


Fall 2016

# A Qualitative Exploration of First-Generation Student Experiences at a Rural Community College

Rebecca Margrete Evans  
*Old Dominion University*

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A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF FIRST-GENERATION  
STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT A RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

Rebecca Margrete Evans  
B.S. May 1996, Southern Connecticut State University  
M.S.B.E. May 1997, Southern Connecticut State University

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY  
November 2016

Approved by:

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Dana Burnett (Director)

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Mitchell Williams (Member)

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Alan Schwitzer (Member)

## **ABSTRACT**

### **A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT A RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

Rebecca Margrete Evans  
Old Dominion University, 2016  
Director Dr. Dana Burnett

First-generation students comprise 36% of U.S. community college enrollments but struggle to remain in school to earn a college credential. First-generation students are less likely to enroll in college and have a higher probability for attrition than continuing-generation students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how first-generation students attending a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States perceived that their experiences impacted their academic and nonacademic success. This study replicated and extended the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) study that explored the experiences of first-generation students attending a large, diverse research university.

This phenomenological study utilized focus groups to explore the experiences of 21 first-generation rural community college students. Focus group interviews were guided by four research questions designed to explore what experiences students perceived to have impacted their academic and nonacademic success. This study further explored what challenges first-generation students perceived they faced compared to non-first-generation students, and what personal factors impacted their college success. Developing an understanding of how first-generation students perceive their lived experiences impact their academic and nonacademic success can help college leaders design support services that will aid efforts to increase retention.

The findings from this study confirmed past research revealing that a lack of social capital, academic preparation, financial resources, and family support challenged this population

of students in their transition to college. However study results contradict past research which offers part-time enrollment as increasing the risk of first-generation student attrition.

Additionally, although this current study's findings support the findings of the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) study, academic integration in terms of institutional fit and experiences related to access to resources and support services differed between the two samples of first-generation students.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my husband and best friend, Michael Evans. You have supported all of my goals and dreams ever since we met twenty years ago. You encouraged me to pursue my dream of earning my Ph.D. and I know in my heart had I never met you I would not have achieved this goal. As a first-generation student, very similar to the students in this dissertation, family is very important, and your support and encouragement motivated me to pursue my dream. Thank you for being my husband, cheerleader, and my best friend. To my daughter Heather who watched me struggle to earn my Bachelor and Master degrees while being a single mother, I thank you for understanding when I had to go to class at night and leave you with the babysitter. I believe your appreciation for education is a result of being part of my nontraditional journey through higher education. To my parents, Marianne and Frank you were the perfect example of the parents of a first-generation student. Although you never felt confident enough to help me in any of my decisions to attend college, return to college, or pursue a terminal degree, you always supported me. I grew up knowing that I could do anything I set my mind to because of both of you. I thank you for allowing me to become an independent and strong woman. Finally, to Meg and Abbey who spent many days and nights at my feet while I wrote papers, did research, and pursued my dream, thank you for being patient and providing me with such sweet, unconditional love.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have contributed to the successful completion of this dissertation. Dr. Lee Mynatt and Dr. Paul Lee encouraged me to take risks and keep learning. They were wonderful mentors and I thank them for helping me to see the impact we, as community college educators, have on the lives of our students. Dr. James Perkins also had a profound impact on my view of leadership. Dr. Perkins led by example and is the definition of a true servant leader. By working with Dr. Perkins and having the opportunity to team teach with him for two years I had a front row seat to see how the power of servant leadership inspires others. Dr. Perkins was an amazing and inspirational role model. Finally, Dr. John Downey inspired this success through insight, encouragement, and providing me the opportunity to grow as an educator. As a result of these four educators and administrators, I now find myself achieving a life's goal.

