced by the guidance, feedback, and encouragement received from both peers and professors (Bandura, 1997; Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016). It is critical that there is an established level of credibility with the person in the persuasive role which directly influences the effectiveness of the dialogue. And lastly, through the process of introspection, students are able to respond to and influence their self-reflection of success or failure based upon both physiological and emotional feedback to the situation (Bandura, 1997). Cues such as an increased heart rate, sweaty palms, fear or nervousness are the physiological responses through which individuals will experience their efficacy. This is the least influential efficacy source of the four identified (Bandura (1997).

Bandura's (1997) theory on self-efficacy includes several ways in which the individual believes it is related to their functioning: (a) *cognitive,* (b) *motivational (intrinsic v extrinsic),* (c) *emotional (affective), or* (d) *decisional.* Each of these influences includes a balance within the

individual, the degree to which a student believes optimistically or pessimistically that his/her actions that can influence an outcome, whether decisions are based upon seeing opportunities or obstacles, and if choice is responded to with either growth or discouragement (Bandura, 1997). In the academic setting, students with higher levels of self-efficacy monitor their progress frequently, approach difficult tasks as challenges to overcome, seek help more often, and employ strategies that influence desired positive outcomes because they believe in the value of motivation (Bandura, 1997; Dembo & Seli, 2008; Ormrod, 2003; Pajares, 2003). In support of this evidence, "Because perceived self-efficacy fosters engagement in learning activities that promote the development of educational competencies, such beliefs affect level of achievement as well as motivation" (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 208).

Academic Motivation

Introduction

Bandura (1997) affirmed that, "Efficacy beliefs play a central role in the cognitive regulation of motivation" (p. 122). Motivations, driven by perceptions, significantly influence how individuals work and learn (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011) and are closely connected to students' self-beliefs. Tinto affirmed (2015), "Without motivation and the effort it engenders, persistence is unlikely" (p. 255). The perceptions of motivation, e.g. feeling competent in your student skillset, believing in the ability to overcome challenges in learning and achieving, and feeling supported by and with easy access to academic advisors, are all highly researched at the

undergraduate levels, "…but these critical factors remain understudied among graduate students" (Hardre & Hackett, 2015, p. 455).

Self-Determination Theory

Researchers and psychologists Ryan and Deci (2000) are credited with developing a theory of human motivation that suggests individuals are driven by the need to grow, be fulfilled, and make choices with their own free will. The theory that arose from their work, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), focuses on the internal sources of motivation and how one's social environment can either nurture this innate drive or hinder it (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As an intertwined theoretical framework with Bandura's theory on self-efficacy, Self-Determination Theory similarly asserts that self-belief influences academic achievement. For example, students will succeed at tasks that matter to them, they will expend more effort to ensure desired results, and they will stay with the task longer when pursuing goals that are consistent with their self-beliefs (Valentine et al., 2004). SDT is very simply, the degree to which an individual's behavior is both "self-endorsed and self-determined" (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The point at which the models differ is that among cognitive theories, an individual's level of motivation or lack thereof stems solely from perceived levels of self-efficacy; within SDT, motivation is differentiated among various sources, interests, and experiences. As Ryan and Deci (2017) affirmed,

> Different motives are not just different in magnitude; they vary in the phenomenal
> sources that initiate them, the affects and experiences that therefore accompany them,
> and their behavioral consequences, including the quality of persistence, performance,
> and health benefits (costs) they yield. (p. 14)

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is built upon a theoretical platform that connects personality, motivation, and functioning with what the researchers determined are the three basic, universal human needs. These needs are: (a) *competence* (mastering the environment, wanting to know how things will work out, self-efficacy), (b) *relatedness* (wanting to interact or be connected to others), and (c) *autonomy* (acting for one's own interests but not necessarily being independent; self-determination) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The theory is built upon the premise that individuals are driven to both grow and gain fulfillment through new experiences and by achieving mastery over challenges. According to SDT, these are the building blocks for an integrated sense of self. When these innate needs (competence, connection, and autonomy) are met, individuals are productive; they become self-determined and intrinsically motivated to pursue ideas and goals that interest them (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Motivation in Self-Determination Theory

The phenomenon of motivation is a study of context, intensity, and duration. Students are motivated from both *intrinsic* (internal) and *extrinsic* (external) sources. Intrinsic motivation is defined as an internal drive to perform an activity or task simply because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable and without any expectation of reward or external gain. The only goal for intrinsic motivation is pure satisfaction and pleasure, "…for which the primary 'reward' is the spontaneous feelings of effectance and enjoyment that accompany the behaviors" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 14). In academic settings, intrinsic motivation has been found to result in positive academic outcomes such as higher academic performance by students and remaining in school (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014).

Extrinsic motivations are the outside forces that drive individuals' efforts to achieve rewards, wealth, bonuses, fame, and accolades—or even to avoid punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2017). Even the pursuit of further education, e.g. the bachelor's degree beyond high school or the master's degree beyond the bachelor's degree, can serve as an extrinsic motivation for some students (Tinto, 2015). A third facet of SDT is *amotivation*, defined as an individual's perception that they cannot reach their goal because they lack the competence or the ability to affect a desired outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within this third dimension of motivation, students would not recognize a causation between their behaviors and desired outcomes.

The research demonstrates that students are much more likely to persist through struggling, taking risks, and believing that they can succeed when they are intrinsically motivated to learn or engage in academic endeavors (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). Students who are extrinsically motivated, because it includes the added pressure to earn something to remain motivated or to avoid an action that results in a punitive effect, are generally more focused on looking competent, impressing others, and avoiding failure (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These students are also less likely to persist when challenged, less likely to seek help, and more likely to attribute their failures to teachers and peers (Lepper, Corpus, & Ivengar, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). The research clearly demonstrates that within the college student population in general, both undergraduate and graduate, there is a consistently proven positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and academic achievement (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). And according to the tenets of SDT, extrinsic motivations can impede intrinsic motivations, thereby affecting academic achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Impact on First-Generation Graduate Student Role

Performance and success in academic settings are the results of the intersecting factors of self-efficacy and motivation. With self-efficacy, the self-beliefs of the individual are an estimation of the ability to perform a complex skill-set in the academic environment and must be segregated from what is more commonly referred to as self-esteem, which is more of a trait than a system of self-beliefs (Tate et al., 2015). Self-efficacy beliefs have been found to factor prominently at the graduate school level because a student's decision to pursue higher-level academic work is typically related to career expansion and professional development (Tate et al., 2015). The pursuit of graduate school is, therefore, more commonly seen as extrinsically motivated, where students enroll for career aspirations and monetary rewards, which may not be as influential in keeping a graduate student enrolled. Ryan and Deci (2000) found that students who were extrinsically motivated demonstrated less interest in school overall, blamed others when they were not successful, and experienced weaker intrinsic motivation, all of which impacted academic achievement. Zimmerman (1995) offers that the, "…quality of performance largely determines the outcomes one experiences" (p. 215).

For first-generation students, the preponderance of the evidence demonstrates that this population may be more motivated by extrinsic rewards, e.g. grades, job promotions, and salaries, than by just being in the academic environment (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). Receipt of rewards symbolizes progress and enhances student efficacy when they are linked to educational accomplishments (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1991). There are studies on first-generation students, however, that refute this evidence. Competing research supports that this disadvantaged FGS population demonstrates more distinct intrinsic motivations, i.e. more resilience, more openness

to challenges, a strong internal focus for academic success, and more stable educational plans when compared to other students (Pascarella et al, 2004). Helping students to develop their interests in the first place, offered Schunk (1991), based upon rewards given for performance, may signal an increase in both learning outcomes and efficacy.

In a study conducted by Williams (2005), he asserted that there are three separate areas that comprise self-efficacy for graduate students—social (the belief in one's ability to build meaningful relationships with faculty and peers), academic (the belief in one's ability to perform in an academic setting), and research (the belief in one's competence to conduct research) self-efficacy. These student domains offered by Williams (2005) are directly aligned with both Bandura's (1997) theoretical tenets of self-efficacy, as well as the conceptual framework of Deci & Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory.

<u>Andragogy</u>

Introduction

It is common for the adult first-generation master's student to struggle upon returning to the college environment. The challenges inherent in seeking an advanced degree are quickly compounded by the expanded demands of adulthood, including employment, parenting, caregiving to aging parents, partnering, and serving as a community member (Polson, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2011). At the graduate level, however, these adult roles can serve as assets to the first-generation master's student (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Adult responsibilities may open a new network of social support that was not present during the undergraduate years, as well as help the

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individual to grow through life experiences that add conviction and motivation to later-in-life goals (Pew, 2007; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Similarly, the adult learner brings a set of professional skills and experiences, including team problem-solving and group discussion, to a graduate program that should be embraced, "to capitalize on this resource" (Hegarty, 2011, p. 149). Graduate study signals the beginning of another new experience for the first-generation master's student and often occurs many years after earning the bachelor's degree. It is therefore relevant to review the strategies and characteristics employed by adult first-generation master's students that help them to sustain their academic persistence.

Practical Applications

Andragogy is the study and science of adult learning. In the adult education arena, Malcolm Knowles' is the leading scholar-practitioner whose research over the last fifty years has had the most substantial influence nationally on what factors help adults to learn (Houde, 2006; Pratt, 1988; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Knowles' research emphasizes that teaching adults (andragogy) requires a different, more collaborative approach than teaching children (pedagogy) because adult students advance in learning activities with a different set of motivations (Hegarty, 2011; Houde, 2006; Knowles et al., 1998, 2005). Within the adult learning framework, there are six key assumptions posited about adult learners. Adult learners are assumed to:

1. need to know why they should learn something and how it is valuable to them;
2. prefer self-direction in the learning environment, described as both intentional choice and taking the initiative and responsibility for tasks;
3. demonstrate a readiness to learn that is oriented to their social roles;

4. bring their experience to learning, which becomes a valuable resource;

5. exhibit an orientation to learning that has moved from strictly subject-focused to one of problem-centeredness, where they can apply knowledge to real life issues;

6. present a motivation to learn, which is primarily internal and interrelated to goal achievement and self-esteem (Knowles et al., 2005; Pratt, 1988; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Taylor & Kroth, 2009).

The essence of the conceptual framework is succinctly summarized as, "Adults generally become ready to learn when their life situation creates a need to know" (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 194).

The conceptual framework, Andragogy in Practice, includes three tiers, two of which encircle the Core Adult Learning Principles and serve to interact with these assumptions (Knowles et al., 1998). The outer ring, G*oals and Purposes for Learning*, illustrates developmental outcomes that affect the learning experience. The goals and purposes for adult learning include the categories of individual, institutional, and societal growth. The second tier or inner ring, *Individual and Situational Differences*, describes the variables that impact adult learning (Knowles et al., 2005). It is within this second tier of the Andragogical framework that the lens of the current study will be focused. Within this tier are *Subject-matter differences, Situational differences, and Individual differences.* Each of these variables has a specific and different impact on the adult first-generation master's student.

For example, subject-matter differences may preclude students from pursuing complex or unfamiliar subjects in graduate school, as might individual differences related to personality, prior knowledge, or even cognitive ability. Situational differences are relevant for the adult

graduate student who may be expecting more interaction in the classroom, more or less self-directed learning, or even less formal group work in class. Rachal (2002) summarized Knowles' tenets for the adult learning setting to include both physically and psychologically comfortable environments that promote, "…a respect for the learner as an adult, a respect for the learner's experiences, a fostering of collaborative effort, and even mutual learning of both learner and facilitator, a minimizing of anxiety, and, in general, an avoidance of the schooling experience" (p. 223). The multi-dimensional interaction of the three tiers recognizes that no two adult learners are identical (Knowles et al., 2005). Adults employ a broad range of learning styles, which requires keeping their training flexible and the learning opportunities adaptive, as found in an Andragogy in Practice study by Cox (2007). Individual experiences and situational differences, in tandem with socio-cultural growth, all impacted the core principles of adult learning differently.

In Andragogy, two tenets are fundamental to the framework: learning is pursued for its intrinsic value (Rachal, 2002) and the adult learner has primary responsibility for his or her motivation (Pew, 2007). Research supports Knowles' theory that adult students prefer learning strategies that engage them in the experience as active agents and provide the opportunity for self-directed learning (Bastalich, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011). The research also indicates, according to Hegarty (2011), that while returning to a graduate program can be daunting, "…the type of motivation and attitude one employs in the pursuit of education has far-reaching ramifications beyond that of just intelligence level" (p. 148). There is contrasting evidence, as well, that adults who return to the college environment can lack self-confidence, are not self-

efficous, and need a highly structured academic learning environment. Ross-Gordon (2011) offered that,

> This body of research suggests that while adult learners desire flexibility they also desire structure. They also exhibit varied learning styles and preferences influenced in part by their past encounters with higher education as well as by their social and cultural backgrounds, and are best not seen as a monolithic group. (p. 28)

While the literature emphasizes the barriers to persistence for the first-generation student, the present research study invited the first-generation master's student to express what had sustained their persistence in higher education, including any strategies employed in their pursuit of the master's degree. In a 1981 study conducted by Bandura and Schunk, they found that the type of motivation factored into how adult learners approached learning (Hegarty, 2011). Within the andragogical model,

> Students who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to credit their successes to internal factors such as the amount of effort they invest. They also believe that they can take credit for the results of their efforts rather than attribute them to luck. Intrinsically motivated students strive for a deep understanding and mastery of the material rather than simply memorization of facts. (Pew, 2007, p. 17)

Knowles' framework of andragogy represented that individuals develop an intrinsic rather than extrinsic source of motivation as they mature, grow older and more independent, and become entirely self-directing (Pew, 2007). The andragogical model supports that while adults respond to external (e.g., promotions, awards, and higher salaries) motivators, the more powerful motivators are internal, such as self-esteem, self-confidence, personal accomplishment, and an improved quality of life (Knowles et al., 2005). Employing andragogical methodologies, according to Pew (2007),

> …letting students know clearly what they can expect from higher education and what instructors expect from them as adult learners (including responsibility for their own motives and leadership in their learning process), develops in lifelong learners

intrinsic behavioral drivers that are portable, dynamic, and student owned and controlled. (p. 23)

In a study conducted by Cox (2008) on adult students who persisted in a graduate liberal studies program, five significant factors were disclosed by the students that helped them succeed in their graduate program. In order of importance based on the graduate student interviews, motivation to get a better job was consistently the leading goal among graduate students in the study, followed by self-efficacy, support from family and others, student/teacher relationships, and the support they gain from their religious faith (Cox, 2008). Additional research is needed on the factors associated with graduate student degree persistence to continue the development of services and resources that meet their unique needs. For the adult first-generation master's student, the persistence challenges are compounded by both experience and expectation.

<u>Summary</u>

The literature on first-generation college students, their aspirations and motivations to persist academically, reflects this population to have highly developed levels of self-efficacy and persistence, including a balance of intrinsic and extrinsic academic motivations. Use of the term *persistence*, "…or its active form – persisting – is another way of speaking of motivation. It is the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise" (Tinto, 2017, p. 2).

Although much of the research indicates the early educational experiences of first-generation students as negative (e.g., they are less prepared academically, they lack academic role models, and they do not understand the college culture), these students were also generally

found to be highly self-motivated, intrinsically driven, and laser-focused on their end goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gardner & Holley, 2011). The research offers strong evidence that when students have a highly developed degree of self-efficacy, they believe in their ability to succeed academically, to influence their motivations, and to persist despite any set-backs or challenges (Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ormrod, 2008). "Because perceived self-efficacy fosters engagement in learning activities that promote the development of educational competencies", submitted Zimmerman (1995), "such beliefs affect level of achievement as well as motivation" (p. 208). Equally supported in the research was the finding that a weak sense of self-efficacy destabilizes student achievement and adversely impacts student persistence (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1987).

The gap in the research literature is demonstrated by a lack of studies that document the academic successes of first-generation students enrolled in the master's degree program. Very little is known, beyond that which is offered anecdotally, about the experiences of first-generation students who persist to the post-baccalaureate level and what it is that these students believe propels them forward to achieve advanced levels of higher education. Much of the research affirms that first-generation students are less likely to enroll in a graduate program than their peers and that first-generation students are also less likely to enroll in educational institutions that produce degree-holders with graduate school aspirations (Choy, 2001; Mullen et al., 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996). Despite data to the contrary, many first-generation students enroll in master's programs and graduate.

Bandura's (1997, 2002) self-efficacy theory and Deci and Ryan's (2000, 2002) self-determination theory represent two constructs that have contributed significantly to the research

on student beliefs, their achievements, and motivations for persisting. Andragogy, the theoretical study of the influences on the variables associated with adult student learning characteristics, is fundamental to understanding those attributes that adult first-generation master's students assign to their academic persistence. It is therefore important to explore and reveal the unique collective experiences of these adult students whose goals for higher education extend beyond the undergraduate degree, lifting them into the new world of graduate school.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter 3 describes the methodology, design, and specific procedures employed in conducting the study. It begins with a brief introduction of the purpose of the study and a reiteration of the research questions, followed by a description of the research methodology, a succinct history of the study design, and the population and sampling methods employed. Also reviewed are procedures used for data collection and data analysis, a brief discussion of anticipated ethical issues, limitations and delimitations, and the expected impact of the study once concluded.

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the interactions of self-efficacy and motivation as influences on academic persistence among first-generation master's students at a large research university in the southeastern United States. This was also an exploration at a deeper level of the collective defining experiences and strategies that adult first-generation master's students attributed to the predictive elements of academic self-efficacy and motivational factors that impacted their decision to pursue a graduate degree. The researcher's intent was to use the experiences of the adult first-generation master's student to understand those elements that informed their decisions to enroll in graduate programs and how they understood self-efficacy to factor into their motivations for the master's degree.

Statement of the Problem

There is ample evidence in the literature that first-generation students struggle more than most to remain enrolled in college, moreover to earn the bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gardner, 2013; Garza et al., 2014; Ishitani, 2006; Mehta et al., 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Rodriguez, 2003; Stieha, 2010). Because the evidence demonstrates that first-generation college students are among the least likely to remain enrolled through their undergraduate college degree completion, it was important to explore the reasons some of these same students persisted beyond the bachelor's degree and enrolled in a master's program. It is well established in the research that self-efficacy influences the degree of effort the student believes he or she should apply toward a difficult task and therefore an individual's motivation to continue with that task (Bandura, 2006; Choi, 2005; Dembo & Seli, 2008; Lent et al., 1986). However, few studies have specifically explored perceived levels of self-efficacy and academic motivation of adult first-generation students who persist to enroll in the master's degree. The significance of the present study, therefore, within this larger social cognitive conceptual framework was to explore the relationship between self-efficacy, motivation, and adult learner characteristics as forces that impel adult students forward in higher education and any resultant differential impact on student academic persistence.

Research Questions

Making the decision to pursue a master's degree and navigating all the post-baccalaureate options is a formidable task for most college students. Having succeeded at the undergraduate

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level, however, is not insurance for success at the graduate level. Using qualitative data collected through one-on-one interviews and document analysis with first-generation master's students, the following research questions guided the exploration of what factors and experiences first-generation master's students ascribed to their persistence in pursuing graduate programs. The study asks the following questions:

1. Do elements of being a first-generation undergraduate student influence the student experience at the master's level? If so, what are those factors and how do they influence the master's student experience in graduate school?

2. What are the past and current experiences of adult first-generation students who are enrolled in a master's degree?

3. In what ways, if any, do self-efficacy and motivational factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) influence the decision of first-generation students to persist toward the master's degree?

Research Methodology

Researchers employ qualitative research when a problem or issue needs to be explored deeply. Layered with this, the exploration may include a particular group or population that requires further study, variables may have been identified that are not easily measured quantitatively, or there are experiences of a group—a phenomenon—that need to be given a voice (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2009). Qualitative research is typically undertaken when the inquiry requires an exploration of a social issue or phenomenon. In qualitative research, the researcher wants participants to relay their deepest personal narratives: "…we want to

empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power

relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study" (Creswell,

2007, p. 40). Qualitative research methods are most effectively employed when researchers seek

to understand,

> …the *meaning,* for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are
> involved with, and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences. The
> perspectives on events and actions held by the people involved in them are not simply
> their accounts of these events and actions, to be assessed in term of truth or falsity; they
> are part of the reality that you are trying to understand, and a major influence on their
> behavior. (Maxwell, 1992, 2004a, as cited in Maxwell, 2009, p. 221)

Phenomenological research is a basic form of qualitative inquiry that seeks, "to discover

and describe the meaning or essence of participants' lived experiences, or knowledge as it

appears to consciousness" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 50). It is the intent of phenomenology to

understand the collective, conscious human experience with a focus on those aspects of the

experience itself that are either universal or dissimilar. Qualitative phenomenological

methodology was selected for this study to reveal the motivations and degree of academic self-

efficacy present in adult first-generation students who persist to the master's degree. This method

of research inquiry was used primarily because the objective of this type of research is to extract

the meaning and essence of the lived experiences of a person or people who share or similarly

experience a specific phenomenon (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010). Moustakas (1994),

generally considered the founder of phenomenological research, submitted that research should

focus on the search for the essence and wholeness of experiences and that these same

experiences were inextricable from the person experiencing the phenomenon under study.

Participants are, therefore, viewed as 'co-researchers' in phenomenological studies and the data

discovered are grounded in their real-world phenomena and experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

The intent of qualitative research is to understand the essence of the lived experience and try to give meaning to a phenomenon from the view of the participants, which includes identifying a commonly shared culture among the participants (Maxwell, 2009; Patton 2015). Ascribing meaning to the lived experience without bias or judgment is both the purpose and the greatest challenge of the research. Each researcher brings to his or her study a worldview or paradigm of assumptions from which the research will be conducted (Creswell, 2014; Hays & Singh, 2012). This study was conducted from a social constructivist perspective, where the goal was to rely on the participants' views of and experiences with motivation and self-efficacy as adult first-generation students. Rather than begin with a theory upon which to expound, the researcher in this study acknowledged the, "intent is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). The emphasis in social constructivism research, according to Hays and Singh (2012), is on the views and assumptions of the participants juxtaposed with the researcher acknowledging that his/her interpretation derives from personal experience and a culture-specific background. Data from this type of research study, "reflect the participants' voices and thoroughly describe the roles of the researcher and research setting in understanding the research program" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 40). The questioning is more open-ended in this type of research (see Appendix A), allowing the participants to construct their meaning of the study from the discussion and interactions with the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

Research Design

Because qualitative research is interpretative, the design of this study was focused on participant interviews and electronic journals that were transcribed and summarized. The collection of this data explored *what* the participants had experienced being first-generation master's students and *how* they had experienced this student status. Hays and Singh (2012) offered that, "Qualitative researchers strive to assess participants' *intentionality*, or internal experience of being conscious of something" (p. 50).

Setting

This study was conducted at a major research level one public university in the southeastern United States prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The university has a current enrollment of more than 68,000 students, with the total graduate population currently estimated to be 9,164 students. The 2019-2020 enrollment of active (currently admitted) master's students in the College of Community Innovation and Education (CCIE) is 2,520 students. The focus of this study was the 2,306 students currently enrolled (registered for courses) in the CCIE. The college awarded an estimated 700 master's degrees in calendar year 2018. The university serves a diverse student population as a comprehensive institution in a major metropolitan area, recently earning the distinction as an Hispanic-serving institution. An estimated 25% of the undergraduate student population, or a total of approximately 15,000 students, have self-reported being first-generation students. The graduate college at the university also recently implemented, in spring semester 2019, data gathering on self-reported first-generation student status in the

application to graduate school. Although the first-generation student status is not defined in the application for graduate school, the university data show 1,980 fall semester 2019 applicants (inclusive of certificate through doctoral programs) self-reported as first-generation students.

Because this study explored those first-generation undergraduate students who enrolled in the master's degree, the sample population was drawn from the College of Community Innovation and Education. The reason for drawing the sample population exclusively from the College of Community Innovation and Education included the higher education practice of doctoral programs in colleges of education and the social sciences typically requiring the master's degree for admission. Colleges of education and the social sciences therefore, have a higher proportion of students enrolling in the master's degree, separating out any doctoral student aspirants who would be enrolled in master's programs to earn the degree "along the way" to the doctoral program.

The study took place in three phases: (a) Phase One of the research process was the administration of a questionnaire to all enrolled graduate students in the college to determine whether they were first-generation master's students; (b) Phase Two was conducting personal interviews with up to 12 participants who self-identified as a first-generation master's student randomly selected from the returned questionnaires; and (c) Phase Three was a journaling exercise conducted in Qualtrics where each of the same interviewed participants was emailed a new prompt with two questions to respond to each week for two weeks. An incentive for participation in the study was a 5-dollar gift card offered to each participant at the conclusion of Phase Two, the one-on-one interview, and again at the conclusion of Phase Three, the journaling segment. Each of the participants had, therefore, the potential to be awarded with two 5-dollar

gift cards, for a total of ten dollars per participant, for participation in the study. The literature on using monetary incentives to increase participation in a study, especially a study utilizing different methods of data collection (i.e., one-on-one interviews and journaling), is overwhelmingly positive (Dillman, 2007; Toepoel, 2012).

Phase One of the research process was initiated with sending introductory emails explaining the nature and intent of the study to 2,306 active graduate students enrolled in the college (see Appendix B). Within two weeks of sending the introductory email, a follow-up email with the link to the 16-statement questionnaire was sent to the same group of actively enrolled graduate students in the college (see Appendices C and D). Students indicated by responding to the first question whether they were a first-generation student based on the given definition that *neither parent has attended any college nor has any college experience* (Choy, 2001; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, 2007; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pryor et al., 2006). The purpose of this questionnaire was two-fold: 1) for students to identify themselves as first-generation students who had persisted to enroll in masters' programs at a college of education and public affairs at a large, research focused university in the southeastern United States and 2) to indicate their willingness to participate in the study if they met the criterion. If they indicated they were not first-generation students based upon the definition provided, they had concluded the questionnaire and were excluded from the participant sample. Every student who returned a questionnaire indicating they were not a first-generation student and included their contact information, received a brief follow-up email thanking them for their participation.

If respondents indicated that they were first-generation students and were currently enrolled in a master's degree program in the college, they were included in the participant

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sample (Appendix E). Using a "life history" sample homogeneity parameter, where each participant shares a common life experience, in this instance being a first-generation master's student, is recommended as one of the methods for establishing a participant inclusion/exclusion criterion (Robinson, 2014). The respondents were then asked to share the following personal demographics on the questionnaire: gender, age, race, marital status, country of birth, institution from which the bachelor's degree was earned, undergraduate and graduate programs of study, undergraduate grade point average (GPA) upon graduation, current graduate GPA, number of semesters enrolled in the graduate program thus far, parents' country of birth, parents' (or legal guardians') highest levels of education, and the highest level of education achieved by any siblings. At the conclusion of the questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they were willing to participate in a study to share their experiences of being a first-generation master's student. The statement comprised the parameters of volunteering to participate in the study, including a 60-minute personal interview with the researcher and an exercise of responding to written prompts that would be emailed to them directly over a two-week period.

Phase Two of the research study was conducted through one-on-one interviews with nine randomly sampled graduate students from those who completed and returned the questionnaire. The nine students responded affirmatively that: (a) they defined themselves as a first-generation master's students based on the definition provided at the beginning of the questionnaire and (b) were willing to participate in a one-on-one interview and journaling exercise regarding their experiences as a first-generation student. Note, although nine students did complete the full study, it was uncovered late in the study that one of the participant's parents had attended a two-year college later in life, earning an associate's degree. For this reason, the participant's

responses were eliminated from the study data and the final total number of study participants was eight students. All students who agreed to participate were asked to provide their contact information including name, phone number, and university student email address. Securing multiple methods for the researcher to connect with the participants helped to coordinate interview scheduling. While telephone interviews may allow participants to provide less detail or elaboration on their personal stories due to not having established a stronger rapport with the interviewer, there were several practical reasons for phone interviews including time constraints, physical location of participants, and available budgets (Irvine, 2011).

Once the data were compiled on participants, it was expected that out of approximately 2,306 eligible master's students who received the questionnaire, potentially there would be 8-12 willing, qualified participants for the study. Initially, a larger group of qualified participants was identified for the study, 20-30 students, in anticipation of students who would not continue with the interviews or would leave the participant pool over the course of the study. Each of the qualified participants was assigned a pseudonym for tracking purposes throughout the study to ensure his or her anonymity. The students selected to participate in the study each received a 5-dollar gift card for being interviewed for the study.

Phase Three of the study included having the same nine participants from the interviewed group participate in an online journaling exercise. Each of the nine students who participated in this journaling phase of the study, again received a 5-dollar gift card for sharing their written responses to emailed prompts in a Qualtrics platform. There were no interviewed students who opted out of the study at Phase Three; all of those interviewed for the study also completed the

journaling exercise for two weeks. The final journaling phase of the study occurred following the interview experience.

Participants

The researcher randomly identified nine participants initially who were willing to be interviewed from the pool of first-generation master's student respondents using criterion convenience sampling. This was done because the total initial participant response, 27 students, was greater than the number to be interviewed. The use of convenience sampling in this study included two factors: potential participants were local to the study site and willing to participate. The participant group in this research study was, therefore, both, "…demographically and geographically local and thus restricting generalization to that local level" (Robinson, 2014, p. 32). In support of research with limited participants, Hycner (1985) defended that while the results may not be generalizable, "…they can be phenomenologically informative about human beings in general" (p. 295). A smaller participant group was also identified due to the narrow focus of this research study based upon the first-generation college student definition employed.

In qualitative research, identifying a smaller group of participants who have shared the same experience, from as few as 3 to 4 up to 10 to 15 individuals, is recommended to safeguard the individuality of each analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2009). Additionally, when utilizing interviews in research, the goal is to form a participant group, "…that is sufficiently small for individual cases to have a locatable voice within the study…" (Robinson, 2014, p. 29). Following this protocol allows for a more rigorous and in-depth review of the data by the researchers, as well as helping them to understand more clearly what circumstances among the

participants are unique and how meaning is shaped by each participant. A goal in

phenomenological research is finding information-rich cases that are meaningful and insightful

(depth) rather than large sample sizes (breadth) (Hycner, 1985; Patton, 2015).

Phase Two comprised determining a time and date convenient for each student to

participate in a semi-structured interview to last no more than 60 minutes. Because the graduate

students were located between two physical campuses and many of them were enrolled in online

programs, face-to-face interviews were provided for the participants, as well as telephone

interviews, as a convenience to them. The research on using telephone interviews to collect

qualitative data is varied but as Holt (2010) offered, it should not be considered a "second-best"

option (p. 120). While the phone interview is not always the preferred method for data collection

due to an absence of visual cues for the interviewer, a weaker participant rapport established with

the interviewer, and the pace of the interview more often directed by the interviewer, it does

represent the factor of flexibility inherent in qualitative research (Irvine, 2011). For this research

study, telephone interviews offered students living outside of the local area the opportunity to

participate in the study, flexibility to schedule an interview time around their busy schedules of

working graduate students who also carry adult responsibilities, and the additional anonymity of

not being recognizable to the interviewer.

Using open-ended interview questions has advantages in qualitative research. In addition

to the researcher having the ability to probe participants for more detailed explanations regarding

their experiences, the researcher may also receive unintended information from the participant

that is critical to the research question (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). Each participant was

asked the same 10 open-ended questions related to their first-generation status, beliefs on self-

efficacy and academic motivation, and what elements they attributed to their pursuit and persistence for graduate work (see Appendix F). The interview protocol was informed by earlier qualitative studies on first-generation graduate students who demonstrated resilience, persistence, and discipline in the pursuit of higher education (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Each semi-structured, open-ended interview was recorded and coded for common themes and responses related to academic self-efficacy and reasons why these students remained motivated to pursue graduate education. The use of semi-structured interviews was important to ensuring data saturation, whereby the same set of questions was posed to each participant and new questions were not continuously introduced to elicit tangential responses (Guest et al., 2006).

Phase Three in the study included inviting the same nine participants from the interviewed group to participate in an online journaling exercise following the one-on-one interview experience. The purpose of the journaling was to capture additional experiences that were remembered by these first-generation master's students after the interview had concluded. There are evidenced disadvantages to using document analysis as a secondary form of data collection: there is no opportunity for follow-up with participants, the response data may not be relevant to the study, and the quality of the data remain unknown (Guest et al., 2013). Rich data, however, as posited by Maxwell (2009), are derived from intensive participant interaction with whom the researcher has sustained involvement.

The primary purpose of journaling in phenomenological research is to provide document analysis by having participants reflect independently upon their experiences. It is a blend of personal reflections and experiences, an account of events from the participants' point of view, in

their vernacular (Chabon & Lee-Wilkerson, 2006; Guest et al., 2013). Swenson (2004) suggested that journaling should be used in combination with other data collection methods to enhance the information gathered from participant interviews. Bowen (2009) acknowledged that the qualitative researcher, "…is expected to draw upon multiple (at least two) sources of evidence; that is, to seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources and methods" (p. 28). The practice of data triangulation, combining methodologies and collecting information using a variety of methods, ensures the credibility of the study, corroborates the research findings gathered from several sources, and reduces researcher bias.

To help facilitate this autonomous method of data collection subsequent to the interview, each journaling participant was emailed to his or her school account, a Qualtrics link to two identical questions, two questions during week one and a new set of two questions for week two (see Appendix G). This journaling structure comprised four different questions over a total of two weeks with participants asked to respond to the exercise in a Qualtrics platform. Providing a limited period for journaling has been found to increase participation: the expectation is clear of exactly how long it will take for data to be collected and participation may accelerate as the deadline draws near (Hayman et al., 2012). The participants were given prompts for the additional details the researcher was seeking about the first-generation experience. For example, a prompt included writing of an experience when they were confident in their decision to attend college and another experience when they lacked the confidence that they believed they were "college material". Asking participants to document their experiences through text and images without the researcher's intervention was purposeful to ensure their privacy and openness in relaying potentially painful experiences. The researcher then collected the electronic journals

after two weeks from the start of the exercise. The journal entries were coded for the same themes of academic self-efficacy and motivations to persist academically as were the interviews. A variety of documents are encouraged for inclusion throughout the journaling process, as poor participation with journaling has been found in other studies due to participants' fear and lack of confidence in their writing abilities (Hayman et al., 2012).

<p align="center">Population and Sample Selection</p>

The sampling procedure employed for this qualitative study was the criterion method. Participants were purposefully selected from a larger group based upon meeting a preconceived standard in the criterion method, in this case, a first-generation college student enrolled in a master's program. Criterion sampling is used for groups that potentially could be too large to include in a study, but which does add credibility to the sampled group (Creswell, 2014). Utilizing randomization with a larger participant population, according to Patton (2015), cannot achieve the depth of purposeful sampling, though Creswell (2014) defended that it provides a stronger backdrop for being able to generalize to the larger population. Maxwell (2009) countered that the true value of qualitative research may be in its *lack* of generalizability, where the data may reveal extreme or ideal cases of phenomena that are equally as informative. There is some evidence in the literature about whether participants who are selected by purposive sampling are indeed actually *chosen,* instead of selected based upon convenience or availability (Creswell, 2014). This is simply the true nature of phenomenological research: study participants must be purposively selected to meet the criterion under exploration.

It was expected the initial population of potential participants for the study to be at least 50 students, approximately 2% of the initial participant pool, but the final sample group of participants to number between 20-30. All potential participants were assigned a pseudonym for tracking purposes throughout the study to ensure their anonymity. From the initial participant sample of 27 returned questionnaires, five students did not include contact information (email or phone) for follow-up. The demographically representative group for the study was therefore reduced to 22 participants. From this group of 22 participants, the researcher randomly selected 15 students to participate in the study and over the course of several weeks of communication, this group was reduced to 9 viable candidates. At this point, the remaining students were designated as replacements if any students left the initial study. It was anticipated for participants not to respond to the questionnaire at all, to be unwilling to participate for various reasons, or to agree to participate and then not be active in the interview process.

While the study participant sample was a smaller sample population, it provided the researcher for more in-depth interviewing and data review. Patton (2015) asserted,

> The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size. (p. 313)

Guest et al. (2006) found that data saturation, an emphasis within qualitative research, occurred after interviewing twelve participants, although common themes were developed after just six interviews. Specifically, they found three elements that were critical to an effective participant sample: a consistent interview structure, a broad understanding among participants of the same shared experience, and homogeneity among participants because of common criteria (Guest et al., 2006). The literature also directs that participants are more likely to engage in and complete

surveys if: they are interested in the topic of the research, email versus postal communication is used including reminders, the survey requests are sent from people within the organization, monetary incentives are offered, and assurances of confidentiality are made (Dillman, 2007; Saleh & Bista, 2017).

No academic records or transcripts were used to verify the participants' college enrollment or graduation history, as this information was self-disclosed by the participants. There is no method currently available to verify the accuracy of the first-generation student status, i.e. the historical non-enrollment in college of the participants' parents in question (Mangan, 2015). Nationally, the first-generation student status continues to be strictly a self-reported application issue among colleges and universities. Therefore, there was no attempt to verify this participant-disclosed student enrollment status. It was anticipated that the one-on-one interviews would be conducted on either the main or downtown campus or by telephone at the convenience of the participants. The journaling exercise occurred for approximately two weeks following the interviews and was accomplished independently, online by the participants.

Data Collection

A university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought and received for this research study (see Appendix H). There were three phases to this research study that required IRB approval: the initial questionnaire phase conducted through email to determine first-generation student status, the subsequent interview phase conducted on one of two campuses or by telephone, and the final online journaling phase of the same interviewees. Informed consent

was obtained from the students who agreed to be in the study by reviewing with each participant the approved protocol for the study at each phase (see Appendix I). Approval was also required for verbatim transcription of the participant interview conversations. Coding for emergent themes and member checking required approval, as well. Interviews were held over a pre-determined three-week period while school is in session, audio recorded with participant permission, and transcribed by the researcher. Note taking by the researcher was also conducted during the interview. Upon completion of the interview, each participant received a follow-up email from the researcher, thanking the student for his or her participation and reviewing the next phase of the study, journaling (see Appendix J).

From the inception of the study, the researcher ensured that all potential participants were informed of the purpose of the study, its parameters and requirements, its voluntary nature, and how anonymity and confidentiality would be achieved and maintained (Robinson, 2014). In the opening language used for each of the interviews, the researcher stated to the student participant that the entire interview process would take no longer than 60 minutes and then asked for his or her consent to the interview and permission to tape record the interview. The researcher shared that if the participant chose not to answer a particular question or to stop the interview, he or she was free to do so at any time. The researcher reiterated that all the responses would remain confidential and were being used anonymously to develop a better understanding of how first-generation graduate students viewed their motivations to pursue the master's degree and what factors may have influenced their academic decisions. Each interviewee was reminded several times throughout the interview that his or her participation was completely voluntary.

After obtaining informed consent, the interview began with a statement such as, "Please tell me a little about yourself, your family, and where you come from—your siblings, and levels of education among immediate family members." The semi-structured interview progressed through the stages of undergraduate college choice and life experiences, what role the family played in these experiences, and whether and to what degree the participant believed his or her first-generation student status had affected these experiences. Questions specific to the graduate school experience included: how did you find out about it, what were your motivations for enrolling in graduate school, and to what or to whom do you attribute your academic successes?

The final phase of the study lasted for two weeks and included document analysis of an online journaling exercise given to the same group of nine student interviewees. Participants in qualitative studies are typically asked to use their journals to refine or expound upon their beliefs and ideas as shared during the interviews while the research study is still in progress. Journal writing is advantageous to the study because it allows the study participants to reflect more deeply upon their experiences as a way of getting feedback from themselves, while offering the qualitative researcher another level of data triangulation (Janesick, 1999).

The timeline for the completion of this study was estimated to be no more than three months. Once the initial participant group was sampled from the larger population, the interviews were designed to take three weeks during a fall or spring school semester. The subsequent journaling exercise was designed to take two weeks. Triangulation of the data, having different parties read and examine the interview conversations (e.g., the researcher, the participants, and an outside reader) and subsequently coding the journal entries for recurrent themes from the interviews, offered another method of building coherent evidence (Creswell,

2014; Patton, 2015). According to Janesick (1999), triangulation, "…is a type of member check of one's own thinking done on paper" (p. 513). In the context of this study, recurrent themes were determined from the aggregate, identified as recurring among at least five of the eight participants and coded a minimum of at least 12 times for each of the same five participants.

Data Analysis

The data analysis plan employed in this research study followed Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological approach, "…a method that remains with human experience as it is experienced, one which tries to sustain contact with experience as it is given" (p. 53). The seven procedural steps, as outlined by Colaizzi (1978), commenced with transcribing interviews and journals that were read several times by the researcher to identify credible common themes and phrases that emerge. The focus of this step is to remain objective for the purpose of developing a greater understanding of the participants' experiences (Colaizzi, 1978; Sanders, 2003). Colaizzi (1978) posited that, "…objectivity is fidelity to phenomena. It is a refusal to tell the phenomenon what it is, but a respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself" (p. 52). The steps that followed included identifying the powerful statements that are relevant to the phenomenon under study (step 2); the researcher then formulates meanings or general statements as gleaned from the participant narratives (step 3); the researcher next groups the framed meanings into clusters or themes that are common among all of the participant narratives (step 4); all of the results from the participant narratives are compounded and a comprehensive, inclusive description of the phenomenon is developed (step 5); the researcher then condenses the

descriptions to reveal the fundamental, essential structure of the phenomenon (step 6); and finally, the researcher may approach some of the participants a final time, asking them to review the fundamental structure statement(s) to determine whether it describes their experience and the essence of the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978; Morrow, Rodriguez, & King, 2015; Sanders, 2003). This final step was endorsed by Colaizzi (1978) as a method to validate the results, although it is viewed by some in the field as unnecessary and unrelated to the experience itself.

The thematic analysis conducted was emergent coding, where the researcher was looking for similarities among the participant interview responses and journal entries, developing larger categories or protocols under which to place recurrent themes and note issues, especially those that developed naturally (see Appendices K and L). Sanders (2003) recommends completing the data analysis manually, as it allows the researcher to remain immersed in the data and adds to the reflective analysis at the end of the study. Integrating multiple sources of participant information is recommended in qualitative research to provide a comprehensive perspective in the study, balance the strengths and weaknesses of each data source, and to validate the findings (Maxwell, 2009; Patton, 2015).

The researcher employed the technique of bracketing, although throughout the process was aware that the personal experience of not being a first-generation student potentially influenced interpretations of collected data (Moustakas, 1994). Important, as well, was the reflexivity that the researcher was able to employ: how to reflect upon the impact of assumptions and experiences, the role of researchers on interpretations, and the meaning that is ascribed to the data as it is revealed (Creswell, 2014). The researcher read each of the transcribed interviews and journals several times, noted related thoughts and ideas based on personal experiences in higher

education, and highlighted any significant statements or phrases by the participants. It was anticipated that after clustering similar ideas from all participants, significant themes would emerge in the study that would be of value to the literature in this area. The alignment of the research questions to the data sources and the method of analysis supports the use of phenomenological inquiry for this study (see Appendix M).

Steps utilized to validate the findings and confirm reliability in this research study included member checking and enlisting the assistance of a person outside of the research study to conduct an unofficial external analysis of the transcription of the interviews and journals (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). These methods support the participants' satisfaction that what transpired during their interview and journaling exercise was reflected accurately when provided a summation of what the researcher heard during the interview and extrapolated from the journal entries. Additionally, the outside consultant was able to corroborate that the transcribed interviews and journal entries were completed accurately, further supporting the rigor of the study (Hycner, 1985).