Dr. Dana Burnett thank you for being the guiding light in my choice of a dissertation topic and by agreeing to be my committee chair. What began as a meeting over coffee at Borjos resulted in my finding a topic and excitedly beginning this dissertation journey. Dr. Burnett, you were always an email away, patient, encouraging, and calming. I am so grateful for your guidance. Dr. Mitchell Williams thank you for being my APA guru and a wonderful mentor. I have learned so much from you over the past two years. Dr. Alan Schwitzer, thank you for agreeing to be on my dissertation committee and always having that you-can-do attitude. My committee members continually helped me to believe that I could do this! I am so thankful for your expertise and mentorship. Dr. Christopher Glass, thank you for being a wonderful and supportive academic adviser. Your encouragement and assistance over the past three years have been incredible and your belief in me (from our first telephone interview) inspired this success.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One of the fastest growing student populations on American college campuses is students who are the first in their families to attend college (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). First-generation students comprise 36% of U.S. community college enrollments (AACC, 2014; NCES, 2015) but struggle to remain in school to earn a college credential (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Garcia, 2010). First-generation students pose considerable concerns over retention for colleges and universities (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Gibson & Slate, 2010). D'Amico and Dika (2013) confirmed first-generation status as a possible barrier to academic success in college. Gibson and Slate (2010) found first-generation students are less likely to enroll in college and have a higher probability for attrition than continuing-generation students. The growing presence of this student population, as well as the challenges they experience in completing college, inspired this study. The information provided through this study of students' experiences in college could help college administrators understand how to assist first-generation rural community college students to succeed.

#### **Related research**

Engle and Tinto (2008) found that the 23% success rate of first-generation community college students was comparable to non-first-generation students in earning an associate degree or certificate within six years of graduating from high school. First-generation students are more likely to enroll at a two-year college and attend part-time (Chen, 2005). However, only 9% of first-generation students starting their educations at two-year colleges obtained a bachelor's degree within six years of graduating from high school compared to 29% of non-first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Additionally, six-year outcomes reveal that 51% of low-income

first-generation students leave higher education without a degree or certificate compared to only 31% of non-first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Although the success or failure of first-generation college students has begun to receive greater attention, a better understanding of how higher education can assist first-generation students to succeed is needed (Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). Furthermore, while research on the experiences of first-generation students on four-year college campuses has increased over the past two decades, research focused on the community college environment, as it affects first-generation students, remains sparse (Majer, 2009).

First-generation students are at a disadvantage compared to their continuing-generation peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005; D'Allegro & Kerns, 2010; Garcia, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2003). First-generation students are less likely to attend college and are at a higher risk of dropping out than their continuing-generation peers (Gibson & Slate, 2010). Parents of first-generation students lack the social capital gained through the college experience (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle et al., 2006; Sy et al., 2012). This lack of social capital results in the parents of first-generation students being less supportive of the educational pursuits of their children (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2012).

First-generation students lack the parental guidance on how to prepare for and navigate higher education that benefits continuing generation students (Engle et al., 2006; Garcia, 2010; Gofen 2009; Horn & Nunez, 2000; McConnell, 2000; Sy et al., 2012). Many parents of first-generation students reject their children's plans to pursue a college degree. This resistance is due to the fear of their children failing and apprehension over the cost of higher education (McConnell, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996; Vargas, 2004). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) study highlighted the positive relationship between parental involvement and educational aspirations.

Approximately 52% of first-generation students come from lower socioeconomic families lacking the financial resources to attend college (Chen, 2005; Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Many families of first-generation students may question the benefit of a college education (Engle et al., 2006; Majer, 2009). As first-generation students lack knowledge of the financial aid process, many students struggle to pay for college even though they are eligible for financial aid (Engle et al., 2006).

First-generation students arrive at college less prepared academically than their non-first-generation peers (Chen 2005; Choy, 2001; D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Engle et al., 2006; Warburton, Bugarin, Nunez, & Carroll, 2001). Sixty-two percent of first-generation students require remedial coursework before they can begin to take college level courses (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation students report taking less rigorous courses in high school than non-first-generation students (Choy 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000). Many first-generation students also report the lack of academic planning in high school for entry into higher education. This lack of preparation results in many first-generation students having poor study skills and lower GPAs entering college than their non-first-generation peers (Engle et al., 2006; Majer, 2009; Warburton et al., 2001).

Parents of continuing-generation students begin to prepare their children for college early in their academic careers (Majer, 2009). This understanding of the rigors and requirements of college is an advantage for non-first-generation students even before they begin their college experience (Majer, 2009). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found that inclusion of parents in the educational process reduces “college culture shock” and increases educational aspirations of students.

First-generation students work more hours than their non-first-generation peers (Chen 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Many first-generation students do not pursue financial aid to pay for college or have family obligations that require them to work while attending college (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Seventy-five percent of first-generation students work while attending college (Ishitani, 2006). The need to work results in first-generation students spending less time studying, increasing the risk of poor academic performance (Bryant, 2001; Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2003). A strong predictor of first-generation student attrition is whether a first-generation student is employed while in college (Bryant, 2001). Working more hours results in first-generation students taking fewer credit hours per semester (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). The need to attend college at a level less than full-time results in first-generation students taking longer to graduate and increases the risk of non-completion (Center for Community College Engagement [CCCSE], 2009; Chen, 2005).

Finally, first-generation college students are more likely than non-first-generation students to live off campus (Chen, 2005; D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). As many first-generation students work full time while attending college, their ability to engage in social activities on campus is limited (D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Lack of social connection with the college and their peers results in first-generation students being less involved in student organizations and extracurricular activities. This lack of social integration also results in students feeling more isolated than their peers (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) found student engagement affected persistence from the first to second year of college. Lack of social and academic integration has been studied and repeatedly supported as the main reason students drop out of college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Tinto, 1975; 1993).

The lack of success of first-generation students has garnered growing attention over the past two decades. Despite an increase in the number of enrollments, the number of first-generation students completing degrees or certifications remains low (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001). Growing research has attempted to uncover why first-generation students struggle in their pursuit of higher education. However, the majority of the research is focused on first-generation students attending four-year colleges. The research focused on first-generation students attending rural community colleges is scant (Majer, 2009).

The mission of community colleges is to offer open access for all students (Vaughan, 2006). Nationwide 922 (55%) of the 1,666 community colleges in the U.S. are classified as rural two-year colleges (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Seventy-five percent of first-generation students began their college education at two-year or for-profit colleges (Engle & Tinto, 2008). However, studies indicate first-generation students who begin college attending community colleges are more likely to drop out than first-generation students attending four-year colleges (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008). In light of the nationwide call for more credentials to be awarded and the growing pressure to connect college funding to performance, understanding why first-generation students persist or leave higher education has increased in importance.

Although numerous studies have been completed over the past 40 years attempting to answer the question of why college students drop out of college, the experiences of first-generation college students have only recently begun to be explored (Majer, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2003). The issue that exists in the literature that resulted in the need for my study is the gap in research focused on the experiences of first-generation rural community college students.



This study replicated and extended the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) study, which explored the experiences of first-generation students attending a large, diverse research university. Tukey (1969) stated, “confirmation comes from repetition”. Through the replication and extension of the Stansberry and Burnett study to include the experiences of first-generation students attending a rural community college, the findings of both studies can be compared. This comparison extends the research and offers insight as to whether the size, type or location of the institution affects the perceptions of first-generation students. Tinto (1993, 2006) offered that to promote student success, research must not focus on attrition but rather on student persistence. The findings of this study may help to explain why first-generation students attending community colleges persist less than first-generation students studying at four-year institutions (Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004)

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how first-generation students attending a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States perceived that their experiences impacted their academic and nonacademic success. Developing an understanding of how first-generation students perceive how their lived experiences impact their academic and nonacademic success will help college leaders design support services that will aid efforts to increase retention.

### **Research Questions**

1. What experiences do first-generation college students at a rural community college perceive impact their academic success?
2. What experiences do first-generation students at a rural community college perceive impact their nonacademic success?

3. What challenges do first-generation students attending a rural community college perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students?
4. What personal factors do first-generation students attending a rural community college perceive impact their college success?