The trustworthiness of the findings in a constructivist study, according to Patton (2015), begins with the investment of time by the researcher: time spent at the research site, interviewing participants, and building trusted relationships with respondents to elicit the uniqueness of their experiences, individually and collectively. In this study, verification of trustworthiness was evidenced through: bracketing, defined as early disclosure by the researcher of beliefs held about the research study; use of a literature review search; triangulation with cross verification of participant experiences through interviews and document analysis; and finally, incorporating field notes from both the interviews and observations. Being mindful to personal biases and

subjectivity, as well as using multiple data collection methods, were also strategies employed by the researcher to safeguard trustworthy interpretations (Patton, 2015). Validity of the study was achieved with member checking, external analysis by an outside member, and the coding for emergent themes, in addition to the use of interviews as the primary method of data collection. It was expected from this study that the phenomenon of first-generation master's students' academic experiences and motivations would emerge as a dynamic, thematic construct.

Ethical Considerations

The steps undertaken for this study are outlined in this chapter to ensure the conclusions are both responsible and honest. Throughout the questionnaire, personal interview, and journaling processes, all ethical considerations were extended to the student participants. This included full disclosure to the participants as to the purpose and benefits of the study, their permission to volunteer for the study, assurance of their anonymity and confidentiality as participants, and researcher sensitivity to the topical issues. One of the roles of the researcher in a qualitative study is to accurately analyze the data through interpreting the meaning of themes and descriptions, transcribing it responsibly, coding the data, validating the correctness of the data, and organizing and preparing the data for analysis. Strategies such as researcher self-reflection, triangulation, member checking, use of an external auditor, and full disclosure of all interview information were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The results and data analysis of this study are presented in the following chapter.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

With interpretative qualitative research, there are various limitations that beset the researcher throughout the process. Areas over which the researcher has little to no control include the initial sample size, the response rate of participants, the continued engagement of participants once the study is underway, and any potential methodology constraints that the researcher has not anticipated at the commencement of the study. Other factors considered in this particular study included that the participants were self-reporting their first-generation student status (there is not a mechanism in place to verify their student status) and participant responses can potentially be influenced by the time of academic year during which the study takes place, e.g. is it during an exam week, at the beginning of the semester, at the end of a semester, and what is the related emotional state of the student. Hycner (1985) suggested a limitation in phenomenological research may include participants who were unable to articulate the relevant experience of the study, which may prevent the researcher from fully understanding or investigating the phenomenon. Additional limitations include researcher bias by not adhering to the parameters of reflexivity and positionality addressed earlier in the study.

Delimitations are anticipated when conducting qualitative research. While there is ample research on first-generation students at the undergraduate and even at the doctoral program levels, there is a dearth of research on first-generation students who choose to pursue the master's degree. This was the primary reason for the focus of the present study on this very narrowly studied student population. As defined by the researcher for this study, first-generation college students are students whose parents have no college experience, including community college or university

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enrollment. The purpose of this research was not a comparison study between first-generation students who decided to pursue graduate school after earning the bachelor's degree and those students who did not pursue graduate work, so the latter group of students were not interviewed. Additional delimitations of this study, which were the decision of the researcher, included: the conceptual framework, the research questions, the interview questions and protocol, the setting, and the overall study design. The researcher sought to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of this unique adult student population through the interactions of academic self-efficacy, motivation, and adult learning, the theoretical lenses employed for analysis in this study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand and reveal the adult first-generation master's student experience, exploring the elements of self-efficacy, motivation, and adult learning as collective influences that informed their choices to enroll in a master's program. The focus of the study was to, "…assess the essence of the experience as well as the variations of that experience. The final product is a written representation of the structure of an experience through several participants" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 50). The research study included the perceptions of factors that adult first-generation master's students deemed significant to their academic motivations for and persistence through graduate school.

All graduate students in a large southeastern college of education and public affairs were initially sent a questionnaire by an email link to determine whether they identified as a first-generation master's student based on the definition provided by the researcher. The students who returned the questionnaire and indicated that they were first-generation college students enrolled

in a master's program were placed in the sample participant population. Of those students who returned the questionnaire and indicated that they would participate in the study, an estimated final sample size of 27 students was randomly selected from the respondents. From this sample, nine students were randomly selected to participate in the research study to include both an interview and subsequent journaling exercise. The one-on-one interviews were held on one of two campuses or by telephone at the convenience of the student and lasted no more than 60 minutes. Each student received a 5-dollar gift card for participation in the study. This same group of nine interviewed students then participated in a journaling exercise, which lasted two weeks, subsequent to the conclusion of the interviews. The participants were offered another 5-dollar incentive gift card for participating in the journaling segment of the study.

Because phenomenological research typically employs the semi-structured interview to collect data, this method was used to capture the experiences of a group of individuals—adult first-generation master's students—who shared a collective phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). A journaling exercise, subsequent to the interview, was also conducted as a useful technique in qualitative research. Journal writing provides participants the opportunity to write uninterrupted, to be reflective outside of the presence of the researcher, to be completely focused, and to be less affected by the research process (Bowen, 2009; Janesick, 1999). The participants were chosen through a purposive criterion convenience sample of currently enrolled graduate students in one university college in a public, high research producing institution in the southeastern United States.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

In Chapter 4, the findings of this phenomenological study are presented on the influences of self-efficacy and motivational factors that adult first-generation students enrolled in master's degrees ascribe to their academic persistence. The chapter begins with a review of the data sources and participant demographics, followed by a presentation of personal student portraits of each of the study participants. Through these portraits, the intent is to provide a synopsis of each student. The synopses include self-reported participant demographic data, descriptive analysis by the researcher, and the citation of personal statements both spoken and written by each participant. This design was employed to provide context to the reader about each of the participants in the study, helping to share the persona and experience behind each first-generation college student voice. While not intended to be a comprehensive overview of each participant, the portraits serve to share the collective challenges, influences, and successes experienced by these adult first-generation college students in pursuing an advanced degree. At the end of this chapter, a summary of the findings is discussed.

An inductive analysis was used to interpret the data and develop categories that demonstrated the recurring relationships and patterns of the phenomena. The findings presented in this chapter will respond to each of the three research questions in this study through alignment with the participant interview and journal responses. This chapter also includes a thematic coding process whereby the researcher initially transcribed verbatim each hour-long interview. After reading through the complete transcribed interviews and participant journal

responses at least three times, the researcher identified themes commonly shared among the participants. Each of the designated themes was identified as also encompassing related sub-themes, which are identified and discussed in the findings. From these themes and sub-themes, the researcher formulated meanings and clustered them into categories, one method of searching the participant data for patterns without any preconceived ideas or notions of what to expect. It is from these categories of coded themes that the research questions will be explored as they relate to the broader concepts of this study.

Three research questions guided the focus of this study to explore the experiences of adult first-generation master's students and the factors that influenced their aspirations for graduate school. The data, compiled from personal participant interviews and journaling exercises, as well as researcher observations, were triangulated using several methods. Triangulation was accomplished through reviewing and analyzing of the online questionnaire data, semi-structured interview responses, participant journal entries, member check statements from the transcripts, and researcher notes and observations. Moreover, coding participant responses for emerging themes and sub-themes, followed by an outside researcher review and discussion regarding the thematic coding, was conducted. The use of semi-structured interviews was deliberate. In an earlier pilot study, the researcher found that using more open-ended questions elicited deeper conversations and richer narratives from the participants. This is an especially important aspect of the interview process when the participants may be sensitive in sharing their experiences.

The constructs in this study, as described in the conceptual framework, are academic self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and elements of andragogy that influence adult

learning. Organizationally, the findings will be presented in three sections following the

participant portraits. Each section will begin with the research question, followed by a table that

aligns the research question with the emerged themes, sub-themes, and corresponding constructs

as related to the conceptual framework. It is important to note that all of the constructs had some

direct correlation to each of the themes that emerged, although the tables were used to identify

the primary construct with the predominant emerged theme. Each of the three sections will also

include a discussion of the coded themes, associated sub-themes, and evident constructs, all to

demonstrate alignment with the conceptual framework. Sub-themes, integral to the formulation

of the overarching themes for each question, are included to support the findings in each

thematic discussion.

A separate table is also included under each research question, illustrating the participants

for whom the formulated theme explicitly emerged as a result of their interview and journaling

responses. To be indicated as a formulated theme in this study, the theme had to have been

common among the transcripts of more than half of the student participants, or at a minimum,

five out of the eight students. At a granular level, saturation of a formulated theme in this study

occurred at a minimum of 12 times for at least five out of the eight students across both the

interview and journal transcript data.

Data Sources

Each participant who volunteered to take part in the study agreed to be interviewed for up

to one hour, either in person or by phone. Each participant also agreed to respond to written

questions, emailed in a Qualtrics platform, referred to in this study as a journaling exercise. The results of the interviews and journaling exercises, which took place over a total six-week period in the fall 2019 semester, are condensed by participant. This ensured that the thoughts and reactions of each participant were consistently attributed to the appropriate participant, instead of the results being presented in one group of interviews and then in a second group of written journal entries. Approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was granted for the researcher to conduct this study and interview enrolled graduate students who volunteered to participate.

Each of the eight participants in this study was given a pseudonym at the conclusion of the interview to ensure anonymity throughout the remainder of the study. The process for assigning the pseudonyms by the researcher included using a mnemonic known only to the researcher. Additionally, any personally identifiable characteristics about the participants that may interfere with their anonymity were adjusted to reflect more generalized information. There were 27 students who responded to the initial online questionnaire. Of the 27 returned questionnaires, five students did not include contact information (email or phone) for follow-up. The viable group for the study was therefore reduced to 22 participants.

All participants were enrolled as master's degree-seeking students in the College of Community Innovation and Education (CCIE) at a large research I institution in central Florida. The college has recently restructured, resulting in more than half of the graduate students enrolled either in a downtown campus setting (as compared to the main campus) or as fully online students who do not come to campus or live too far from the local area to commute to campus. For these reasons and to accommodate the incredibly busy lives of adult graduate

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students, the personal interviews were scheduled on the main campus, the downtown campus, or by telephone based on the participant's availability.

Twelve students from the initial group of 22 students (who completed and returned the questionnaire and included their contact information) were selected at random to receive an invitation to participate in the study. They were emailed a request to participate and within one week of this email, eight students responded with genuine interest to continue in the study. A subsequent random selection of another three potential participants was performed and of this group, all three students responded as interested within a week. From this last group of emailed participants, only one of the students eventually completed the study.

A total of nine randomly selected students ultimately participated in the study through to completion. During the study, it was uncovered that one of the participant's parents had attended a two-year college later in life and earned an associate's degree. Although the student participant shared that the parent's program was more trade oriented and occurred when the student was much older, the definition of first-generation student for this study was clearly defined as "no college enrollment by either parent or guardian". For this reason, the participant's experiences were not included in the study and the final total number of study participants was therefore, eight students. The researcher manually transcribed each of the student participant interviews verbatim within three days of the interview. Each participant was sent a transcript of his or her interview to ensure that the transcription was accurate. No corrections or additions from the participants were received.

One challenge encountered in trying to make plans to meet with the students was that 75% worked full-time, they were enrolled in an average of 6 credit hours for the semester, many

were married, some had children of their own, and others were currently taking care of ageing parents. They were all therefore extremely busy and their time was at a premium, making it especially important to accommodate the little free time they had. The researcher did not personally know any of the students who participated in the study.

Demographics of Participants

In total, there were eight participants in this study. Their demographic information as self-reported on the emailed questionnaire is outlined in Tables 2 through 4. Each participant had a one-on-one interview with the researcher either in person or by phone that lasted no longer than 60 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher reviewed with each participant the approved protocol for the study. The protocol included the purpose of the study, how confidentiality of the data and participant information were being ensured, the rights of students as participants in the study, and how the data would be managed subsequent to the conclusion of the study. Each participant was also provided this same protocol in writing before completion of the initial online questionnaire. At the conclusion of all the interviews, each participant was emailed a link to respond in writing to journal prompts provided by the researcher in a Qualtrics platform. Each participant received the same two new questions each week for two weeks. The question prompts, a total of four questions, were available to all participants for the total two weeks. All eight participants engaged in the journaling exercise for the full two weeks. All participants received a $5 food and beverage card for participation in each of the two segments of the study, for a total of $10.

Table 2

Self-Reported Demographic Data of First-Generation Master's Student Study Participants: Age,

Gender, Race, Marital Status, and Country or Continent of Birth

Participant Name	Age	Gender	Race	Marital Status	Country of Birth
Donald	23	Male	White	Single	South America
Issac	31	Male	Black	Single	USA
Gwynn	24	Female	Black	Single	Caribbean
Joey	28	Male	Mixed	Partnered	South Asia
Hope	28	Female	White	Married	USA
Regan	23	Female	White	Married	USA
Matthew	25	Male	Black	Single	USA
Sarah	43	Female	South Asian	Married	United Kingdom

Table 3

Self-Reported Demographic Data of First-Generation Master's Student Study Participants:

Prior Community College Enrollment, Major and GPA During Undergraduate and Current

Graduate Programs, Undergraduate and Graduate Degrees Earned at the Same Institution

Participant Name	Community college transfer	Major: undergraduate (GPA) graduate (GPA)	Bachelor's and master's earned at same school
Donald	No	Psychology (3.9) Educational Leadership (4.0)	Yes
Issac	Yes	Sociology (3.46) Healthcare Administration (N/A)	Yes
Gwynn	No	Psychology (3.46) Counselor Education (3.98)	No
Joey	No	Pharmacy (3.1) Healthcare Administration (N/A)	No
Hope	Yes	Public Administration (3.8) Urban and Regional Planning (3.9)	Yes
Regan	No	Public Administration (3.8) Public Administration (3.75)	Yes
Matthew	No	Elementary Education (3.8) Reading Education (3.8)	Yes
Sarah	No	Business Administration (3.86) Educational Leadership (3.9)	No

*Note. *N/A denotes graduate program GPA not applicable because it was the student's first term of enrollment in the master's program.*

Table 4

Self-Reported Demographic Data of First-Generation Master's Student Study Participants:

Mother's Birth Country/Continent, Mother Earned a High School Diploma, Father's Country of

Birth, Father Earned a High School Diploma, Highest Level of Siblings' Education and Number

of Siblings

Participant Name	Mother's birth country	High school graduate (mother)	Father's birth country	High school graduate (father)	Siblings' highest education and number of siblings
Donald	S. America	Yes	S. America	N/A	N/A
Issac	USA	Yes	USA	Yes	High school (3)
Gwynn	Caribbean	Yes	Caribbean	Yes	Some college (3)
Joey	South Asia	Yes	South Asia	No	Bachelor's (1)
Hope	Germany	Yes	USA	Yes	N/A
Regan	USA	Yes	USA	Yes	N/A
Matthew	USA	Yes	USA	Yes	Some college (3)
Sarah	S. Asia	No	S. Asia	No	Doctorate (3)

*Note. *N/A denotes not applicable in the designated column, e.g. father was not a high school graduate or the participant had no siblings.*

Participant Profiles

Donald

So it was always, I always knew that I was going to college. I didn't really know what those steps entailed, just didn't have a lot of information about it, but it was just kind of set in stone that this was going to happen and you know, whatever steps you have to take to get there, you just kind of figure it out.

Donald was not the first student to respond that he would participate in the study, but he was the first participant I scheduled for a face-to-face interview. I did not know him prior to his volunteering for the study.

Donald is gregarious, friendly, confident, and engaging. He works on campus and is in the Educational Leadership—Higher Education master's program. He is well versed in college life now and seems to have found his place in the world of academia. He is the child of a single parent who moved from South America when he was quite young at four or five years of age. His mother was able to complete up to the high school level of education in South America, where she then worked in the private sector for a few years before moving to the United States. "She had a lot of expectations for me," Donald shared, "…the reason being we come from a low income family, so a lot of those families want, you know, for their children to succeed a lot better." He also shares how proud he is of her, coming to a new country as a single mother, observing her overcome challenges, and living the message that you can be successful with dedication and hard work.

While Donald's mother wanted him to become a doctor, he found that he did not enjoy the hard sciences and that the rigor and dedication it required of him was too much. On his own,

he decided to change and pursue psychology as a major. He found that this major change still allowed him to explore the aspects of academic research he liked so well but did not require the rigor of studying the hard sciences. Donald did indicate that he felt some anxiety related to this decision to change majors. He explains, "There's a lot of fulfillment to it and you learn a lot but you have that liberal education to work off of, which is great but now you need something to get the position that you want."

From his decision to change majors, he found that he would need to continue into graduate school because psychology was not a profession, per se, in the sense of studying to become the doctor or engineer or lawyer that his mother had always talked about. "She has always wanted me to be a doctor," Donald reaffirms, "and so that is something she is constantly pushing me towards. But a lot of it is for myself, too." With mentoring and support from colleagues on campus, Donald was able to find a good fit for his talents and interests in his master's program. And he had absolutely no time to reconsider his choice: he recounted that he graduated from psychology on a Friday, started his new job on campus the following Monday, and was enrolled in graduate classes that same week.

By Donald's own admission, "I'm always thinking, how can I push myself to do better, how can I get a better grade, how can I have the highest grade? I always want to be competitive—that's my thing." Donald is intensely consumed by being able to make enough income now and over the next few years to be able to support his mother and to help take care of her as she ages. He worries that this is an expensive obligation but does not question that he must do it because of all the sacrifices his mother made, which allow him to be here and in graduate school pursuing his dreams.

Isaac

I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do but I knew that kind of where I come from, college is an escape and it's obviously something that gives you other opportunities in life.

Isaac is kind, pensive, and respectful. He was the first participant to schedule an interview at the downtown campus. Both of his parents are high school graduates. He has an older brother who works as a truck driver and a younger sister who works in an elementary school. He is a U.S. military veteran, not originally from Florida, but from a small community in the southwest where he knew he had only two choices: he could stay and work in a local "menial" job for the rest of his life or he could join the military to see where that may take him. Ten years later with a wealth of experience and a recent admission into the healthcare administration graduate program, Isaac is living his dream.

His mother always talked about him going to college, but he never really understood the internalities of how that was going to happen. Joining the military at age 17 helped broaden his perspectives and gave him the confidence of experience beyond his age in years. He earned his bachelor's degree in Sociology while in the military but then was unsure what he wanted to do with the degree. He took some time off and in considering his options, he thought about his work and the various roles he had had with medical facilities in the military. When he discovered the healthcare administration field, his graduate school decision was made. In reviewing why he decided to go to graduate school and the steps that lead him to this decision, he expressed, "So you kind of see the fortune of all of the things I do. I may not always have liked it, but you see the work that went into it that gave me answers to all of the questions later on that I didn't even know I was going to ask."

Isaac talks a lot about how expectations placed by both family and community can limit children. He refers to this as "crab in a bucket mentality," where crabs trying to climb out of a bucket simply fall back to the bottom and are trapped. As he explains the analogy: "People are never trying to lift you up and out but people are always trying to pull you down and make you feel unsatisfactory." He has always believed there is more to life than how others may define it for you. He rises to challenges, is not afraid to break molds, and is passionate about serving his communities as an encouraging, successful role model.

Issac also believes there are no shortcuts in life. If things come to you too easily, he shares, you do not appreciate or care for them quite as much as when you have to work hard for them and earn your way. He is shy and reserved upon first meeting him but after a while, he opens up and begins sharing how talking to more students in his graduate courses has helped him to know that they have more in common than he originally thought. His older brother, who dropped out of college, continues to encourage Isaac to stay in school, saying it will "pay off". Isaac talks about the pressures of wanting to be successful, the competition in families for attention, and getting out of things what you put into them. Graduating from college, thus far, has been one of his biggest accomplishments, more satisfying than anything else, "...knowing that I could count on myself and in myself, I had the tools that I needed to overcome."

Gwynn

It was this thing of always college, college, college but there was no blueprint, no one really explained to me what college was, how different it was from high school, or any of that. So it was just a word and I knew that it was a place I should go to and I'm just there on a basis of knowing that going to college will help me to become this or that.

Gwynn was the first phone interview conducted in the study and it went quite well. She is affable, open, and friendly and we had an immediate connection despite the numerous emails we exchanged to set-up the interview time. Her parents are both high school graduates and she believes that her parents moved to America to provide better educational and professional opportunities to their children.

Gwynn was also the first participant in the study who had not earned her undergraduate degree at the same institution in which she is pursuing her master's degree. She graduated from high school in the top 5, along with two other students who would become her confidantes and soul mates. After they had all decided they would attend the same university and live together, Gwynn received a better financial offer from another school and changed her mind at the last minute. The community and friends of her family had to convince her parents this was a good idea and finally, they lamented because they had family living in the same area where the school was located. As she herself offers, "I usually take on challenges head on and I do believe if I work at it—for the most part—I can make things work."

Graduate school has been a special challenge for Gwynn because her parents do not exactly approve of or understand her program of study. Because of cultural taboos and traditions, her family is expecting her to graduate as a psychologist, but she has chosen the field of Counselor Education, which as she says, is the field that most spoke to her. She is anxious thinking about how this will resolve itself because status is important in her culture and she wants to make everyone in her family proud.

When asked about experiences or personal traits that affected her academic success, Gwynn responds, "Everyone who knows me just knows that my mom instilled in me, whatever

is worth doing is worth doing right." She feels a powerful obligation to both her family and local community for their sacrifices that have allowed her to achieve her dreams thus far. She understands, "…that sense of responsibility that comes from an immigrant family, you know, that you're here and you have a better chance than other people in that same situation. You have to make the best of it because this is such a great opportunity."

Joey

I kind of always knew that I wanted to go to college. It was always something that I knew because I did well in school.

Joey was the second phone interview in the study. He was very friendly and open, immediately at ease sharing his life story that was quite a bit different from the other interviews completed up to this point. Joey was born in a South Asian nation, only recently immigrating to the United States. He had already completed a very competitive pharmacy program overseas but as his family slowly immigrated to the U.S., he indicated that he decided to follow to be close to them and to seek additional educational opportunities. He states that he is the first within his extended family—including everyone on his mother's and father's side of the family and all their siblings and all cousins on both sides—to graduate from college. He shares that his younger brother is the first to graduate from college in America but that he is still the first in the family to go to college—and then go to graduate school, as well. And he will, of course, be the first to graduate with his master's in America.