This study addressed a gap in the literature by investigating the experiences of first-generation students attending a rural community college. This qualitative study explored how the academic and non-academic experiences of first-generation rural community college students are perceived by them to have impacted their academic success.

### **Research Design**

This study replicated and extended the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) study, which focused on first-generation students attending a large urban research institution. As the present study differed by focusing on first-generation students attending a rural community college, the research design, with minor adjustments, mirrored the design of the Stansberry and Burnett study.

This research study used a qualitative design to allow for a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-generation rural community college students and how these students perceive their lived experiences to have impacted their academic and nonacademic success. A qualitative research design provides useful data and depth in the understanding of the human experience (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Qualitative research evolves through the use of emerging questions and by collecting data in themes as the researcher attempts to interpret the meaning of the data (Hayes & Singh, 2012).

Phenomenological research “describes the meaning of the lived experiences of several individuals” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). The purpose of this current phenomenological study was to

expand the understanding of how first-generation rural community college students perceive their college experiences impact their academic and nonacademic success.

Focus groups were used to gather data from study participants. Focus groups allowed for the voices of all study participants to be maximized (Hays & Singh, 2012). This allowed the inquirer to collect data from students who have experienced the phenomena and use the data to create a “description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals” (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007, p. 252).

The research participants for this study were a sample of first-generation college students attending a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States. The sample did not include transfer in or international students. Students who met the first-generation status criteria and had completed at least 12 but no more than 24 credit hours and were not transfer in or international students were invited to participate as first-year students. Students who met the first-generation status criteria and had completed greater than 24 credit hours and were not transfer in or international students were invited to participate in the study as second-year students.

### **Definitions**

**Academic experiences:** The amount of time studying, course load, number of credit hours, grades, social interaction with peers, computer use, and reading and writing experiences (Pascarella et al., 2004).

**Academic self-efficacy:** A student’s self-confidence in his or her ability to successfully perform academic tasks at a designated level (Schunk, 1991).

Continuing-generation student: Individuals for whom at least one parent has attended college, and may have an advantage, as their parents' familiarity with the college experience may serve to guide them during the college transition (Sy, et al., 2012).

First-generation student: Defined as students whose parents never attended college (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella, et al., 2003).

Nonacademic experiences: Work, athletics, living area, co-curricular experiences, volunteering, and nonacademic interactions with peers (Pascarella et al., 2004) are the nonacademic experiences that will be used in this study.

Social capital: The potential for individuals to access intangible resources embedded in their social network (Bourdieu, 1986).

### **Significance of the study**

First-generation students comprise 36% of enrollments at community colleges nationwide (AACC, 2014; NCES, 2015). Although Engle and Tinto (2008) found that the 23% success rate of first-generation community college students was comparable to non-first-generation students in earning an associate degree or certificate within six years of graduating from high school, only 9% of first-generation students obtained a bachelor's degree within six years of graduating from high school compared to 29% of non-first-generation students. Additionally, six-year outcomes reveal that 51% of low-income first-generation students leave higher education without a degree or certificate compared to only 31% of non-first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

In light of the dismal completion rates of first-generation students and the fact that this student population comprises over half of all community college enrollments, there is a need to fill the gap in the literature. Data gleaned from this study of rural community college first-generation students' academic and nonacademic experiences can help college administrators,

faculty, and staff develop programs and policies aimed at increasing retention and improving completion rates among this significant sub-population of community college students.

### **Assumptions**

This study assumed all information collected from focus group participants is truthful and honest. It is also assumed the researcher and focus group moderators did not influence the responses of the interview participants and information gathered through focus group interviews is unbiased.

Focus groups are dependent on the interaction of focus group participants. Additionally, qualitative research is subject to interpretation. Although the researcher attempted to capture the true meaning of the data conveyed by focus group participants, meanings can be subjective. As this study employed the use of focus group moderators, their interpretations of the information shared by study participants may vary as a result of biases and past experiences.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations of this study included the decision to pursue a qualitative process of inquiry. The scope of this study was delimited to first-generation students attending one rural community college in the Southeastern United States. For the purpose of this study, first-generation students were defined as students whose parents did not attend college and does not include students whose parents began but did not complete a degree or certification. The study focused on the academic and nonacademic experiences of first-generation students and limited the pool of participants to this population of students. An additional delimitation was the exclusion of transfer in or international students from the potential pool of study participants. As the study was limited to one rural community college campus, the results may not be representative of

first-generation students attending other rural community colleges, urban campuses, or any four-year institutions.

### **Overview of the methodology**

This research study used a qualitative design to allow for a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-generation rural community college students and how participants perceived these experiences have impacted their academic and nonacademic success. Focus groups were used to encourage open dialog within a safe setting (Hays & Singh, 2012). The qualitative research process keeps the focus on learning what participants hold true, not what the literature presents, or the researcher brings to the study (Creswell, 2013). The understanding of how first-generation student perceptions of how their lived experiences impact their academic and nonacademic success will help college leaders design support services that will aid efforts to increase retention.

To further the research, by replicating and extending Stansberry and Burnett (2014), the experiences of first-generation students attending a rural community college can be compared to the experiences of first-generation students attending a large, diverse research university. This comparison can offer insight as to whether the size, type or location of the institution affects the perceptions of first-generation students.

Qualitative data analysis is viewed as a cyclical process of reducing data, displaying data, drawing conclusions, and verification (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Transcripts from the focus groups were reviewed and bracketed. Bracketing allowed for the isolation of researcher bias and assumptions (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Focus group transcripts were coded into general meanings. The categories of general meanings were reviewed to highlight the common themes and subthemes that emerged. Following the completion of the coding process, the process of member

checking ensured the themes and observations that emerged from the focus group interviews were accurate.

### **Organization of the study**

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter I provides an introduction to first-generation students, the purpose of the study, definitions of key terms, the study's theoretical framework, research questions, research design, explanation of the significance of the study, as well as assumptions and delimitations of the study. Chapter II provides a review of the literature related to first-generation students. Chapter III provides the methodology used within the study to collect and analyze data related to the academic and non-academic experiences of first-generation rural community college students relating to the research questions. Chapter IV provides the results of the research study. Finally, Chapter V provides a discussion of the results of the study, the implications, and suggestions for future research.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the college experiences of first-generation rural community college students. This study replicated and extended the previous work of Stansberry and Burnett (2014), which explored the academic and nonacademic experiences of first-generation students. Although the Stansberry and Burnett study focused on identifying and exploring the experiences of first-generation students attending a large urban research university, the present study focused on the experiences of first-generation students attending a rural community college. The study explored how these college students perceived these experiences related to their academic and nonacademic success. This qualitative study will further the understanding of how first-generation students perceived their lived experiences impacted their academic and nonacademic success.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past few decades the number of first-generation students attending college has continued to rise (Capriccioso, 2006; Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003). One-third of college students in the United States are first-generation students (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). Despite an increase in the number of enrollments, the number of first-generation students completing degrees or certifications remains low (Chen, 2005; Garcia, 2010). Although more first-generation students are gaining access to college, only 24% of first-generation students entering college directly from high school will earn a baccalaureate degree within eight years of graduating from high school (Choy, 2001).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how first-generation students attending a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States, perceived that their experiences impacted their academic and nonacademic success. Developing an understanding of how first-generation students perceive their lived experiences impact their academic and nonacademic success will help college leaders design support services that will aid efforts to increase retention.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Over the past four decades, researchers have attempted to uncover the reasons why students depart from higher education. Approximately 25% of all undergraduate students are first-generation students with 75% beginning their studies at two-year colleges (Chen, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gibson & Slate, 2010). The first year of college is critical to the success of first-generation students with the transition to college particularly challenging (Tinto, 1993). First-generation students struggle to academically and socially integrate into the college environment



(Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). Consequently, it is not surprising that first-generation students are four times more likely to drop out of college during their first year than their non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Current theory isolating the variables which challenge the persistence of college students in higher education begin with Vincent Tinto's (1975) Interactionalist Model of Student Persistence. Cited as a seminal study (Leslie, 2012), Tinto's Interactionalist Model of Student Persistence offers insight into certain characteristics students possess when entering college, which directly influences their departure decision or commitment to persist (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's model of persistence presented academic and social integration as essentials to a student's transition into higher education. Tinto posited that when students do not integrate academically, socially, or both the result will be departure from higher education (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto's model drew its origin from Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide. Spady (1970) was the first to apply Durkheim's theory of egoistic suicide to the college setting. Egotistical suicide can occur when an individual does not integrate into a new environment (Metz, 2002). Spady presented college as a social system with social structures and values similar to society. Spady proposed that conditions affecting the decision to drop out of college were similar to decisions resulting in suicide; insufficient interaction with others in college and insufficient integration into the values of the institution (Spady, 1970). Tinto drew from Spady's interpretation of Durkheim's theory of suicide to develop a framework to explain the longitudinal process of interactions leading to student persistence or dropout behavior (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto presented a student's decision to persist or drop out as a longitudinal process of interactions between the student and the academic and social systems of the college (Tinto, 1975). Tinto offered that student's profiles (sex, race, ability), precollege experiences (GPA,

academic and social attainments), and family backgrounds (social status, values, and expectations) impact performance in college (p. 94). These attributes and characteristics influence student goals and institutional commitment. In turn, both goals and commitment are predictors and reflect a student's experiences in college and influence the decision to persist or dropout (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto presented student's social and academic integration into the college environment as vital to a student's decision to remain in college (Tinto, 1975). Tinto opined that students arrive at college with certain expectations and goals. Student's integration (or failure to integrate) into the college environment affects student outcomes (Tinto, 1975). Faculty-student interaction, peer interaction, involvement in extracurricular activities and groups assist student integration and strengthen student commitment to goals and the institution (Tinto, 1975). Commitment to goals and the institution, in turn, leads to persistence.

While Tinto's Interactionalist Theory has been cited numerous times as the seminal longitudinal theory of student persistence, many researchers have noted weaknesses in the theory and offered alternative models to explain student attrition. Criticized as focusing primarily on traditional college students attending four-year institutions (Metz, 2002), Tinto's Interactionalist Theory disregards the non-traditional and two-year college student. Tinto originally acknowledged that his research focused on traditional college students and did not include non-traditional or underrepresented student populations (Tinto, 1993). Tinto later revised his theory to include financial resources as an attribute and expanded the theory to include the influence of external factors including family, work, and community on a student's decision to depart higher education (Tinto, 1993). More recently, researchers have used Tinto's revised theory to predict

student departure of different student populations including community college students (Halpin, 1990; Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, & Deli-Amen, 2014).

In reviewing Tinto's Interactionalist Model, Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) questioned the applicability of the theory to the question of student departure from commuter or two-year colleges. Braxton et al. determined that when used in a community college environment, only one of the propositions of Tinto's Interactionalist Model, student entry characteristics, directly affect the likelihood of student persistence in college. Braxton et al. presented student entry characteristics as having received "robust empirical affirmation" (p. 117).

In examining student involvement within the college and its effect on persistence, Astin (1985) offered a talent development model of persistence. Astin presented student learning and personal development tied to any educational program as directly correlated to the quality of the student's experience (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013). Astin suggested student involvement in college resulted in the development of skills and talents (Metz, 2002). Astin presented certain events or variables as influencing student's decision to persist. One of these variables was the financial aid award. Astin suggested that when students receive work-study funds as a single financial award to pay for college, there was a positive effect on persistence (Astin, 1985). Astin cited loans as having a negative influence on persistence and scholarships, and grants as having a neutral impact on persistence (Astin, 1985). Perhaps students having skin in the game, the development of skills, and creating ties to the institution increase student's commitment to reaching academic goals. As a large number of first-generation college students attending community colleges are low-income Astin's talent development model

should be considered when studying the relationship between financial aid awards and persistence.