Joey's father left school at the age of 12 to work in his father's business and his mother graduated from high school. He shares that his mother was the person who always encouraged

him to do well in school. "She always pushed us to do well in school because she felt that she missed out on that and she wanted to complete college. She should have studied science and always wanted to do more, and she had that regret," Joey explained. His experience with education, both in South Asia and in the U.S., has been one where a lot of time, attention, and focus have been placed on his academic competence by his family. It seems that many sacrifices have been made for him to achieve so much educationally.

He is keenly aware of the cultural and educational differences and challenges he is faced with now that he is pursuing his master's degree in Health Care Administration. He is older, he has already earned his degree in pharmacy, he is new to the American system of education, but he is not deterred. He is insightful, driven, and quite honest about how much he has achieved educationally from his very humble beginnings. He states that his mother always told him that what you learn, no one could take from you and this belief appears to provide him with the drive and motivation to continue.

<center>Hope</center>

I don't know, I didn't really have any particular college, but I knew I wanted to go to one.
I didn't feel like I had much of a future without it.

Hope's interview was also conducted by phone, my third and last of the phone interviews. I find Hope more reserved in her responses to my questions, not as forthcoming with information and even more tentative with the information she does share. I sense more of a topic sensitivity from her than from all of the other students interviewed—she is more guarded and appears to be more judgmental of her parents' decisions throughout their lifetime, more so than

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any of the other students in the study. She is an only child; her father did not graduate from high school, but her mother did graduate from high school.

During her early formative years, she recalls that there was always an expectation from her parents that she would do well in school, that only A's and the errant B grade were acceptable. But there was rarely conversation in the household about what these good grades were for and why they were so important. And when she did encounter academic difficulty, she expressed disappointment that her parents were not very understanding about her academic challenges. She gleaned most of what she needed to know about college from her friends in high school, so much so that she attended an International Baccalaureate (IB) presentation and was accepted into the program. She shared that, "My parents couldn't really ever give any input on anything because they hadn't gone through anything similar, and even when it came to deciding to go into the program, it was pretty much up to me."

Hope really struggled academically in the IB program, not because she was incapable but because she just needed some help in developing the right skillsets and organizational tools to get her through the more challenging parts. In the end, she did develop the requisite skills that she is using to this day to be successful in her master's program but at the time in high school, she intimates she felt like a failure and wanted to quit the program. She knew that quitting was not an option and therefore, she struggled on and graduated with a less than stellar high school GPA but an IB graduate, nonetheless. She attended a local state college, not having any real input from family about what her next best steps might be. It was one of those, 'everyone is going to college so I might as well go myself', moments for her. She waited tables in a restaurant to make some money while enrolled in college and shared during the interview that she knew

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there was not much of a future in this type of work but that for the moment, it was something to help pay the bills.

From the local college, she transferred to the university and decided to pursue engineering after she landed a new job at a local traffic-engineering firm. What she learned from this experience was that engineering was not her true passion, but urban planning was, and she has now earned her bachelor's degree in the field and is pursuing her master's in it, as well. She firmly believes that, "…if you work hard, you can do just about anything but, I guess, the limitation is how long you want to keep pursuing that same step on the ladder of where you're going…" She is married now and receives a tremendous amount of support and encouragement from her husband to continue her educational pursuits. She recognizes that others in her field have a master's degree and that she needs one, as well, to keep moving ahead, making more money, and providing stable family support.

Regan

I didn't know you had to pay for college applications, I thought that was crazy. I was like, I'm paying and I don't even know if I was going to get in? It was a lot of googling and just trying to figure things out.

Regan is one of the few study participants who had grown up locally. Because of her proximity to the campus, she was familiar with the university that was both close to home and worlds away from home. She does not remember a time when going to college was not an option for her, when it was not discussed in the home. Both of her parents are high school graduates. She is affable, genuine, and very open and talkative from the start of the interview.

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College, for Regan, became her "ticket" out of a small, local community that seemed to want her to stay at home. She believed that going to college was not only a way to get a better paying job, but also a way to get out of a small town. The world she sees now includes everyone having a bachelor's degree, which is why she is pursuing graduate school. She has been encouraged by her supervisors at work to pursue the master's degree while she has the time and energy. She has felt overwhelmed with work and school at times but also feels that she, "…is naturally gifted in school and things come pretty easy…" to her. She also shares that her friends, including her boyfriend, are currently enrolled in graduate programs and this seems to lend a lot of support to her. She reveals that it makes it a little easier on all of them, "…because all of us are in it together," mutually understanding there are classes at night and homework to be done on the weekends.

She is the daughter and granddaughter of men who have served in the military and she therefore understands and practices discipline in all things. She shares that, "It's one of those things that, you know, growing up, that well if you started something, you'd better finish it." She plans to earn her master's degree in Public Administration soon, after which the family expects her to return to the hometown to establish her new life. She discusses at length about her sense of responsibility to the family and being the provider for the family, especially because she doubts her sibling's ability to do so. She plans to take care of her parents and provide for them because of all the sacrifices they made to put her through college. But moving back home is not her first choice. "We'll see where my life will take me", she says tentatively, as we end the interview.

<center>Matthew</center>

<center>*And I guess I don't think about it much for me because I had my mom pushing*
and supporting me, and even though she doesn't understand everything, she
pushes me to go talk to someone who does.</center>

Matthew is a confident, open, affable young man who is just instantly likeable upon first meeting him. He laughs a lot, is very good-natured, and exudes positivity. He is very close to his family, siblings, and mother, and shares repeatedly how both his mother and a 7th grade teacher were fundamentally instrumental in his educational pursuits and academic developments. He has three siblings, none of whom have enrolled in a four-year university, although he finds himself giving advice to them about what their next steps should be for college enrollment. For him, "College wasn't optional because I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher and you have to go to college to do that. You have to get those credentials. So, I was very motivated my senior year and kind of just figuring it out." Matthew earned his bachelor's degree in elementary education and is currently pursuing a master's degree in reading education.

Because Matthew was selected to participate in the IB program at his local high school, he was also given opportunities to sit in on college presentations. He was especially impressed with one of the schools and so he and his mother travelled to an open house hosted by the school. He remains enrolled at this same institution to this day, earning his bachelor's degree and now his master's degree. He did eventually drop out of the IB program in high school, citing that "...it was a very stressful two and a half years..." but did move into the AP classes, which helped him continue honing his educational skills. He states from his experiences with both IB and AP programs in high school, he felt college life and the academic work were not all that challenging initially because he was already used to the rigor.

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He is the one student interviewed who speaks at length about a teacher who was instrumental in his life and helped him shape the discipline he has today to continue his educational pursuits. Matthew is gregarious and extroverted, two characteristics which likely helped in his hiring as an orientation leader when he came to the university. His mentoring and coaching of other students, especially those who were put on academic probation after their first semester at the university, are evidence of his teaching abilities, organizational skillset, and confidence in negotiating in an academic environment. He is truly a student who has found his passion and knows his strengths—and wants to share them with his students so that they too will aspire to great heights.

He views the master's degree as "ongoing professional development" and has understood from the very beginning that a college degree or degrees would be necessary to achieve his goals. He is a goal setter and long-term planner, sharing that, "I plan on getting my specialist degree and I'm just constantly always going back, reminding myself that there is something further, setting that up in your mind that you want to shoot for something else. I just revisit it, keep revisiting it, and going back to the catalog."

Sarah

There's nothing I can't do. I feel like if I give it my 120%, there's nothing I cannot do.
And that's the other thing. Why not? I can do it. I know how I work and I know I can do it.

Sarah meets me late one afternoon in my office for the interview, about an hour before her master's class for the evening. She is instantly likeable, friendly, funny, and eager to share

her first-generation student story. In fact, she shares that she did not even realize there was a first-generation student profile that she fit until she received my email and read the definition.

Her parents are from two countries in South Asia but moved to the United Kingdom and had an arranged marriage when her father was 17 and her mother 15. Neither of them attended high school. They worked hard, long hours in physical labor factory jobs most of their lives and had four children, three girls and one boy. It was the son they put all of their educational focus on because in their culture, men are the breadwinners and are therefore pressed into education, while women are guided to raise the children and take care of the home. Sarah had different plans in mind for herself, meeting and marrying an American military serviceman when she was 18 years of age and with whom she travelled the world on assignments, securing professional employment positions as best she could. She aspired to enroll in Cambridge but due to station time limits on her husband's military posting, she changed her plans and earned the bachelor's degree that was available to her within the timeframe. She and her husband then travelled from assignment to assignment, not really settling down with their own family until several years ago when she moved into her first role at the university. Sarah has absorbed everything about the university and her academic positions, educating herself on a system that is foreign to her but relishing her participation in lifelong learning. She says, "We have to grow—we can't be the same as we were yesterday. We need to change and evolve and if we don't learn, we don't grow."

Sarah is pursuing a master's degree in Educational Leadership and has certainly found her stride in higher education. She shares a concern that she is older than many of the students in her classes, but she decides she is better equipped to have the drive to finish and more motivated

to do well than younger students. She is competitive with the group and with herself too, giving her studies "120%" so that she does not earn a B grade, but also proud of her graduate work because it has been many years since she earned her bachelor's degree. She acknowledges that education opens opportunities and options for people. She concludes, as well, that she would not have had as many options unless she had persisted so many years ago in achieving that bachelor's degree.

She is driven by forward, future-oriented thinking. She wants very much to provide a better future for her own children, "…not just trying to make ends meet and paying the bills." Sarah still fights cultural taboos on pursuing her educational goals—her family and her culture dictate that women should be at home full-time raising their children—but she very much wants to accomplish advanced degrees for herself and to be a good role model for her daughters. On pursuing her degrees and the perspective her parents had, she relays, "I feel like it's always probably been in the back of my head that I needed to get an education—they didn't, but I knew that I did, even if they didn't know it."

Discussion of the Results

The discussion of the data begins with a table illustrating the alignment of each research question that guided this study to the emergent themes and sub-themes and how the constructs were indicated in the conceptual framework. Because this was a phenomenological research study based on Colaizzi's (1978) method of data analysis, it was important that the focus of the study remained open to the participants' experiences as they unfolded. By approaching the

participants without any preconceived ideas or perspectives of first-generation master's students, the researcher was able to be authentic to the phenomenon.

The first step of inductive analysis included the researcher conducting a broad but in depth reading and review of each of the participant interviews and journals. Step two of the process included reading the transcripts from both the interviews and journals several times to glean common themes and predominant phrases or sentiments that related to the first-generation master's student experience. The common themes and recurrent phrases that surfaced were identified by the researcher on the transcripts with color-coded dots for reference as they related to a theme. Steps three and four included extracting the formulated meanings from the significant participant statements and then clustering them into several overarching themes. A minimum of 12 formulated meanings from at least five out of eight participants' interview and journaling data were determined for clustering into common themes; the cluster themes, originally numbering 28, were condensed to ten emerged themes upon the final analysis. Note, sub-themes were identified and included in this study as a method of support to explain and explore the phenomenon under review.

In step five, the researcher synthesized the general meanings and extracted the significant statements from the participant texts that aligned with the identified themes. The themes and related sub-themes are therefore presented using quoted material from the participant interviews and journals. The exhaustive description Colaizzi (1978) recommended at this stage, developed as an amalgam of the participant experiences, is as follows: Adult first-generation college students who pursue the master's degree demonstrate high levels of academic self-efficacy and diverse sources of motivation that promote their achievement of advanced academic credentials.

These students are highly competitive, resilient, problem-solving life-long learners. They are focused on achieving an advanced degree for themselves professionally and to support their families to whom they are indebted for their sacrifices. These adult first-generation students pursuing master's degrees persist though academic challenges with undeterred optimism.

As much as possible, the researcher stayed true to the original text of the participant interviews and journals. As a final step, an independent researcher was brought in to review the participant interview transcripts and journal entries juxtaposed with the common themes and recurrent phrases identified by the researcher. This second review of the responses and results by an outside person is an added measure that contributed to the triangulation of these data.

<u>First-Generation College Student Experiences That Influence Graduate School Enrollment</u>

RQ 1: Do elements of being a first-generation undergraduate student influence the student experience at the master's level? If so, what are those factors and how do they influence the master's student experience in graduate school?

Table 5

Framework of Sub-Themes, Themes, and Construct Relationships to Research Question 1

Research Question	Themes	Sub-Themes	Constructs
RQ1	Optimism	Flexible Future oriented Same school for bachelor's and master's programs Blind faith	Academic Self-efficacy
	Reliance on Peers and Mentors	Social modeling Social mobility Status Positive feedback	Motivations
	Competitiveness	Self-Starters Problem solvers Self-reliance Persistence	Adult Learning Strategies
	School is the Clear Path to Opportunity	Confidence Readiness to learn Self-direction Rewards	

Research Question 1 was designed to elicit participant responses regarding whether the undergraduate first-generation college student experience influenced academic persistence for the master's degree. The research supports that being a first-generation college undergraduate student can be challenging on many levels and different from those students whose parents have had a college experience. Therefore, interview questions 6, 8, 9, and 10 and journal question 1 were specifically designed to elicit responses from the participants regarding whether they felt any first-generation college student elements present in their graduate student experiences.

Additionally, if the elements were existent, the open-ended structure of the questions was designed to elicit how those factors influenced the graduate school experience. Topics such as the first-generation student status still being relevant once a student reaches the graduate level, students' ability to be self-reliant and self-directed, academic persistence, and the dynamic of being the "first in family" to attend college and enroll in a master's program were explored here.

After completing multiple readings of the interview and journal transcripts, four themes were identified as factors that influenced the graduate student experience of first-generation undergraduate college students. The four themes were: (a) undeterred optimism; (b) reliance on peers and professional mentors; (c) a highly competitive personality; and (d) school becomes the clear path to more opportunity. As a group, the participants were future oriented in their thinking, exuded a positive attitude, and demonstrated a blind faith that things would just work out for them. Notably, the students were seen to define themselves. While most, if not all, of the participants expressed elements of the four themes, Table 6 provides a synopsis of the student participant responses in relation to the identified common themes.

Table 6

Thematic Summary for Research Question 1

Emerged Theme	*Student Participants*							
	Donald	Issac	Gwynn	Joey	Hope	Regan	Matthew	Sarah
1. Optimism	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2. Reliance on Peers and Professional Mentors	X	X	X		X	X	X	
3. Highly Competitive Personalities	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
4. School Becomes the Clear Path to Opportunity	X	X		X	X	X	X	X

Theme One: Undeterred Optimism

Optimism, that positive outlook on life that every challenge is an opportunity to learn and grow, was a consistently voiced theme through the interviews and journaling exercises. Hope lamented that while her IB experience in high school was difficult, ruined her high school GPA, and was not how she wanted to spend her years in high school, eventually shared that, "I think I got some good skills out of it." Issac explained that dedicating himself to any task and putting his mind to it, "…is something that has always worked well for me, being able to persevere through things and when things get a little difficult, I am able to sit there and tap into my optimism." And for Regan, her trepidation of enrolling in graduate school while also working full-time was soon relieved by her positive thinking. She revealed,

But then I think you get into a rhythm of things, you kind of get into a routine. So, I just kept telling myself that, I was like, the routine was going to come, the rhythm is going to be there, you're going to figure out what needs your attention more. I was probably overwhelmed for a little bit but I had faith that it would be easy.

As first-generation college students enrolled in master's degree programs, all the participants reported that they generally believed they were smart, had good people skills, and thrived in the academic environment. Several of the students did change their undergraduate majors when they found their first choice for programs too difficult, but they made these decisions early in their enrollment and did not appear to lose significant time to completion. When entering graduate school, each of the students knew their program of choice; only three of the students, Sarah, Gwynn, and Joey, had attended different schools for their undergraduate work. This familiarly with the current institution from the undergraduate program, as indicated by the remaining five students, added to their student confidence level, thereby helping to shape their positive outlook on further enrollment in graduate school.

Sub-themes that emerged for optimism included the participants maintaining a positive attitude despite setbacks or challenges, employing a blind faith that things would just work out for them in the academic environment, and the unique confidence that success breeds more success. Despite the challenges of not always knowing how to navigate their way through higher education, these first-generation students persisted undeterred. As affirmed by Gwynn, "I usually take on challenges head on and I do believe if I work at it—for the most part—I can make things work."

Theme Two: Reliance on Peers and Professional Mentors

For most of the participants in the study, there was a strong reliance on peers and professional mentors to help guide them through the channels of higher education. Six of the eight students talked about close friends in high school with whom they attended college open houses and college presentations, even enrolling in college with friends because that is what everyone was doing at the time. Gwynn relayed that she was simply doing what her friends were doing at the time because her friends had older siblings who had attended college. She also did not trust the college recommendations she was getting from her extended family, who she determined just wanted her to stay close to home. She took a risk and moved to a school farther away that offered her more money, but it did not include her friends and as a result, she initially felt quite isolated and alone.

Although the literature on first-generation college students demonstrates that professional mentors and teachers are typically sought out by this population to serve as advisors, in this study, only one of the students spoke at length about a seventh-grade teacher who influenced him significantly. Matthew affirmed that this teacher was highly influential on his decision to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and ultimately, enter the teaching profession. Of the other students who mentioned outside guidance, it predominantly came from peers, work supervisors, and older siblings. Regan summarized this approach by sharing what had worked best for her, included surrounding herself with people who have similar goals and aspirations.

Donald explained why he sought college information from his friends:

> I really didn't know very much. I didn't know any of the steps. I really relied on, especially in high school in my junior and senior years, I really relied on my peers and the information that they had about what was necessary and how I apply and what I

should do because from my household, that wasn't existent. Because no one in my family had gone [to college].

Regan, who moves more independently among her peers, talked at length about the quantity of relevant advice and practical guidance she has received from her supervisor and colleagues at work for pursuing her master's degree. From her experiences, she wisely affirmed, "Having someone who walked this before you is always helpful." And for Issac, he described how his older brother, who was unsuccessful with his own pursuit of the college diploma, encourages him regularly to stay in school, saying that as his younger brother, he is the one in the family who has *it*.

Theme Three: Highly Competitive Personalities

Being highly competitive, individually primarily and then with their peers, was the first and most significantly consistent attribute that emerged as a theme among the participants. Many of the students competed for top honors in their high schools, two of the students were selected for the IB program, one student followed the Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum, and another student graduated in the top five of her high school class. As a group, they were academically motivated, high achievers, and driven to exhaust all efforts to exceed expectations. They were resilient, they pushed themselves, but they also allowed themselves to be "pushed", a word that emerged in each interview. The best example of competitiveness and optimism among the participants was shared by Hope in her journal: "I may not always know my path or how to do what I feel I want or need to do, but I push onward and figure it out."

Most of the students talked about setting personal goals for themselves, like Hope who explained that, "…I feel like I have the drive and determination once I get my mind set on certain ideas of where I want to be eventually…" Issac talked about how he is, "…willing to do whatever it takes and make sacrifices to ensure that I give it my all." Donald remarked, "I always want to be competitive—that's my thing. Personally, for me, it's just a drive to stay competitive wherever I'm at." Sarah echoed many of these same thoughts on her academic competitiveness, detailing that she has, "…to give 120%--I cannot get a 'B' grade except if it were for me by my own standard and so I really push myself…"

In tandem with their optimism that things will work out, for all of the students in this research study, their drive to be the best academically has brought many successes, opportunities, and accolades. Gwynn explained that, "…whatever is worth doing, is worth doing right. And just kind of giving your all to everything." Sarah detailed that the strong drive she has was not shared by anyone else in her high school class, as far as she could assess. She referred to herself as not being that competitive but then continued to add that she has always had a strong drive, unlike most of the other students in her classes. She is both driven and motivated to do well and to have it all: "I did not want to be like in my culture where everyone gets married and has kids. I did not want to be that way. I wanted to have a career before I had children. That's what I wanted to do."

Theme Four: School Becomes the Clear Path to More Opportunity

From the interviews and journal entries, it became clear that for these first-generation master's students, enrolling in college and pursuing advanced coursework was their one way to move out of small towns, achieve financial independence through better employment

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opportunities, and build a future outside of their current family structure. Enrolling in graduate school empowered these scholars and increased their confidence, much the same way that their invitations to participate in the IB and AP programs inspired them in high school. Matthew, who guides and advises his siblings now on the benefits of enrolling in college, stated very candidly that college was not optional for him. Because he decided early in his high school years that he wanted to be a K-12 teacher, he knew that this would require at least an undergraduate degree and that he had to go to college to earn this credential.

Others, like Issac, had watched family members move into hourly wage jobs. He says that he knew when he was much younger, eventually he was either going to school or was going to have to work in an hourly wage job. In the small town where he grew up, employment opportunities were limited. For him, joining the military to learn a skill and then later enrolling in college became his trajectory. For Regan, she does not remember a time in her early years when college was not an option for her. Going to college was ingrained on her by her parents and they advised that her good grades in high school would lead to getting into a good college, which would result in a good job and eventually a move up in an organization.

For Hope, she is an only child with parents who are self-employed, owning a family business. She had limited input from family members about her goals, but her parents were steadfast in their resolve that she would go to college. As she confirmed, "I had like an assumption in my head that it seemed like that was the path to go on but other than that, I wasn't really sure how to figure it out or what to do." She said later in the interview that she was working as a waitress in a local restaurant when she decided there was not much of a future in that line of work. As a result of watching her parents struggle and deciding that waiting tables

did not offer much opportunity, enrolling in college became her resolve. And in her journal, she

shared, "I have seen success in others with [a] college education like what I am working on."

Sarah, also the daughter of parents who revered higher education, discussed the

importance she gleaned from family conversations about enrolling in college and watching the

men in her extended family pursue advanced degrees. She explained,

> I feel like education opens more paths and gives you more options… So, I think
> maybe indirectly, it's always been in my mind that like, I don't want to be like
> my parents and I need education and it's important.

Because of cultural restrictions, opportunities for education were bestowed to the males of the

family, although Sarah seems to have been keenly aware that she also needed and wanted

advanced degrees—even if her parents did not know it at the time.

Experiences of Adult First-Generation Students Enrolled in Master's Programs

RQ 2: What are the past and current experiences of adult first-generation students who are enrolled in a master's degree?

Table 7

Framework of Sub-Themes, Themes, and Construct Relationships to Research Question 2

Research Question	Themes	Sub-Themes	Constructs
RQ2	Responsibility and Resolve	Self-reliance Isolation Resilience Conviction Persistence Like to be in control	Academic Self-efficacy
	Family Influence: Duty	Improved quality of life Faculty and family influences Obligation Expectations Anxiety Professional employment Social mobility	Motivations
	Effective Strategizing in the Educational Setting	Self-directed learning Intentional actions Task responsibility Imposter syndrome Sense of belonging Mentoring Readiness to learn	Adult Learning Strategies

Research Question 2 was designed to elicit responses from the participants about their experiences as an adult student enrolled in a master's degree program from the perspective of having been a first-generation college student at the undergraduate level. Interview questions 4,

5, and 7 and journal question 2 were broadly centered around those attributes that adult first-generation students assign to academic motivation, as well as any personal traits they believe influence their academic persistence. For example, the questions were drafted for participants to talk about why they decided to enroll in graduate school, what personal traits or experiences influenced their decision to enroll in graduate school, and whether the students felt differently about themselves or they believe their families do, now that they are pursuing a master's degree. The characteristics of adult learners, e.g. problem-solving behaviors, the ability to capitalize on resources, and self-directed learning, were important to the development of these specific questions. Three themes emerged and were investigated from this research question as factors that influenced the adult first-generation student who pursues graduate school. The themes, as noted in Table 8, were: (a) responsibility and resolve; (b) a sense of duty to help the immediate family; and (c) strategizing in the educational setting. Sub-themes that helped to develop the predominant themes under Research Question 2 included participants' overriding sense of familial obligation, articulated lifelong learning values, and the firm commitment for an improved quality of life. Participants also shared the importance they placed on self-reliance and the challenges of anxiety and stress as first-generation master's students, but not as related or resultant concepts.

Table 8

Thematic Summary for Research Question 2

Emerged Theme	*Student Participants*							
	Donald	Issac	Gwynn	Joey	Hope	Regan	Matthew	Sarah
1. Responsibility and Resolve	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2. Family Influence: Duty	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
3. Strategizing in the Educational Setting	X	X		X		X	X	X

Theme One: Responsibility and Resolve

The theme of responsibility and resolve is multi-faceted because the students experienced these constructs in layers. They spoke of the responsibility to self, to the extended family, to their employers, and to their own immediate families. Their resolve, as well, was textured in tiers, with family, academic, financial, and social elements as simultaneous influences. Regan confirmed that, "I mean it's not lost on me that I will accomplish something that no one else in my family ever has because of their help and because of their self-sacrifice to get me where I am." She continued that she genuinely feels a sense of responsibility to her parents who are aging. She has already reconciled that she will be the provider to sustain her family financially as the only sibling who will gain professional employment because of her master's degree. She said she looks forward to graduating, earning a degree that will help her to take care of her parents, but also conceded that she is highly motivated and feels, "…there are people in my life that I

have to prove myself to." Issac shared a similar concern but it extends for him out into his community where he also wants to serve as a role model. He explained, "I know that's one of the measures of how I look at my experiences and that's how I want my experience to be. If I touch someone, I want to leave the impression that he's like me in some ways, and he's able to see that…".

With this responsibility to succeed academically also comes a resolve and determination among the students to ensure this course of action. "It's my own drive and my own wanting to succeed," confirmed Joey, "combined with the support from my family and the emotional and the drive that also comes from family," that influences his academic accomplishments and gives him the determination to achieve more. He has the very strong sense that everyone in his family looks to him to be, "the most accomplished one." Hope keeps her attention focused on what others do to succeed, sharing that, "I have seen success in others with a college education like what I am working on." This has become her resolve, to accomplish what others have done to be successful. Matthew referred to his determination differently by using a term that is more closely related to inspiration. As he explains,

> I think I just feel empowered almost. Because I know as you go up the chain, the amount of people getting degrees are less and less, so it's a little bit of empowerment because it's, I'm doing it. When you just see all of the requirements and you think, wow that's a lot, but as you're checking them off along the way, it kind of increases your motivation.

Theme Two: Family Influence: Duty

A most significant theme to emerge from this study was the consistently expressed belief among all of the participants, with the exception of Sarah, that they owed a debt of gratitude to their families and intended to use their advanced degrees to earn higher salaries to help support the family. Under Research Question 2, this theme was defined as the sense of duty expressed by the first-generation students enrolled in master's degrees. It was typically the mother of the family unit who encouraged enrollment in college, engaged the students in discussions about their grades in high school leading up to college, and participated in the visits to colleges to help their children make informed decisions. As Matthew revealed, "Although my mom never went to college, she was very supportive and really helped me in that process of pulling resources and just jumping in, just trying to figure out all we could."

The sense of duty to and responsibility for the family, a significant extrinsic motivation, was expressed in many ways by the students. Primarily, students affirmed the obligation they felt to help the family financially as a method to pay back the debt they believe they owe for family sacrifices. One participant indicated that the first-generation student status did not matter as much anymore because his family was better off financially now; another student, in contrast, felt absolute obligation to help her parents who are both ageing and unable to care for themselves financially in retirement. These protective instincts of the family were readily apparent with Regan, when the conversation moved to whether there were connotations about being a first-generation college student. Her response was that she never took offense at the label but that she does take umbrage on behalf of her parents when people equate being uneducated, i.e. not having earned a college degree, with the inability to make good decisions. She reasons that there are

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many kinds of education that people can pursue, and that earning higher education credentials is just one form of education.

Several of the participants are children of immigrant parents and this appeared to add an additional layer of accountability to their familial responsibility. As Donald explained about his mother's history,

> She moved here by herself just with me. She was a single mother. I saw her overcome so many challenges throughout our time here when I was younger and that same message was reflected back to me, that if she can do it, oh my gosh, if she can do it in her late 40's early mid 50's not knowing any English and be successful as a person in this country, then I can raise [rise] up and go to college.

Sarah is the child of immigrants but culturally, the male children are favored for educational pursuits. As a result, she received no remarkable encouragement to pursue higher education. Joey and Gwynn are also the children of immigrants but in contrast, they talked about how much they owed to their families for the support and sacrifices made to ensure that their education was possible. Joey confirmed that at least half of his drive to be in graduate school came from his mother because she saw how much he excelled in school and how far it could take him. Gwynn added that growing up, she always heard about that, "…sense of responsibility that comes from an immigrant family, you know, that you're here and you have a better chance than other people who have been in that same situation, so you have to make the best of it because it is such a great opportunity." She wrote in her journal exercise that she was mostly motivated for the graduate degree by her parents, "…making sure that everything they sacrificed for us is worthwhile." Gwynn revealed an especially personal insight in her journal when she wrote,

> I always say that my undergrad degree was for my family, my master's degree is for my culture (because I was inspired to pursue this field because of a need I saw in my community), and if I ever decide to take it further, I will make sure that *that* degree is for me.

Theme Three: Effectively Strategizing in the Educational Setting

Despite the challenges of having limited early experiences with higher education, each first-generation college student in this research study engaged in what has thus far been a successful academic career. All the students have moved seamlessly from the undergraduate landscape to their graduate work, with only two of the students beginning their college careers at one of the local two-year colleges. The tenets of andragogy, for example exhibiting intentional choice and taking initiative on tasks, knowing how something is valuable and why it is important to learn about it, and bringing motivation to the learning environment, were just a few of the elements demonstrated by this group of students.

Donald discussed that needing to change his major from the hard sciences early in his undergraduate career, while disappointing to both him and his mother, resulted in a necessary correction to his program path. He is now happier and less anxious in his graduate coursework because he can devote his time to experiential research, which turns out to have been his passion all along. Joey's early experiences in graduate school reflect his ability to self-assess and take initiative:

> The first few weeks were extremely challenging. After my first assignment, I had the internal debate on whether I wanted to do this or not because I was like, I had to again be self-reliant and resourceful again and find my own assistance.

And for Issac, being in graduate school had been challenging trying to engage other adult students in class. But he has found that graduate school mandates outside networking opportunities and he has been using these to engage in the program and most importantly, to meet the other students in his class. His assessment after a short time in the graduate program is

that you find you have more in common with people than you originally thought because you have the program in common.

In addition to all the participants discussing how much they enjoy being in school and enjoy learning, they also talked about the specific benefits of being in graduate school, confident that their chosen program of study would reap many benefits. Regan's account of why she is enrolled in a graduate program includes the belief that earning a master's degree is now a requirement for professional promotions. Joey talked about being able to discern how his field of study applies to the real world. He said, "That's why I like this degree, it is like most of the things I'm studying are not arbitrary, they're practical things, they are how does this apply, why are we learning this, or how do we make this system better"?

Other ways the students shared navigating graduate school successfully included finding assistantships on campus that would defer or fund the costs of graduate school, recognizing that having peers in class is important to networking for jobs, and being very intentional about the classes they take in relation to the number of hours they work. Matthew, an undergraduate education major, reviewed in the interview how he strategized on which master's program he would pursue. He said that while he understood the teaching profession is rife with challenges, he projected 10 to 15 years ahead, and determined that his master's program would provide him with credentials transferable outside of teaching—but qualify him now for higher pay in the public school system. Matthew stays motivated and strategizes his future by regularly reviewing the graduate catalog, reminding himself of his program options. He explained, "I am just constantly always going back, reminding myself that there is something further, setting that up in

your mind that you want to shoot for something else. I just revisit it, keep revisiting it, and going

back to the catalog."

<u>Elements of Academic Persistence</u>

RQ 3: In what ways, if any, do self-efficacy and motivational factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) influence the decision of first-generation students to persist toward the master's degree?

Table 9

Framework of Sub-Themes, Themes, and Construct Relationships to Research Question 3

Research Question	Themes	Sub-Themes	Constructs
RQ3	Student Identity	Pride Introspection Talent Confidence Mastery Personal achievement Self-correction Effort	Academic Self-efficacy
	Family Influence: Support	Encouragement Feedback Intention Sense of belonging	Motivations
	Lifelong Learning Values	Autonomy Mastery Engagement in the learning process Professional goals Intentional actions	Adult Learning Strategies

The conceptual framework constructs of self-efficacy and motivation of adult first-generation master's students were the subject of the final research question. Research Question 3 focused on whether self-efficacy and motivational factors, internal and external, influenced the participants' decisions to persist toward pursuing the master's degree. Interview questions 1, 2, and 3 and journal questions 3 and 4 correlate to this overarching question. These questions were developed to elicit from the participants whether self-efficacy acted as an influence on their decisions as first-generation college students to pursue the advanced degree, as well as any intrinsic or extrinsic motivators that have encouraged them to persist for the advanced degree. The open-ended questions were designed to elicit those factors that the participants, in their own words, viewed as influential on their academic persistence for the master's degree. This is noted, as it was unlikely a student would specifically identify the construct of *self-efficacy* as a factor in his or her continued academic enrollment.

After a thorough review of the participant responses to both the interview and journal questions related to self-efficacy and motivational factors, three themes emerged: (a) a strong, positive student identity; (b) support and influence from the immediate family; and (c) a steadfast approach to lifelong learning values. The emerged themes are highlighted by participant in Table 10.

Table 10

Thematic Summary for Research Question 3

Emerged Theme	Student Participants							
	Donald	Issac	Gwynn	Joey	Hope	Regan	Matthew	Sarah
1. Positive Student Identity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2. Family Influence: support	X	X	X	X		X	X	
3. Lifelong Learning Values	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Theme One: A Positive Student Identity and Strong Sense of Self

The theme of building upon a strong sense of self, and thereby developing a positive student identity, was evident in each of the eight participants interviewed. Characteristics that defined this theme included confidence and autonomy in the academic setting, observance of others' successes and reflecting on factors that help people to achieve success, and being decisive and intentional with action. Additional sub-themes encompassed developing adaptive goals that are flexible with changing situations and the ability for self-correction.

The students had been developing positive student identities throughout their educational years and this accelerated while in their undergraduate programs. They spoke of learning good study habits, applying time management skills, being intentional with their course selections each semester, and exercising discipline and flexibility with their academic work. Additional sub-themes that surfaced included that the participants were acutely observant in their

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environments, exercised forward-thinking and future oriented behaviors, and employed good

planning skills. Each student applied the discipline of effective self-starters. As an example, two

of the students had been chosen for the International Baccalaureate (IB) while in high school and

from this experience, shared that when they got to college, the work was easier than it had been

in high school. Hope confirmed,

> So, I just practiced the same things I had been doing. Throughout most of my school
> time, teachers early on made us use notebooks, use a planner, all of those little things
> that I like for organization. So, I stuck with that and I even did those things when it
> wasn't required. I just continued what I had been doing.

Of the eight participants in the study, five of the students had attended the same

institution for their undergraduate and graduate programs. Each of the five students commented

on how this helped them build their confidence through networking and establishing a sense of

institutional consistency, allowing them to thrive. Donald reflected that from his university

experiences at the undergraduate level, he was "underwhelmed" when he first enrolled in his

graduate program. On an even deeper level, two of the students were also involved in campus

leadership organizations while in their undergraduate program. They believed this resulted in a

greater understanding of the higher educational system, knowing whom to contact and how to

get things done for themselves and others.

It is evident from the participant discussions and journaling exercises that all of the

students felt comfortable in the academic environment. Each of the eight student participants

successfully developed a student identity of self-direction and self-reliance in the academic

environment upon which their confidence was built moving into graduate school. Best described

by Regan, she explained,

So, when you're coming into undergrad, you feel behind because you don't even know

what's coming or going on and you don't even know what to expect. I don't even have anyone I can ask these questions to and not feel stupid. Whereas you're coming into grad school and you're on a level playing field. Because it's like I have a degree, you have a degree, we did four years, you did four years, so it feels a little more like a level playing field because we now have the same experiences. But when you walk into undergrad, you're overwhelmed because you don't know what they all know, and you don't [know].

As Issac detailed, "So when I come to school, this is an environment that when I come as a student, a graduate student, as someone in higher education, that I feel comfortable around and in that environment." Joey confirmed the sentiment: "I do feel like I belong [in graduate school]. I have never felt otherwise."

On the issue of personal achievement and what drives these students to persist academically, the students share many of the same elements. Joey, as did others, relayed that self-drive, sheer personal will, and the dream of wanting to earn a master's degree propel him forward. While they acknowledge family support helps to push them forward in school, many also revealed they know that their families do not always understand their academic challenges or expectations. According to Hope,

> I just feel proud of myself in a way, whenever I do things. And that's a lot of it because I want to do things but also because it was just ingrained in me as a child to always do well in school. And as much as I don't feel like my parents really value it [college] that much still, I'm sure that has something to do with it in my background even though it doesn't feel like it does…

Theme Two: Family Influence: Support

As seen with Research Question 2, the theme emerged again among the adult master's student participants of a strong and consistent family influence on their enrollment ambitions and goals. Under Research Question 3, however, the role of family influence resurfaced but was manifested differently: here, the essence was in family support. The students mostly felt a debt of

gratitude for the sacrifices the families made for them to become the first in their family to earn not only the bachelor's degree, but the master's degree, as well. The students also affirmed, with the exception of Hope and Sarah, that the consistent levels of support and confidence displayed by their families for their continued college enrollment were a driving force for their motivation to succeed. Regan shared a common sentiment among the participants:

> I've always just been motivated. My parents have always said they want me to have a better life than they had, and I think I want to work hard so that I can provide my children with a better life than I had. And I think that's kind of been instilled in me, as well—it's more of the long term than just being stuck in the right here and now.

Matthew emphasized that family support is important to academic success and that everyone needs someone helping them along, if only from the sidelines. He added, "I think it was very helpful for my mom to really support me in terms of getting me there. Even though she's never been [to college], she's doing research on her end and trying to make certain things are right, like I've looked into this and us kind of working like a team to get me here." Matthew explained later in the interview that he has observed different levels of family support and involvement in the academic lives of first-generation students and believes the level of family support influences the first-generation student identity. He shared, for example, that there are, "…different layers and different levels of being a first-generation student. And I don't think I was the most neediest, if that makes sense, or most vulnerable first-generation student" because his family provided such a high level of support.

Joey, in contrast, discussed the frustrations he had felt, wanting his parents to understand more of what he does in his studies to be able to offer him academic advice and guidance in his coursework. After many attempts to engage them in his studies, he reasoned that they could only provide him with the emotional and financial support he requires.

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Graduation from college, a milestone achievement for all students, is especially poignant for these students. They are competitive with their siblings and friends to be the first to graduate from college and take great pride in being the first to be enrolled in a master's program. All of the students discussed with affection about the large, extended family entourages who would come to their master's program graduation. They commented how proud they are of themselves on this achievement and how proud of them they know their families are, too.

Theme Three: Lifelong Learning Values

Many first-generation students, according to the literature, initially pursue college degrees for more promising careers, higher pay, and greater opportunities. All students in this study realized soon after earning a bachelor's degree that the degree would likely not secure for them the professional position or salary they wanted. Hope says with her earned bachelor's degree, she did not feel that she would go very far. She confirmed, "I also personally felt like I wanted to do more than just a bachelor's and so it was more of just not feeling like it was enough for what I wanted to do." She discussed how she felt she had just "…touched the surface of learning what I needed to learn," and therefore decided she needed to keep going for the master's degree.

It was a common theme among the participants that their academic competence slowly emerged while in the K-12 education system and with each new success, their confidence and academic self-efficacy expanded. Their mindset to the continued benefits of higher education was evolving and their commitment to lifelong learning was underway. The rewards of learning were best evidenced by Donald's narrative:

So personally, I think I'm very competitive just with myself so that pushes me to
go farther, you know. I definitely remember in high school, I had a kind of awakening
of academic success where I had always believed previously that I wasn't smart enough
or I wasn't good enough at math or science and then I realized I was through some good
teachers I had there. And ever since then, I was like always comparing my grade to
everyone else in class.

Donald also mentioned that he was heavily influenced by his positive undergraduate

experiences in college, which is why he is pursuing Educational Leadership as a discipline at the

graduate level. Regan reported that, "I think we should always be learning and challenging

ourselves to pick up something but especially in this day and age of technology where we can

learn anywhere."

Some of the common characteristics that were identified by the participants as helping to

shape their academic success included the ability to multi-task, being structured and organized,

prioritization, and self-imposing deadlines and timelines for course assignments. Issac was the

only participant to voice a concern about fear in the academic environment, the fear of failure or

of not understanding course assignments or expectations. But with the optimism and self-reliance

of the first-generation student, Issac explained that because he has always felt welcomed in the

academic environment, this helped to alleviate his one stumbling block: fear. His reward from

the learning environment, he revealed, is that you always get out of it what you put into it.

The one common sentiment expressed by each of the participants on the rewards of

continued learning was simply how much they loved the learning process. Their learning

experiences in the academic setting were generally positive, all the participants performed well

in school, and as a result, they developed high levels of academic self-efficacy. Five of the eight

student participants indicated unsolicited that they knew already how they were going to counsel

their own children about future college enrollment, serving as both a mentor and more

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importantly, a role model for them. This learning to navigate successfully the academic environment served as a motivation to continue and to share their successes with others. The narrative offered by Issac best described how success in the educational process breeds more success: "I didn't know how I was going to get here but I would have told you with confidence that I am smart enough to do these things and so when I sit down to do these things, I look back and it's possible."

Summary

In Chapter 4, the findings of this research study were presented regarding the influences of self-efficacy, motivation, and aspects of andragogy on adult first-generation college students pursuing the master's degree. The chapter began with an introduction to the findings of the study, followed by a presentation of formulated themes and supporting sub-themes that emerged from a thorough coding analysis conducted by the researcher. The coding analysis included the influences on the educational aspirations of the eight participants in the study, as revealed through their interview and journaling responses. Findings were presented in three sections, each section corresponding to one of the three research questions. The purpose of this study was achieved by thoroughly exploring participant responses through personal interviews and journaling exercises to questions about the first-generation student experience at the master's level.

Findings from the first research question of this qualitative study revealed that elements of being a first-generation undergraduate student do influence the student experience at the

master's level. The self-efficacy constructs of social modeling, introspection, mastery experiences, and social persuasion were evidenced by these participants. Additionally, their motivations to persist academically and pursue the master's degree were supported by both intrinsic (self-satisfaction and pride) and extrinsic (e.g., wealth, fame, and status) factors. Their undeterred optimism and ardent competitiveness, both individually and with others, were the two most significant and consistent findings related to this question.

This chapter also presented findings, in response to Research Question 2, that adult first-generation students pursuing the master's degree exhibited many of the key assumptions discussed about adult learners in the literature. The participants demonstrated self-direction through intentional choice with their institutions, courses, and programs, including taking initiative with more mundane academic tasks. The students also exhibited a readiness to earn the master's degree that they believed was crucial to their professional and financial success. Furthermore, the students indicated by their interview and journal responses that they were motivated to pursue the advanced degree for an amalgam of factors from self-esteem to family obligation to social rewards. And while not a deterrent, stress and anxiety associated with sustained levels of performance and the fear of failure were present among this group of high achievers, although never presented as an excuse for lack of achievement.

Lastly, findings in response to Research Question 3 revealed that a complex correlation of self-efficacy and motivational factors influenced the decision of these first-generation students to pursue the master's degree. Overall, the qualitative findings of this study support the current literature that those first-generation students who aspire to earn the master's degree demonstrate high levels of mastery and academic self-efficacy, in addition to diverse sources of motivation

that promote their achievement of advanced academic credentials. These students evidence sustained success in the academic environment and are life-long learners. They are self-motivated to achieve, while also intentionally receptive to the responsibility of achieving more academically to help support and give back to their families.

Chapter 5 presents a discussion and analysis of the findings on adult first-generation college students who pursue the master's degree. In addition to a discussion on the findings from this phenomenological research study, Chapter 5 will also review implications for future practice, make recommendations for future research, and provide an overview of the conclusions drawn from the study.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

<u>Overview of the Study</u>

Chapter 5 is organized with a summary of the findings and conclusions of this phenomenological research study as presented in the preceding chapter. This chapter also presents an analysis and discussion of the thematic findings, implications for further practice, and recommendations for future research. The chapter ends with the researcher's personal reflections and insights, inclusive of a synopsis on the importance of research in this area of first-generation master's student experiences.

In the following section, a summary of the findings is presented. The purpose of the current qualitative study was to explore the influences of academic self-efficacy and motivational factors that adult first-generation students enrolled in master's degree programs ascribed to their academic persistence. A conceptual framework was used in this study with elements from Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory, Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, and Knowles et al. (1998) Theory on Andragogy to explore the aspirational ethos of first-generation college students who pursue the master's degree. The wide-ranging implications of this phenomenological study include: (a) revealing the elements that inform the decisions of first-generation college students to enroll in graduate school, (b) the essence of first-generation college students as adult learners who pursue the master's degree, and (c) any influences they ascribe to their academic persistence.

Eight currently enrolled master's degree students who self-identified as first-generation college students were purposively and randomly selected for participation in the

study. The definition used for "first-generation college student" in this research study was restrictive: *neither parent nor guardian was to have had any previous college coursework or college enrollment experience.* The participant group included eight students, demographically representative of the institution, while also representing various graduate programs within the one college. The participants responded to an online questionnaire that they met the qualifications for the study and were willing to be interviewed and participate in a journal writing exercise. The demographic profile of the adult first-generation master's student from the present study reflected their average age was 28 years old and they had earned an average cumulative GPA of 3.6 from their undergraduate academic work. The study was completed in six weeks during a fall semester of enrollment, which was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<u>Summary of Major Thematic Findings</u>

This qualitative study discovered through eight participant interviews and journaling exercises the essence of influences on academic persistence for adult first-generation college students enrolled in the master's degree. Three research questions guided this study and were answered affirmatively after the data were compiled, reviewed, and analyzed.

1. *Do elements of being a first-generation undergraduate student influence the experience at the master's level? If so, what are those factors and how do they influence the master's student experience in graduate school?*

2. *What are the past and current experiences of adult first-generation students who are enrolled in a master's degree?*

3. *In what ways, if any, do self-efficacy and motivational factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) influence the decision of first-generation students to persist toward the master's degree?*

The data for this phenomenological study were collected through personal interviews and journaling exercises completed by each of the eight student participants who volunteered and qualified to participate in the study. The method of data collection included recorded personal observations and interviews, which were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Subsequent to the interviews, four additional questions were presented to each participant in an online journaling format. All of the responses were read by the researcher numerous times, allowing for categories, themes, and sub-themes to emerge from the readings. The responses were color coded by the researcher based upon the emerged themes. The transcriptions and emerged themes were then reviewed by a peer researcher for alignment, resulting in slight adjustments to eliminate thematic redundancy. The result was the emergence of ten total themes, each developed in support of at least one of the three research questions. The ten emerged themes from the participant experiences and insights were:

a. undeterred optimism

b. a reliance on peers and professional mentors

c. highly competitive personalities

d. school becomes the clear path to more opportunity

e. responsibility and resolve

f. family influence: duty

g. strategizing in the educational setting

h. the development of a positive student identity

i. family influence: support

j. lifelong learning values

The conceptual framework used for this study is based upon the three complimentary theoretical constructs of academic self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and adult learning strategies. These elements from each of the three theoretical models were explored as influences on the adult first-generation master's student who aspired to earn the master's degree. The relevant concepts from each theory that informed the findings and conclusions of this research will be discussed. Additionally, a brief summary of each of the thematic findings that emerged from analysis, predicated on the conceptual constructs, will be reviewed.

First-Generation College Student Experiences That Influence Graduate School Enrollment

Emerged themes: (1) undeterred optimism, (2) a reliance on peers and professional mentors, (3) highly competitive personalities, and (4) school becomes the clear path to opportunity

A significant theme to develop from the participant interviews and journal entries was their undeterred optimism. The typical roadblocks for many college students, such as not having enough time to study and devote to class or not being able to decide initially on an undergraduate major within the first two years of college enrollment, did not derail these students. Despite the challenges they had faced in moving through their undergraduate programs—financial, social, and academic—they were undeterred at the graduate level. They experienced setbacks, anxiety, and fear about being in graduate school but did not express any pessimism that something might not go well. Conversely, they consistently expressed optimism that they would "figure it out."

As a group, the eight participants spoke of always trying to do their best, quickly mitigating any setbacks, and purposefully looking to the future. When they experienced obstacles or the results of poor decisions, they did not let negative outcomes impact them for long. These

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behaviors directly support the tenets of academic self-efficacy: a commitment to accomplishing academic goals, resilience, and giving more effort to endeavors that are successful (Bandura, 2006; Choi, 2005; Lent et al., 1986).

In Bandura's (1977) theory on self-efficacy, two components are fundamental: one, individuals must believe they have the required skills or knowledge to be successful and two, they must also believe that they are in control of the outcome. Moreover, Bandura's theory purports that as self-efficacy is strengthened for a particular task or behavior, an individual's persistence in that behavior or task will be positively influenced to continue (Bandura, 1997). The research on self-efficacy supports that that there is a predictive relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic persistence (Multon, Brown, & Lent 1991).

Participants in this study, while not identifying self-efficacy as a term that defined them, experienced it nonetheless in numerous ways and offered various adjectives for it. As a group, recurrent words that they consistently used throughout the study to define themselves included confident, proud, resourceful, flexible, and driven. Two words, self-descriptors spoken by each of the eight participants, were *competitive* and *push*. Each participant talked about being competitive independently, for example always needing to earn an "A", but then also being competitive with others in class, in the family with siblings or cousins, or among peers. Additionally, all the participants talked about pushing themselves forward or being pushed by others. For example, Joey shared that his mother always pushed him to do well in school and Issac, who relayed that his mother always pushed him academically to earn good grades. In her journal entry, Sarah reflected how she pushed herself always to do better: "Mediocre is not good enough for your own goals."

All the participants in the study experienced learning from others, expressing clearly and without prompting that observing their college instructors was one way in which they formed their goals for graduate school. This behavior served as both an element of self-efficacy, identified as social modeling or vicarious experience, and as two elements within Self-Determination Theory, competence and relatedness. Social persuasion, also a critical source of self-efficacy, similarly emerged as a strong theme in this study. As defined in the academic arena, social persuasion is the effect individuals feel from the influence and encouragement from peers, mentors, employers, supervisors, and faculty members. While each of the eight participants spoke of friends or siblings who influenced their decisions to attend college open houses and college night presentations in high school, there was only one student, Matthew, who spoke at length about a middle school teacher who heavily influenced him to enroll in college. Gwynn, Regan, Hope, and Matthew spoke at length about friends who invited them to attend college events and from which they eventually decided to enroll in college.

Introspection, the last and final basis for establishing self-efficacy, is a level of self-reflection based more upon the physiological response to stimuli experienced by the individual. While not addressed specifically in this study as an influence, the interview and journal questions were designed around self-reflection and the students' ability to describe influences on their academic pursuits, which likely conjured emotional responses to some topics. But any elements of stressful college and academic experiences, while creating emotional arousal at the time, were likely diminished through the passage of time and with enhanced remembrance (Bandura, 1997). When the experience turns out to have been productive and accomplished successfully, it helps to build academic self-efficacy.

When asked during the interview to reflect on their classes at the undergraduate level, several of the students talked about realizing that they would need at least a master's degree to teach at the college level. They reasoned early in their college careers that welcoming and responsive faculty members, serving in ancillary positions as role models, provided a compelling motivation to enroll in graduate school. In other words, the master's degree was required for professional opportunity and advancement. This phenomenon was also experienced in relation to comparisons made regarding low wage employment. Many of the students had been employed in lower wage jobs before and during college and had determined for themselves that there was not much of a future in hourly wage work. Several of the students even commented that one or both of their parents were employed in lower wage jobs. As a result, the students were more motivated to enroll in college, gain professional experience, and thereby break this employment pattern. This thinking reflects the theme of school becomes the clear path to more opportunity, where the students found success in the academic environment and expected to realize professional gains from advancement into higher levels of education. Fundamentally, the students understood that because of their education, they were doing better for themselves than their parents had been able to accomplish for themselves.

Experiences of Adult First-Generation Students Enrolled in Master's Programs

Emerged themes: (1) responsibility and resolve, (2) family influence: duty, and
(3) strategizing in the educational setting.

The second research question sought to uncover from the participants their experiences as adult students enrolled in a master's degree program from the holistic perspective of a first-

generation college student. Sub-themes that emerged from the participant interviews and journaling sessions under this research question included self-reliance, persistence, expectations, obligation, intentional actions, and self-directed learning. From these sub-themes, three salient themes emerged as the essence of what it is to be an adult first-generation college student pursuing a master's degree. The themes were a strong sense of responsibility and resolve to oneself, the immediate family and extended family; a sense of duty and obligation to the family to make them proud and to help take care of parents as they age; and finally, the student's learned ability to effectively strategize in the educational setting. The overarching narrative here was that family served as the primary extrinsic motivation for these students pursuing the master's degree. Inclusive of both the extended and the immediate family members, it is the obligation that these students felt to their families for the sacrifices that had been made on their behalf that drove them to persist for the master's degree.

Findings in the present study are moderately consistent with the literature on adult students who enroll in graduate programs. Adult roles can be an asset, where students have immediate shared concerns and new ways to meet others in similar groups for support, or they can be a trigger for stress in trying to balance schedules and the demands of competing interests for their time (Pew, 2007; Ross-Gordon, 2011). It is therefore evident and important that the participants in the present study affirmed that without the support and encouragement from their immediate families, they believed they might not have achieved as much. They spoke at length about the responsibility they had to themselves, foremost, to continue the master's degree and graduate. But this goal was also indelibly connected to their immediate family of children and spouses for whom the scholars had sacrificed so much time and effort on their studies. Moreover,

the participants expressed a responsibility to their extended families to earn the advanced degree as compensation for events they had missed while enrolled in school and to be in a better position to provide financial support, with which they expected to be able to reciprocate eventually. It was evident from the participants' collective experiences that the tenacity required to juggle so many roles successfully and to have so many people dependent on their success was a source of pride and a responsibility for them. The participants never spoke of it as burden but several alluded to the stress and anxiety of being *the one* in the family upon whom everyone relied for financial and extended care-taking support.

Other findings in the study showed that the participants liked to be in control, made intentional choices about academic decisions, were consistently self-reliant, and exercised a great deal of self-initiative and responsibility for task completion. These findings were supported in the literature as behavior typical of students with positive efficacy, which influences the academic decisions they make, the level of effort they put into their studies, their resilience when challenged, and even their ability to practice adaptive goal-setting (Bandura, 1997; Tate et al., 2015; Valentine et al., 2004). When Donald, a pre-med undergraduate student, discovered early in his college career that he was not very strong as a chemistry major in the hard sciences but was very good with people and was enjoying his leadership roles on campus, he decided to move into psychology to take advantage of his strengths. Gwynn advised in one of her journal entries to connect with people who have, "… been where you want to be" and to remain accountable for your decisions. And Matthew, who knew early in his college career that he wanted to be a teacher—and that being a teacher likely would require more than the bachelor's degree— reasoned then that his goal would need to be earning the master's degree. In his journal entry, he

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recommended having a concrete plan, knowing how many courses can fit into the balance each semester, and to, "…map out a potential pace…" for academic success. These characteristics were identified thematically as effectively strategizing in the educational setting and are notable as tenets within the andragogical framework. With adult graduate students, both subject-matter differences and situational differences can dissuade an adult student from continuing with his or her school experience. It is in light of the characteristics that emerged from this group, that the students consistently had positive graduate school experiences, saw graduate school as a valuable resource and experience, and remained motivated to achieve the master's degree.

While the research indicates that many adults who return to the college environment are anxious and lacking in self-confidence, this study sought to explore what these first-generation master's students would reveal as experiential strategies for continued academic success and persistence in graduate school. Based upon their interview and journal responses, the participants were intrinsically motivated to persist for the master's degree, crediting their academic successes to personal effort and raw talent. And while they also demonstrated a strong motivation to achieve the master's degree to help with the extended family financially or to make the family proud, both external motivators, the students profiled in this study demonstrated a more powerful intrinsic motivator in persisting for the master's degree. The intrinsic motivator was a personal investment, a powerful self-belief in spite of challenges, that the master's degree could be accomplished. Furthermore, the extrinsic motivator of family financial care may have been viewed more from a sense of obligation than true motivation among the student participants.

As demonstrated by Pew (2007), the adult learner has essential responsibility for his or her own motivations. Factors such as self-confidence, personal accomplishment and resolve, and

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the goal of an improved quality of life all supply these students with the intrinsic motivation to persist academically. Bandura (1997) and Bandura and Locke (2003) posited that academic achievement could be influenced by positive self-beliefs, as they influence aspirations, goal setting behaviors, and a commitment to personal accomplishments. These characteristics when grouped can be defined as intrinsic motivation.

Elements of Academic Persistence

Emerged themes: (1) the development of a positive student identity and a strong sense of self, (2) family influence: support, and (3) lifelong learning

The final question of this study was designed to explore participants' responses on whether self-efficacy and internal and/or external motivational factors influenced their decisions to persist toward pursuing the master's degree. While self-efficacy was not mentioned specifically by any participant as an influence, similar descriptors such as gifted, talented, ability, effort, self-starter, persistent, resilient, and confident were offered. All of the participants responded that they had always felt comfortable in the academic environment, several of them commenting that they were gifted academically. From these consistently positive academic experiences going back at least as far as their high school years, it was evident that each of the students had developed a strong sense of self that was domain-specific to the academic milieu. As an overarching theme, the development of a positive student identity was prominent.

The students' responses were consistently aligned with Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, which concluded that when individuals believe in what they can achieve, it helps them to work through difficult tasks and to persevere. The primary source for an individual to gain more

confidence in undertaking new tasks is from mastery experiences. The students profiled in this study spoke and wrote about determination, academic acumen, talent, and self-initiating behaviors that made their experiences in the educational setting positive and self-fulfilling. They also spoke of gaining the right tools to be a successful student, being observant of what other students and faculty mentors were doing, and being encouraged by their successful graduate work that they belonged in graduate school. These behaviors are aligned with both the vicarious experience and social persuasion about which Bandura (1977) theorized. The student participants comparing their abilities to other graduate students, learning from other students who are successful in accomplishing tasks, monitoring and adjusting their own progress, and accepting challenges directly are all classic demonstrations of higher levels of self-efficacy. The students were independent self-starters, an essential component in the academic setting when one is competitive and does not always seek help when needed. Joey confirmed this by offering that he had to be resourceful and find his own help in the academic setting. He also shared, however, that he had never felt uncomfortable, and had always felt that he belonged, in the academic environment.

From their mastery experiences in higher education, which were predominantly performance-based experiences, the participants developed positive student identities. Characteristics of this theme included learning the ropes of both undergraduate and graduate school, undeterred optimism, and learning to effectively strategize in the academic environment. These behaviors can often have negative consequences, such as individuals building overconfidence in their abilities or ignoring personal weaknesses in favor of only focusing on accomplishments. Such negative outcomes, however, were not observed or experienced among

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this group. Collectively, the students spoke of: 1) rebounding quickly from bad program decisions (e.g., in the experiences of Donald and Hope); 2) feeling lost at a school with no friends (e.g. Gwynn and Issac) but finding their way in spite of it; and, 3) approaching intimidating situations, like graduate school, with confidence (as expressed by Joey, Sarah, and Hope). Bandura (1997) noted that the mastery experience was the most important basis for developing self-efficacy.

In tandem with academic self-efficacy is motivation. Self-efficacy, the belief that one has the required skills or knowledge to influence an event and the belief that one is in control of the outcome, fosters motivation. Defined as the ability to keep oneself moving forward in a task, motivation is a construct composed of intrinsic and extrinsic elements. Because self-efficacy can influence motivation, the higher the perceived self-efficacy individuals have of themselves, the higher the level of motivation to accomplish an activity. Ryan and Deci (2000) determined through their seminal work on motivation that individuals become self-determined when their innate needs are met: competence (mastery), connection to others, and autonomy or acting for one's own interests. In Self-Determination Theory, self-belief influences what matters to an individual and therefore, how long an individual may persist with an action or goal. In the academic environment, intrinsic motivation has consistently been found to result in higher academic performance and persistence in remaining enrolled (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014).

Competing research on first-generation college students has, however, specifically demonstrated that this population may be more motivated by the external rewards of high grades, better jobs, and higher salaries. Findings from the present study indicate that the support and

influence from family members was a consistently strong motivator for these first-generation students to pursue the master's degree. In addition to making the families proud, the students shared that they owed a debt of gratitude to their families for the sacrifices made to keep them enrolled.

The final theme, a commitment to lifelong learning values and the rewards of learning, is reflective of both the adult learner and the self-determined individual. The adult learner understands how learning is valuable, which serves as an external motivator for rewards and awards. But it is also the self-determined individual who recognizes that learning functions as an intrinsic need and motivation, as well. The motivation for continued learning is both goal achievement and self-esteem. In this study, the rewards of learning were observed to have sustained the participants in their undergraduate and graduate programs as something that others in the family had not been able to achieve. And the rewards of learning became a motivating factor for the participants that helped to promote the development of self-efficacy.

Discussion of the Findings

In this phenomenological research study, adult first-generation college students pursuing master's degrees were found to be highly competitive, optimistic, academically persistent, and focused on achieving an advanced degree both to earn more income for themselves and to take care of ageing parents. They demonstrated resiliency to forge ahead in the academic arena despite challenges, freely acknowledging that they did not always know what they were doing but were willing to try despite a lack of experience or guidance. As a group, the students were

self-starters, problem-solvers, and forward thinkers. They strategized and planned for their academic success, only sure of what they knew they did not want to occur. Factors that helped these first-generation college students to persist for the master's degree confirmed earlier research (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Demetriou et al., 2017; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2017). The participants profiled in this study identified early access to college information and open houses, mentoring relationships with faculty, active engagement on campus with student organizations and service, and perceived value in their coursework as key factors essential to their persistence and success.

Consistent with Bandura's (1977) theory on self-efficacy, the present study found that students who had positive academic self-efficacy also had a strong sense of self in the academic environment and therefore, a highly developed student identity. These attributes significantly influenced how much effort the students continued to put into their studies and the duration of their academic perseverance. This was especially insightful because the participants, defined as first-generation college students pursuing the master's degree, were both intrinsically motivated by their own need to compete and achieve, while also motivated by the external rewards of family pride, more professional employment opportunities, and higher salaries. Knowles et al. (2005) and Deci and Ryan (2000) posited that while external motivators could be dynamic, the internal motivators of personal accomplishment and self-esteem were much more powerful for students.

All of the students in the present study cited the motivation they received from a sense of personal pride, and the pride their families exhibited for their accomplishments, in being the first in their families to succeed in college. While the families could not help these high-achieving

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students to lay the foundation for a successful college career, they did serve as powerful extrinsic motivators and were highly valued to the first-generation college student. Six of the eight student participants had siblings and for each of these family groupings, the students also served as role models for their younger siblings and cousins, offering guidance and mentoring through the academic processes. This experience served as a strong external motivation for the first-generation college student, who not only took pride in sharing his or her academic success with family members, but also stayed motivated to persist academically not to let anyone down or to be seen as a failure.

A consistent finding in this study, related to the family as an extrinsic motivation, was the focus on the mother in the family unit. The mothers were primarily the key socializers and sources of encouragement for the students to continue achieving academically. For every student but two, the participants expressed that their mothers' positive messages of academic support and accomplishment were thought to have been unrealized expectations the mothers' had for themselves. This was true in many of the cases because the mother had been prevented from attending college for cultural, familial, or economic reasons. While parents and siblings served a key role in motivating the students to enroll in college and pursue the master's degree, it was predominantly the mothers who established the high expectations for them.

As noted earlier in the study from the literature, first-generation college students typically are deficient in the cultural capital to be successful at the undergraduate college level due to a lack of experience, guidance, and even academic preparation (Lundberg, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). These fundamental characteristics are consistently illustrated in the literature as the reasons why first-generation college students: 1) do not graduate with the

bachelor's degree and 2) do not persist into graduate school. This phenomenon, however, was not a finding in the present research study. Participants were, conversely, found to be high achievers, practiced in the most effective student success skillsets and well prepared academically. The students spoke at length regarding various good study habits they had learned, which helped them to achieve success in their undergraduate programs. Of the eight students, a 3.1 GPA was the lowest reported undergraduate cumulative grade average at graduation, with a 3.46 GPA reported as the next lowest. The remaining students had an average 3.8 GPA upon graduation with the bachelor's degree.

Other findings in this study that are outside of the present conceptual framework but are supported in the literature for first-generation college students being successful and persisting in the academic environment, included: 1) one of the students joined a sorority and lived on campus, 2) all participants enrolled in graduate school well within the ten year bachelor's degree graduation benchmark for success, 3) five out of eight (62.5%) of the students attended the same school for the bachelor's and the master's degree, 4) all of the students chose the master's program based on close proximity to home and family, and 5) those who returned to the same school for the master's program shared a deep devotion to the university related to the earlier positive interactions and faculty support they had experienced (Davis, 2010; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Tinto, 2017). The participants shared feelings of being comfortable in the institution during their undergraduate program, which was a significant motivator for them to return to the institution for their master's program. This behavior is fully supported in the literature as a method for developing a positive student identity or *mastering the college student role*, as described by Collier and Morgan (2008, p. 425). The familiarity with an institution provided by

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understanding its processes, knowing the physical layout, and having already met many of the faculty are all reported as incentives for students to return to the institution for advanced coursework (Davis 2010; Tinto, 2017).

A significant finding from this research study included the discovery that being a first-generation student did not define the participants once they reached the master's degree level. While the students exhibited some of the same behaviors from their first-generation undergraduate college student experience, they did not consciously bring that status forward into the master's degree experience. This finding refutes the evidence found by Pike and Kuh (2005) that the first-generation student status remains significant to these students as they moved into the graduate levels. As one participant in the present study best explained, the "playing field is leveled" once every student reaches the master's degree. The first-generation college student experience of not having the guidance, exposure, and knowledge to help manage the undergraduate college experience successfully was, therefore, no longer relevant in graduate school. Enrolling in a master's program was more equitable for all students *because it was new to everyone.* For some of these first-generation students pursuing the master's degree, this leveled playing field may have even been empowering.

The participants in the study were resilient in college despite many challenges: some students made initially misguided choices in majors, classes were too hard, programs did not fit their work schedules, and advice was incorrect. The stress that came from not knowing what to do next was continuous. The families lacked any college experience to help prepare and guide them and the students affirmed that their knowledge of institutional practices was limited upon enrolling in college. But from the students' perspective, none of this was viewed as a deterrent.

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The students spoke of an internal drive to keep going, a persistence to make the college experience a success, and a faith that they would always just figure it out. They thrived in the academic environment despite information deficiencies and limitations. When asked if some of them had an alternate plan if college did not work out, they mostly shrugged and indicated that there were no alternate plans. Being in college, somehow, was just going to work itself out.

Similar to findings noted by Portnoi and Kwong (2011), factors in this study that added to a positive graduate student experience and continued to help students develop academic self-efficacy included the participants' interest in the graduate program coursework and any support they received from the faculty. These findings directly supported the tenets of adult learning theoretical constructs: students knowing how a graduate program is valuable to them, demonstrating a readiness to learn, and faculty providing a level of respect to the adult graduate student. These behaviors minimize anxiety in the academic setting, foster collaboration among class peers and with faculty, and help to keep the adult student motivated (Knowles et al., 1998, 2005; Pew, 2007; Rachal, 2002). Several of the students commented that they were excited to have been treated as adults in their graduate programs and felt a stronger bond with the faculty as colleagues, rather than as instructor and student. Also cited in the literature as a factor that adds to a successful graduate student experience is the relationship developed among peers and classmates in the program (Lunceford, 2011; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). Although initially developed with caution among this group of study participants, they did eventually reach out to peers in class with questions, finding that others had similar questions. The participants also expressed that they eventually found they had more in common with their classmates than originally predicted.

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As demonstrated in this discussion of the study's findings, each of the conceptual framework constructs was revealed through the experiences of the adult first-generation students pursuing the master's degree who participated in this study. The interaction among the conceptual framework elements was also examined to illustrate how those factors helped to shape the persistence behavior of adult first-generation master's students in this study.

The elements of academic self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and adult learning were significant as findings in this study and as emerged themes from the data. While there are many factors that influence student persistence, the synergy of these three theoretical constructs indicated they were essential to the phenomenon that is the first-generation college student pursuing the master's degree. The subsequent influence on the students' collective college experiences, including their strategies for academic success, was explored as well. The selection of these three constructs for use in this study was, therefore, appropriate.

Related Observations

While the behavior of college students may be predictive, it is never static. The findings from the current study on adult first-generation college students enrolled in the master's degree yielded several related, notable observations. Primarily, the students enjoyed very strong family bonds. The students stayed in college and pursued the master's degree partially to return a debt of gratitude they felt they owed to their family for earlier sacrifices, as well as to make their family proud. Much of the literature reflects first-generation students walking between two worlds, that of their family and friends left behind in comparison to the new college life they are

living (Ward et al., 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996). This scenario was not proven in the present study. None of the students in the present study spoke of unreasonable burdens the families had placed on them or expressed any strained family relationships because of college enrollment.

The bulk of the research on first-generation college students indicates that college is a struggle. First-generation college students experience weak academic preparation, more academic challenges, a lack of family support and educational plans, and higher rates of non-completion of college programs than students who have parents or guardians who attended even some college (Choy, 2001; Gardner, 2013; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Stieha, 2010). These experiences, however, were not evident with the first-generation college students in this study, nor did the students exhibit the cited weaknesses or academic challenges commonly noted in the literature.

In the present study, the students' collective experiences supported the research on the positive influential relationship between academic self-efficacy and persistence behaviors (Bandura, 1997; Choi, 2005; Dembo & Seli, 2008; Lent et al., 1986; Multon et al., 1991). In tandem with this finding was how infrequently the students sought guidance from college academic advisors when they had questions or were unsure of next steps. Alternatively, the students purposely initiated a search for the information they needed, seeking guidance from known circles of influence and resources. Of particular interest was the result that all the students in the present study eventually identified themselves as *advisor* to younger siblings, cousins, and friends; two of the participants became academic orientation advisors on campus.

Throughout their interviews and journal entries, the students did not express a fear of failure as much as they expressed a conviction that they would not let themselves fail. This

behavior may reflect more of their competitive nature, as discussed earlier, or represent their grittier approach to being persistent academically (Bowman et al., 2015). The students did not acknowledge luck as a factor in their academic success. They felt fortunate to have had options and a supportive group around them, but they did not express that they felt "lucky" in any way. Only two of the eight students spoke specifically of "imposter syndrome" upon enrolling in college but everyone spoke of feelings, eventually, that they "belonged in college." The topic of feeling like a *fish out of water* in the college environment was also the subject of a journal entry question. Consistently, the students responded that they had those feelings but quickly overcame them by networking with students in class and asking faculty for help with their work. The *fish out of water* feeling did not last long and was easily compensated for by strategizing ways to fit in. Two additional elements that were noted during the study: 1) the participants did not speak at length about financial or academic challenges that prevented them from persisting with their educational goals and 2) none of the students spoke of religious or spiritual beliefs that sustained them through challenging periods while enrolled in school.

Finally, an issue that was not anticipated but was mentioned by several of the students, focused on what it is like to move through high school and college *perceived* as a competent, confident student. As motivated, high-achieving students, some in IB programs and AP classes, the students expressed they occasionally hesitated to ask questions because they felt an expectation that they should already have the answers. Reviewing this more deeply in the interviews, several of the students shared that they believed educational leaders hesitated to inquire about their educational plans because as talented students, they were thought to know what they were doing. Gwynn, for example, talked at length about being perceived in high

school as self-reliant, whereby adults (e.g., teachers and counselors) thought she did not need their help and could figure it out on her own. In her words, "…for students who are doing really well in school, they just assume that because you're doing well in school, you already have it figured out." Gwynn explained how some students, when they are confident and do well academically, can be erroneously assumed to know more than perhaps they do. Academic self-efficacy can, therefore, disguise confidence levels and personal struggles.

While interview and journal questions were not specifically designed to elicit negative responses, none of the students recounted harsh or negative experiences while enrolled in college. Most of their experiences, on the contrary, were positive and encouraging. Any bruised egos along the way with this group of high-achieving first-generation college students were met with more resilience and more determination to succeed.

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

There were several limitations identified with the present study, many of them inherent when conducting qualitative research. Nonetheless, the present study adds new findings to the nascent literature and research on adult first-generation master's students. As the researcher is typically engaged with the participant population on an intensive, extended basis, this suggests the first key limitation: that of the final number of participants. Securing eight participants who volunteered for the study, after verifying that they qualified for the study, was a limitation to the sample size.

The ability to retain all viable participants through the end of the study was also a limitation. In the present study, five students completed the initial questionnaire, indicating that they were qualified to participate as a first-generation college student enrolled in a master's program. Unfortunately, they did not include their contact information for follow-up scheduling. There were several other students who volunteered to participate and provided contact information but never responded to repeated requests to schedule an interview. To encourage participation, food and beverage cards were identified early in the study as incentives to be provided to any student who completed a segment of the study. While the findings from larger studies with more participants are noted to be more generalizable, this conclusion can be refuted with the very purpose of phenomenological research. In phenomenology, the intent is to delve deeply into the lives and experiences of the study group, made nearly impossible with larger participant groups.

A limitation to the study was also the initial response rate to the questionnaire that was emailed to all active master's students who self-identified as first-generation college students. Students who self-selected and volunteered to participate may have been students with only successful experiences to share. Whether the students who participated in the study did so in a meaningful way, remaining genuinely engaged through the journal writing entries, is unknown. Additionally, the narratives of the final sample group were limited to the collective experiences of those eight students, enrolled in one college at one university, and recalled from their memories. The findings of the present study have been attributed to the students' first-generation master's student status but may, in fact, be directly related to other outside factors. As well, experiences recalled from participant memories are a limitation in phenomenological research.

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Often, recollections of stressful episodes may be remembered with enhancements and all recollections, whether from stressful events or happier times, have the advantage of time and experience, which can alter the memory.

Students were asked to "self-select" themselves for the study based upon the definition of first-generation college student designated and provided by the researcher from the literature. It was determined that this definition, while more restrictive for the number of students who may qualify, would also ensure a more homogeneous group of students with parents and guardians who had no college enrollment or experience. There is not a mechanism in place, however, to verify their first-generation student status based upon the stated definition. As it turned out, one participant had to be eventually disqualified from the study when it was revealed late in the interview phase that her father had returned to a two-year college for a trade-centered program much later in his life.

Although positionality of the researcher was openly discussed with the participants, a limitation could have occurred with students who were responding to questions according to the researcher's reactions. Finally, because students were the sample population of this study, limitations included the time of academic year once the study was approved for dissemination, whether self-qualified participants had other significant events occurring in their life during the study, and even potentially work and travel obligations that may have impacted their ability to volunteer, continue, or engage in the study.

<u>Implications for Practice</u>

The first-generation college student population is currently estimated to be at 25% of the total undergraduate college student population in the United States. The literature details that first-generation college students are less likely to be retained in their undergraduate programs, are less academically prepared for the demands of college, work more hours per week than they attend class, and are less likely to earn the bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001; Gardner, 2013; Portnoi and Kwong, 2011; Stieha, 2010). And yet, many of these same first-generation college students will be successful in their bachelor's degree program, persevering to eventually enroll in the master's degree. While the study of first-generation college students is a recent focus of interest in higher education circles, the study of student persistence strategies and motivational factors has been a long-standing focus of scholarly discussion and research.

This study identified three constructs: academic self-efficacy, motivation, and elements of andragogy that significantly interacted with and influenced the persistence strategies of adult first-generation master's students. This in-depth focus of the influence of these constructs was accomplished through exploring the spoken and written narratives of first-generation students pursuing the master's degree. Qualitative findings from this study, including data from personal interviews and recorded journal entries, indicated that many factors served as sources of support and influence on the persistence of first-generation college students who pursue the master's degree.

Overall, this study sought to inform through the exploration of identified theoretical constructs, the institutional practices of graduate student recruitment methods and the

enhancement of first-generation graduate student advisement for success. The findings are essential to advisors, faculty, and administrators who wish to recruit and retain first-generation college students to graduate programs.

The findings include the following influences as significant to the persistence of adult first-generation college students who pursue the master's degree: 1) accelerated high school academic programming (e.g., IB and AP programs), 2) early attendance (with friends and family members) at university open houses, 3) reliance on friends or siblings who exercise good judgment about college attendance, 4) initial enrollment at the university without prior two-year college enrollment, 5) established familiarity with the institution, enrolling in undergraduate and graduate programs at the same institution, 6) student employment and deliberate engagement with the institution, and 7) taking leadership and student organizational roles in the institution, especially those that work with other students to help them navigate the same institutional practices.

It may be no surprise to educators that what works well and is successful in supporting the undergraduate student may work well for the graduate student, too. Knowing the factors that contribute to the development of academic self-efficacy and the motivators present for students who persist into the master's degree, will assist educators to better prepare first-generation undergraduate college students for graduate work. Support mechanisms such as: 1) offering consistent student contact and mentoring opportunities with the faculty, 2) hosting specialized graduate student orientations for the first-generation master's student, 3) having readily available and accessible information on graduate student policies and institutional practices, 4) providing dedicated graduate student housing on campus or near campus, and 5) establishing a supportive

and empathetic culture of understanding student time constraints and outside obligations while in graduate school, are recommended as practices to help ensure the persistence rates of first-generation college students enrolled in master's programs (King, 2017; Wyatt, 2011).

Additional recommendations include providing dedicated physical space to first-generation college students at all academic levels with a lounge area or study rooms, hosting early decision day events for admitting first-generation college students to graduate school, and offering specialized student advising services that are welcoming and meaningful. Aspirational first-generation college students would also benefit from focused study skill and graduate student college life workshops, as well as sessions about graduate school and faculty expectations. A meaningful beginning to launch these recommendations might begin with a universal definition of first-generation student incorporated on the university's application form for admission.

The key is to ensure that these are *shared efforts* for first-generation undergraduate and graduate students. Often, large institutions segregate their undergraduate and graduate populations but, in this illustration, first-generation college students would be best served by having a dedicated office at the onset of their college career. Critical to this blended retention endeavor is to have faculty involved with the graduate program planning sessions, helping the first-generation college students acclimate from the beginning of their undergraduate careers and mentoring the students earlier in their undergraduate programs on research projects that would guide them seamlessly into graduate school. Development of an ambassador program would also be warranted, matching a current FGMS with an incoming FGS, to provide institutional guidance, academic support, and personal encouragement.

More than half of the graduate students in the present study earned their bachelor's degree at the same institution. There is currently one program already in place at the institution that could be more heavily promoted among the first-generation college students. It is known as the Senior Scholars program, whereby an undergraduate senior student—with permission from the anticipated graduate program—may take up to nine graduate credit hours and have the hours counted toward both the undergraduate and graduate degrees. A stronger emphasis on this program of credit sharing between the undergraduate and graduate programs at the same institution would help to retain first-generation college students, acclimate these students to graduate school earlier through the introduction of graduate coursework to be used in an undergraduate program, and reduce their course totals at both program levels.

The findings of this study also support the research that students, especially first-generation college students who are more resilient, recognize earlier the advantages of an advanced degree (Bowman et al., 2015). With focused resources such as peer interactions, faculty engagement, academic work that challenges them, and an academic setting that welcomes them, they adapt to the higher education environment and succeed (Hardre & Hackett, 2015; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011). As graduate student admission practices trend toward more holistic methods of applicant review, these types of "soft skills", for example resilience and self-efficacy, may become more valuable to admission committees as predictive markers for academic success.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this research study, combined with the following recommendations for future research, have far-reaching implications for educators. This study presented an in-depth focus on the interactions among the constructs of academic self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and persistence strategies that adult first-generation master's students attribute to their decision to pursue the master's degree. A review of the findings suggests several new directions for areas of additional research on the adult first-generation master's student. Four primary recommendations, based upon the outcomes of this study, are reviewed. Because the self-qualified group of first-generation master's students in this study was so highly competitive and academically high performing, the recommendations are being made for future research to extend and enhance the study of this compelling underrepresented student group.

The first recommendation would be a comparison study of adult first-generation college students. Students who pursue a master's degree program within the ten-year benchmark of their bachelor's graduation and those first-generation college students who choose not to pursue the master's degree would represent the two student groups. The insight to be gained from this study would include motivations, the value of early academic experiences, and reasons for academic persistence. Another new avenue of research would be to study those adult first-generation college students who were admitted provisionally to graduate school. Because provisional graduate admission review is completed for students typically with less than an earned 3.0 grade point average from their undergraduate work, it would be helpful to evaluate whether academic progress in the bachelor's degree had any impact on graduate school persistence.

Based on the findings from this research study, the data indicate that a comparison study of the current group of adult first-generation master's students to a group of comparable graduate students who dropped out or left graduate school would be useful. This last group of students is difficult to identify and track because universities typically do not maintain current contact information for students who have disconnected from the institution. Nonetheless, it would be helpful to the research base to know the reasons why these students chose to leave or were asked to leave the graduate program. An ancillary recommendation would be to conduct a comparison study between adult first-generation college students performing well academically in their master's program and those who are not performing well academically in the master's program.

This study also offered insight into adult first-generation master's students who enrolled in the same institution for both degrees. A final recommendation would, therefore, be to compare students who begin their educational journey at the two-year college and persist to the master's level with those students who begin at the four-year institution before enrolling in graduate school. The present study identified more than half of the participants as having enrolled in the same institution for both degrees, assessing that this helped in their decision to pursue graduate school. The students' levels of institutional well-being and knowledge were higher, they understood institutional practices, and generally felt more comfortable having been in the same school for a longer period.

Conclusion

With declining college enrollments nationally, annual state budget cuts to higher education, institutional closings, and alternative enrollment opportunities for the international student population, exploring new ways to recruit and retain 25% of the undergraduate student population for graduate school in the United States would be a pragmatic strategy to adopt—now. Educators, mentors, advisors, administrators, and faculty members can use the findings in this study to help with future course and program development, graduate course delivery platform options, marketing themes for targeted student populations, and graduate student retention strategies.

The findings of this research study have inferences for many stakeholders across the higher education spectrum. Understanding how academic self-efficacy evolves for the first-generation college student and influences academic persistence for these students to pursue the master's degree will assist all educational stakeholders with strategies to help prepare undergraduate students for graduate level work. Knowing the complexity of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that are critical to the success of the adult first-generation college student's success in pursuing the master's degree will also assist in the effort to recruit and retain graduate students. Indeed, understanding the aspirational ethos of the adult first-generation college student who pursues the master's degree has marked and scalable implications.

APPENDIX A: RATIONALE FOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND ONE-ON-ONE
OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW PROCESS

Rationale for Interview Questions and One-On-One Open-Ended Interview Process

Interview Process Question	Impacting Motivation, Challenge, or Factor	Source
1. When did you know you were going to college?	Pride, wanting to be different, wanting to do better, professional work, higher salary, social strata improvements, hearing "you're going to college"	Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Vargas, 2004
2. Describe your perception of your level of preparedness for college. If not prepared or minimally prepared, what was your plan?	Motivations, not letting others down, family support, mentors and influence, investment from others, avoidance of another life choice	Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Ishitani, 2006; Mehta et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2003; Stieha, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996; Vargas, 2004
3. Do you believe that you can handle challenges if you are willing to work hard?	Self-efficacy, confidence, independence, goal setting, effort over ability, mastery experiences	Bandura, 1997 and 2001; Bowman et al., 2015; Davis, 2010; Dembo & Seli, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Garza, Bain, & Kupczynski, 2014; Ormrod, 2008; Pajares, 1996; Stieha, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996; Valentine et al., 2004; Zimmerman, 1995
4. What made you decide to enroll in graduate school?	Professional goals, salary improvements, social strata, peers, supervisors, motivations, academic aspirations, ambition, conviction, persistence	Baum & Steele, 2017; Baird, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Engle, 2007; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Hardre & Hackett, 2015; Knowles, 1998 & 2005; Landrum, 2010; Pew, 2007; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003; Tate et al., 2015; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014; Williams, 2005
5. Describe for me what the first few weeks of graduate school were like for you.	Isolation, fear, safe in the academic environment, at home or at odds, tethered to school or untethered from family, being an imposter, situational differences, self-efficacy	Bandura, 1997 and 2001; Baum & Steele, 2017; Hegarty, 2011; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Landrum, 2010; Lunceford, 2011; Mullen et al., 2003; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Seay et al., 2008; Williams, 2005

Interview Process Question	Impacting Motivation, Challenge, or Factor	Source
6. Was your undergraduate experience different from your graduate school experience?	Pride, ability, success, self-efficacy, fear, isolation, "fish out of water" experience, overwhelming, positive, stimulating, encouraging	Baird, 1995; Hegarty, 2011; Deci & Ryan, 2000 and 2008; Olive, 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Polson, 2003; Stieha, 2010
7. What personal traits or experiences do you believe have impacted your academic success?	Confidence, fear of failure, ambition, teachers, professors, family, friends, work groups, tenacity, grit, ability, persistence, effort, unwilling to give up, competence	Bandura, 1997; Davis, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2000 and 2002; Dembo & Seli, 2008; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Knowles, 1998 & 2005; Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997; Mehta et al., 2011; Ormrod, 2008; Pajares, 1996; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Tate et al., 2015; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014; Valentine et al., 2004; Vuong et al., 2010; Zimmerman, 1995
8. Do you feel that your first-generation status has affected your graduate school enrollment?	Success in being the first, all eyes on you, reliance, persistence, stress, higher expectations, confidence builder, motivating factor	Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Hardre & Hackett, 2015; Lunceford, 2011; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Polson, 2003; Portnoi & Kwong, 2011; Tate et al., 2015; Thayer, 2000; Williams 2005
9. What factors do you believe influenced your academic accomplishments?	Self, family, peers, work groups, supervisors, teachers, mentors, children, significant others, wealth, professional growth, advancement	Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Knowles, 1998 & 2005; Mehta et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2003; Stieha, 2010; Striplin, 1999
10. What is it like to be the first person in your family to attend college and be in graduate school?	Pride, jealousy, confidence, accomplishment, imposter syndrome, acceptance, self-efficacy, persistence, ability, reward	Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Mehta et al, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Payne, 2007; Rodriguez, 2003; Striplin, 1999; Terenzini, 1996

APPENDIX B: EMAIL ANNOUNCEMENT TO ALL ENROLLED CCIE GRADUATE
STUDENTS

Date

Dear CCIE Graduate Student:

My name is Andrea Withington and I am a doctoral student enrolled in the College of Community Innovation and Education (CCIE). I am conducting a research study to learn more about first-generation students who pursue the master's degree in CCIE and to gain a better understanding of the first-generation student experience. Within the next week, you may expect to receive a First-Generation Master's Student questionnaire link from me. The purpose of the questionnaire is to help me understand primarily whether you identify as a first-generation master's student, followed-up with some very basic demographic information that helps me to understand who our first-generation graduate student population is at UCF.

The questionnaire is being sponsored by the College of Community Innovation and Education, the college in which your current master's program is housed. Your selection occurred because you are currently enrolled in a master's degree in CCIE. Your responses to the questionnaire, if you choose to participate, will help me to determine the number of graduate students who identify as first-generation in the college and whether you would be willing to be contacted for a more in depth, one-on-one interview about your first-generation student experiences thus far.

Thank you in advance for your consideration to participate. If you should have any questions, I would welcome a discussion by phone (407-823-2439) or by email, [Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu.](mailto:Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu)

Respectfully,

Andrea Withington
Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu

407-823-2439

APPENDIX C: EMAIL INVITATION TO ALL ENROLLED CCIE GRADUATE STUDENTS

Date

Dear CCIE Graduate Student:

When we are the first in our family to earn a bachelor's degree, we exceed expectations. We want to make our families proud and ourselves more accomplished. And then we hear about going to graduate school and think, can I do that? We do so with the understanding that we may need some help along the way and may have questions about graduate school but we will determine, at some point, that earning the master's degree is certainly within our reach.

If you are a first-generation college student active in a master's program, I am writing to ask for your help with my research study. If you choose to participate in the study, I am asking that you provide me with your experiences both leading up to and as a first-generation master's student in your UCF graduate program in the College of Community Innovation and Education (CCIE). Being a first-generation college student active in a master' program in CCIE is the only requirement you must meet to participate in the research study.

If you choose to participate, please complete the questionnaire provided at this link in Qualtrics: First Generation Master's Student Questionnaire. Your responses, which should take no more than 15 minutes of your time, are voluntary and will be kept confidential. I obtained your email address from the CCIE Graduate Affairs Office, who confirmed your status as a "currently active master's degree student" at UCF. Your name will not be included on any mailing lists, your answers will not be associated with your mailing address or graduate program, and you will not be contacted again once the study concludes. If you prefer not to participate, please indicate this by responding to the first statement in the questionnaire that you "do not wish to participate" and include your name.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to join me for a 60 minute one-on-one interview at your convenience, followed by a two week journaling exercise where you will be asked to share your experiences as a first-generation master's student at UCF. In appreciation of your willingness to share your experiences, you will receive one $5 food and beverage gift card for participating in the on-campus interview and another $5 food and beverage gift card for participating in the online journaling exercise. Both gift cards will be delivered directly to you subsequent to your participation in each segment of the research study.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study at any time in the process, please feel free to contact me by phone, 407-823-2439, or by email at Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu. You may also contact my doctoral chair, Dr. Thomas Cox, at Thomas.Cox@ucf.edu. By sharing just a few minutes of your time, you will be helping me and future first-generation graduate students at UCF by adding to our understanding of academic motivations and persistence at the advanced educational level. I hope that you anticipate being selected to share your experiences in the study by completing the questionnaire and certainly look forward to receiving your responses.

Respectfully,

Andrea Withington
Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu
407-823-2439

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE IN QUALTRICS

1. Student Name: _____

2. Are you a ***first-generation master's student***? (Note, for purposes of this study, first-generation master's student is defined as **a student currently enrolled in a master's program for whom neither parent nor legal guardian attended any college**):

   YES ___   NO ___   NOT SURE ___

If you are **NOT a first-generation student, you do not need to continue the completion of this questionnaire. Thank you for your time.

****

3. What is your gender?

   Female ___   Male ___   Transgender ___

4. What is your current age? _____

5. Please indicate your marital status:

   Married ___   Partnered ___   Single ___   Widowed ___

6. What is your race? _____

7. What is your country of birth?

   _____

8. From which college or university did you earn your bachelor's degree:

   _____

9. Please list any other schools you attended during your undergraduate career:

   _____

   _____

9. What was your undergraduate major of study:

   _____

10. What is your current graduate program of study:

    _____

11. What was your undergraduate GPA upon graduation: _____

12. What is your current graduate GPA: _____

13. How many semesters have you been enrolled in the graduate program: _____

14. What is the country of birth of your parents:

mother _____

father _____

15. What is the highest level of education of your parents or legal guardians:

mother _____

father _____

16. What is the highest level of education achieved by your siblings?

sister(s): _____

brother(s): _____

If you would be willing to participate in a one-on-one interview and follow-up journaling exercise in the next few weeks regarding your experiences as a first-generation master's student at UCF, please include your contact information below. I will use this information to set-up a convenient time and location for the interview. The interview should last no more than 60 minutes. The subsequent journaling exercise will be conducted in an online platform.

Student name:

_____

Student phone or contact number:

_____

Student's UCF student email address:

_____

APPENDIX E: EMAIL TO CCIE STUDENT RESPONDENTS SELECTED TO
PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

DATE

Dear CCIE Graduate Student:

On September 27, 2019, you were invited to complete a questionnaire about whether you are a first-generation master's student at UCF. Thank you so much for completing and returning the questionnaire. I am happy to share that you have been selected to participate in the study!

I am writing to you today to set-up our one-on-one interview, at your convenience, to be scheduled during the next three weeks. I can meet with you in my office, ED 115, I can make arrangements to schedule a conference room in the Education Complex Monday – Friday any time between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, or can meet with you at the Downtown Campus. If you are pressed for time, we may also conduct the interview by phone. I will do my best to work around your schedule, so please provide me with some dates and times that work for you.

I do know how busy you are as a graduate student and appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. I believe working with our first-generation graduate students is incredibly important and I expect the data gathered from this study to help improve graduate student services and resources in the College.

Again, thank you for your consideration and feel free to email me, Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu, or call me directly with any questions (407-823-2439). My dissertation chair and faculty program coordinator is Dr. Thomas Cox, Thomas.Cox@ucf.edu, if you wish to reach out to him directly.

Respectfully,

Andrea Withington
Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu

407-823-2439

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW
QUESTIONS

Script: Welcome and thank you for your participation today in this research study on adult first-generation students active in the College of Community Innovation and Education who are pursuing a master's degree. My name is Andrea Withington and I am a doctoral student at the University of Central Florida conducting a study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership.

Thank you for completing the initial demographic questionnaire. The interview taking place today includes 10 questions and is designed to take approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded, and I would like your permission to tape record this interview. I do this to ensure that I am capturing what you say accurately and will document correctly what you have conveyed throughout the interview. If at any time you wish to stop the interview or discontinue the use of the audio-recorder, please let me know.

After all of the interviews have taken place, each participant will then be asked to take part in a follow-up exercise. The exercise consists of participants responding to researcher email prompts about being a first-generation master's student by typing their responses in a Qualtrics form management system. Qualtrics is a university site-licensed, web-based software tool that allows for easy question and response navigation, as well as easy sign-on using your UCF credentials. There will be two email prompts over a period of two weeks, one new prompt per week. Each participant will respond to the same prompt in a Qualtrics platform provided by the researcher. This electronic journal exercise is designed to allow study participants to reflect privately and at length on their first-generation student experiences.

The interview and journal questions will focus on the different aspects of what it is like to be an adult first-generation student enrolled in a master's degree program. The focus will be your experiences as a first-generation student both as an undergraduate and now graduate student and your motivations for pursuing an advanced degree. The purpose of this study is to help us understand what behaviors or attitudes may be predictive among first-generation students who decide to enroll in graduate school and whether the first-generation student status remains relevant at the graduate level. Because I want to understand the first-generation student experience, I encourage you to be honest with me so that I get a clear picture of your challenges and triumphs. Please consider this an opportunity to tell your story so that others may learn from your experience.

Each participant throughout the study shall have ensured anonymity. All of your responses are confidential. Your identity will be not revealed in any of my study reports, including the final published work. Details about the study, confidentiality, ethical considerations, and approval to conduct the study are outlined in the explanation of this research project.

Please take a few moments to read through the Explanation of Research and indicate if you are willing to proceed by participating in the interview. *(Allow time for participant to read through the details and ask any questions).* I remind you that your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You may withdraw your participation in this study at any time without

consequence. If you need to take a break during the interview or wish to stop at any time, please just let me know.

Before we begin with the interview, do you have any questions?

If you are ready to begin then, with your permission, I'm going to turn on the audio recorder and we'll get started with the interview.

Icebreaker to get to know the participant and elicit details on his or her background: Please tell me a little about yourself, including your family's history with higher education, your experiences before and during college, and your overall impression of your college experiences.

IQ 1. When did you know you were going to college?

IQ 2. Describe your perception of your level of preparedness for college. If not prepared or minimally prepared, what was your plan?

IQ 3. Do you believe that you can handle challenges if you are willing to work hard?

IQ 4. What made you decide to enroll in graduate school?

IQ 5. Describe for me what the first few weeks of graduate school were like for you.

IQ 6. Was your undergraduate experience different from your graduate experience?

IQ 7. What personal traits or experiences do you believe have impacted your academic success?

IQ 8. Do you feel that your first-generation student experience has affected your graduate school enrollment?

IQ 9. What factors do you believe have influenced your academic accomplishments?

IQ 10. What is it like to be the first person in your family to attend college and be in graduate school?

Is there any experience or feeling that I didn't ask you about that you would like to share at this time? Any experience that you consider significant to your first-generation student status that I did not ask you about?

Conclusion:

        We have now reached the end of our personal interview. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and agreeing to participate and share your experiences throughout this interview. Your participation today will contribute to a research area that is currently inadequate for the recent growth in first-generation student enrollment. For your willingness to contribute and add to the research, I am most grateful and appreciative. In appreciation of sharing your first-generation master's student experiences with me today, I am giving you a $5 food and beverage gift card as reviewed earlier in the study.

        I will be following-up through email with you in the near future regarding your participation in the journaling exercise. Once this second phase of the research study ends, I will be following-up with each of you in the next few weeks through email with a transcript of our one-on-one interview. This is done so that I can ensure your experiences have been recorded and described accurately and as you intended them.

Will you please confirm with me the best email address at which I may contact you?

If you should have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email. And again, thank you so much for your time and effort—know that your experiences are valued. Have a great day!

APPENDIX G: JOURNALING PROTOCOL AND SEMI-STRUCTURED
JOURNAL QUESTIONS

Journal entries can be represented by images, photographs, news stories, social media entries, drafted text responses, or any other type of document that you believe represents your reaction and experience to the weekly questions. You will receive two questions per week for two weeks for a total of 4 questions. You have the entire two weeks to respond to all four questions. The questions will be emailed to your school email account through a Qualtrics link provided in the email.

Week 1, JQ1:

If you could offer any advice to another first-generation college student considering graduate school, what kinds of tips would you share? What do you know now that you wish you would have known then?

Week 1, JQ2:

Some first-generation students talk about feeling like a "fish out of water" and not having friends in graduate school. Discuss whether you had these feelings, whether you overcame them, and what kinds of things you did or did not do to fit in.

Week 2, JQ3:

Reflect on your undergraduate experience and now your graduate experience. Has going to college and being the first in your family to do so changed your relationship with your parents and/or siblings? Has going to college changed your relationships with friends who did not go to college? Do you think differently about yourself now because of your college enrollment? Do they?

Week 2, JQ4:

Because I have asked you to reflect upon your first-generation student status and graduate school enrollment, please share the reasons or characteristics related to why you believe you have been successful in college, both undergraduate and graduate. Are you confident in your abilities to achieve your goals? What has encouraged you to persist with your academic goals?

APPENDIX H: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

Institutional Review Board

FWA00000351
IRB00001138
Office of Research

12201 Research Parkway

Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

September 18, 2019

Dear Andrea Withington:

On 9/18/2019, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study, Exempt Category
Title:	Aspirational Ethos: An Exploration of Self-Efficacy and Motivation of First-Generation Students Who Pursue the Master's Degree
Investigator:	Andrea Withington
IRB ID:	STUDY00000797
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

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 so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Adrienne Showman Designated
Reviewer

APPENDIX I: EXPLANATION FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: Aspirational Ethos: An Exploration of Self-Efficacy and Motivation of First-Generation Students Who Pursue the Master's Degree

Principal Investigator: Andrea Withington

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Thomas Cox

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

The purpose of this study is to explore the defining experiences that adult first-generation college students enrolled in CCIE master's programs at the University of Central Florida attribute to their academic persistence and to examine whether the experiences of being a first-generation college student remain significant for students at the master's level.

The initial emailed questionnaire to determine your eligibility, including your affirmative response that you meet the study's definition of being a first-generation college student active in a master's program in CCIE, should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you are randomly selected from this initial participant pool, you will be invited to participate in a one-on-one interview either in person or by phone and one 2-week online journaling exercise where you will share your experiences as a first-generation master's student at the University of Central Florida. The interview will last no more than 60 minutes and will take place in person on either the UCF main or Downtown campus or by phone/Skype. The journaling exercise will require two online responses per week for two weeks and will not require being in a specific location but will require access to the internet. The duration of the weekly online response is up to you but is not expected to take more than 30 minutes per question, per week. If you take part in this study, you will receive a $5 food and beverage gift card at the conclusion of the interview and another $5 food and beverage gift card delivered to you at the conclusion of the online journaling exercise.

Your interview will be audio recorded and the researcher is the only person who will have access to the recording. If you do not want to be audio recorded, you may not participate in this study. If you are recorded, the recording will be kept in a locked, safe place for five years and then permanently and safely destroyed. When transcribing your interview recording and reviewing your journal responses, the researcher will remove your personal identifying information. No personal identifiers will be shared in this study. Your confidentiality and privacy will be maintained at all times.

You are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in this study at any time without prejudice or penalty. Your decision to participate or not participate in this study will in no way affect your relationship with UCF, including continued enrollment, grades, employment or your relationship with the individuals who may have an interest in this study.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem: If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, the researcher, Andrea Withington, EdD Candidate, Educational Leadership, College of Community Innovation and Education, (407) 823-2439, Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu or Dr. Thomas Cox, Faculty Supervisor and Program Coordinator, Department of Educational Leadership, 407-823-6714, ED 315Q, Thomas.Cox@ucf.edu.

IRB contact about your rights in this study or to report a complaint: If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or have concerns about the conduct of this study, please contact Institutional Review Board (IRB), University of Central Florida, Office of Research, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901, or email irb@ucf.edu.

APPENDIX J: THANK YOU EMAIL FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPATION AND REVIEW
OF JOURNALING PROTOCOL, WEEK #1

DATE

Dear Student Participant:

Thank you again for meeting with me recently to share your experiences as a first-generation student enrolled in a master's degree. I so appreciate your time and honesty in sharing your experiences with me.

We are concluding the interview phase of the study and are now moving into the journal phase. By clicking on the link below,

you will find two questions to be answered about your experiences as a first-generation student. You will have one week to respond to these two questions and then next week, I will follow-up by sending the link to the final two questions. Your written responses should take no longer than 30 minutes. The electronic journal exercise is designed to allow you to reflect privately and at length on your first-generation student experience. As with the interview, please feel free to respond honestly.

All responses on the journal entries are confidential—your identity will not be revealed in any published work and I will not follow-up with you for additional details once the study concludes. At the conclusion of the journaling exercise in two weeks, participants will receive another $5 food and beverage gift card.

I believe that working with our first-generation graduate students is incredibly important and I expect the responses to the interviews and now the journals to help improve graduate student services and resources in the College. Again, thank you for your consideration and feel free to email me, Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu, or call me directly with any questions (407-823-2439). My dissertation chair and faculty program coordinator is Dr. Thomas Cox, Thomas.Cox@ucf.edu, if you wish to reach out to him directly.

Respectfully,

Andrea Withington
Andrea.Withington@ucf.edu

407-823-2439

APPENDIX K: ALIGNING TARGET DATA WITH THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND
METHODS OF DATA ANLYSIS

Aligning Target Data with the Interview Questions and Methods of Data Analysis

Data Sought	*Interview Questions*	*Data Analysis Methods*
To reveal family and participant awareness and attitude toward college.	1. When did you know you were going to college?	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation
To gauge participant self-efficacy and attributions of success to either ability or effort	2. Describe your perception of your level of preparedness for college. If not prepared or minimally prepared, what was your plan?	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation
To reveal participant beliefs regarding self-efficacy and the differences between attitude and aptitude.	3. Do you believe that you can handle challenges if you are willing to work hard?	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation
To gauge what adult participant believes is important to their academic motivation.	4. What made you decide to enroll in graduate school?	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation
For participant to define the challenges experienced going to graduate school— what may have tested or promoted motivation to persist.	5. Describe for me what the first few weeks of graduate school were life for you.	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation
To determine if there are factors (e.g. age, roles, program, intent, readiness) in the educational experiences that are different. Perhaps strategies have been learned or bad	6. Was your undergraduate experience different from your graduate school experience?	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation

Data Sought	*Interview Questions*	*Data Analysis Methods*
habits have been eliminated that impact motivation to persist.		
To ascertain what participant believes influences their personal academic success, what forces or personal traits have been key to their persistence and motivation.	7. What personal traits or experiences do you believe have impacted your academic success?	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation
To gauge participant awareness of FGS status through educational progression.	8. Do you feel that your first-generation status has affected your graduate school enrollment?	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation
To ascertain participants' understanding of personal accomplishment and determination, including where they believe this drive comes from.	9. What factors do you believe influenced your academic accomplishments?	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation
To gauge what is the participants' experience by moving outside of family circles and known cultural dynamics—is this a motivating factor or deterrent?	10. What is it like to be the first person in your family to attend college and be in graduate school?	Data organization and interpretation, coding, categorization of themes, conceptual framework, triangulation, member checking, data summary analysis and presentation

APPENDIX L: ALIGNING TARGET DATA WITH THE JOURNALING QUESTIONS AND
METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Aligning Target Data with the Journaling Questions and Methods of Data Analysis

Data Sought	*Journal Question*	*Data Analysis Procedure(s)*
To understand what the FGS participant has learned from the experience, what the participant deems important to relay to others, to learn whether what is shared is seen as building confidence or as a warning for things to avoid	**Week 1, JQ #1**: If you could offer any advice to another first-generation college student considering graduate school, what kinds of tips would you share? What do you know now that you wish you would have known then?	Document Analysis • Content analysis • Thematic coding • Frequencies • Triangulation of data • Comparative analysis
To gauge the presence or further development of participant self-efficacy, to learn the motivations and specific factors that influence participant academic persistence, to understand those factors of andragogy that promoted continued enrollment, and whether/how learning engagement was experienced as a challenge	**Week 1, JQ #2**: Some first-generation students talk about feeling like a "fish out of water" and not having friends in graduate school. Discuss whether you had these feelings, whether you overcame them, and what kinds of things you did or did not do to fit in.	Document Analysis • Content analysis • Thematic coding • Frequencies • Triangulation of data • Comparative analysis
To gauge self-efficacy, to understand participant motivational factors as intrinsic or extrinsic for continuing in higher education	**Week 2, JQ #3**: Reflect on your undergraduate experience and now your graduate experience. Has going to college and being the first in your family to do so changed your relationship with your parents and/or siblings? Has going to college changed your relationships with friends who did not go to college? Do you think differently about yourself now because of your college enrollment? Do they?	Document Analysis • Content analysis • Thematic coding • Frequencies • Triangulation of data • Comparative analysis

Data Sought	*Journal Question*	*Data Analysis Procedure(s)*
To gauge participant self-efficacy, to learn the factors of motivation for higher education both intrinsic and extrinsic, to learn whether the reasons for participant success are believed to be similar or different for undergraduate and graduate, to understand how the participants view their persistence in higher education	**Week 2, JQ #4**: Because I have asked you to reflect upon your first-generation student status and graduate school enrollment, please share the reasons or characteristics related to why you believe you have been successful in college, both undergraduate and graduate. Are you confident in your abilities to achieve your goals? What has encouraged you to persist with your academic goals?	Document Analysis • Content analysis • Thematic coding • Frequencies • Triangulation of data • Comparative analysis

APPENDIX M : RESEARCH QUESTIONS ALIGNED WITH DATA SOURCE AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Research Questions Aligned with Data Source and Method of Analysis

Research Question	Data Source(s)	(IQ) Inquiry	Analysis
RQ1: Do elements of being a first-generation undergraduate student influence the student experience at the master's level? If so, what are those factors and how do they influence the master's student experience in graduate school? (self-efficacy, isolation, not belonging, imposter syndrome, motivations for professional goals; competence; social modeling)	Interview (semi-structured) IQ's 6, 8, 9, & 10 Observation Journaling exercise (JQ 1)	**IQ:** Was your undergraduate experience different from your graduate school experience? Do you feel that your FGS experience has affected your graduate school enrollment? What is it like to be the first person in your family to attend college and be in graduate school? What factors do you believe influenced your academic accomplishments?	The primary objective of phenomenological research methodology is to extract and try to understand the meaning and essence of the lived experiences of a person or people who share or similarly experience a specific phenomenon (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010; Creswell, 2014). • conceptual framework • open coding • thematic analysis Emergent coding using Colaizzi's method (Colaizzi, 1978; Creswell & Poth, 2018).
RQ2: What are the past and current experiences of adult first-generation master's degree students who are enrolled in a master's degree? (self-efficacy: cultural, familial, institutional, personal; motivational factors; self-directedness; conviction; situational differences; need to know; faculty; culture; sense of	Interview (semi-structured) IQ's 4, 5, & 7 Observation Journaling exercise (JQ 2)	**IQ:** What made you decide to enroll in graduate school? What personal traits or experiences do you believe have impacted your academic success? Describe for me what the first few weeks of graduate school was like for you.	• conceptual framework • open coding • thematic analysis The primary purpose of journaling in phenomenological research is to document and have participants reflect upon their experiences as a way of thinking, learning, and understanding—it is a blend of personal reflections, experiences, and an account

Research Question	Data Source(s)	(IQ) Inquiry	Analysis
belonging; autonomy; brining experience to learning)			of events (Chabon and Lee-Wilkerson, 2006). • conceptual framework • open coding • thematic analysis
RQ3: In what ways, if any, do self-efficacy and motivational factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) influence the decision of first-generation students to persist toward the master's degree? (self-efficacy, academic motivation, persistence)	Interview (semi-structured) IQ's 1, 2, & 3 Observation Journaling exercise (JQ's 3 & 4)	**IQ:** When did you know you were going to college? Describe your perception of your level of preparedness for college. If not prepared or minimally prepared, what was your plan? Do you believe that you can handle challenges if you are willing to work hard?	The data from real world experiences can be used to understand the unique context of the participants and the influences on their experiences, all to assess the commonalties across participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). • conceptual framework • open coding • thematic analysis

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