Bean and Metzner's 1985 Theory of Student Attrition took a different approach by explaining student attrition associated with nontraditional students. As non-traditional students attending community colleges are over the age of 25, often first-generation, have been displaced from their jobs, or seeking to update their skills to strengthen job security (Jesnek, 2012), Bean and Metzner's research is relevant to this study.

Bean and Metzner argued that theories of student attrition based on traditional college students were not relevant to nontraditional students. The Bean and Metzner Theory of Student Attrition offered socialization as unimportant to nontraditional college students, but non-collegiate or environmental variables as important (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Environmental variables include finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer. Environmental variables were held to be more important than academic variables, which include study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, course availability, and major certainty for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Consequently, when academic and environmental variables are favorable for persistence, Bean & Metzner (1985) posited that students would persist. When academic and environmental variables are unfavorable for persistence Bean and Metzner held that students would leave college. However, if academic variables are good but environmental variables are poor students would leave school as the "positive effects of academic variables on retention will not be seen" (p. 491). Conversely, if environmental support is good and academic support poor, students are expected to remain in school as the "environmental support compensates" for poor academics. (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Bean and Metzner's Theory of Attrition is extremely relevant to the community college environment and the related variables which challenge first-generation students. As many first-generation students receive less support from family and friends and more pulls from environmental factors it may hold true that socialization is not as important as environmental factors in the longitudinal process of whether first-generation community college students persist or drop out.

Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) entered the dialog of student attrition by investigating whether the precollege characteristics of first-generation students differed from those of their non-first-generation peers. Additionally, this research sought to explore whether the first year experience of these two groups of students differed and if so what consequences emerged from the differences. Studies suggest first-generation students experience college differently than their non-first-generation peers (Terenzini et al., 1996). This research implies that the transition to college for first-generation students is difficult, and the need to "smooth" the transition should involve collaboration between high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions (Terenzini et al., 1996)

Terenzini et al. (1996) suggested that "validating" encounters with administrations, faculty, and students are important and help the students see they can succeed and are in the right place. Additionally, the study results found that first-generation students differed from their peers in their perception of the climate of the institution. First-generation students were more likely to report racial/ethnic or gender discrimination (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Academically, the Terenzini et al. study found that the time spent studying and the number of credit hours completed significantly impact first-generation student success. Although first-generation students reported spending fewer hours per week studying, the number of hours spent

on studying was discovered to be more important in increasing the reading skills of these students than their non-first-generation peers (Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, Terenzini et al. (1996) found that the number of credit hours completed was strongly associated with gains in critical thinking skills of first-generation students while unimportant for gains in their non-first-generation peers.

Another significant finding of the Terenzini et al. study was the affirmation of the findings of Bean and Metzner (1985). Terenzini et al. confirmed that offering low-income first-generation part-time students more opportunities to work on-campus and reducing the need to work off campus would strengthen first-generation students' commitment to the institution. In turn, students would be encouraged to enroll in more credit hours per term with an increased commitment to goals and the institution (Terenzini et al., 1996).

More recently studies by Pascarella et al. (2004) and Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) took different approaches to investigate the experiences of first-generation students in higher education. Pascarella et al. (2004) studied the differences between first-generation and other college student's academic and nonacademic experiences in college. The researchers defined academic experiences as the amount time studying, course load, number of credit hours, grades, social interaction with peers, computer use, interaction, and reading and writing experiences. Pascarella et al. (2004) defined nonacademic experiences as work, athletics, living area, co-curricular experiences, volunteering, and nonacademic interactions with peers. The researchers sought to uncover any differences between first-generation and non-first-generation students related to critical thinking skills, reading comprehension, science reasoning, writing skills, openness to diversity and challenge, internal locus of control, and self-understanding (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Pascarella et al. used the social capital theories of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) as theoretical frameworks to base their research. The researchers hypothesized that “levels of academic and social engagement will act in a compensatory manner, with stronger incremental impact on cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes for first-generation students than for their classmates with parents having more experience with postsecondary education” (p. 252). Pascarella et al., (2004) revealed first-generation students benefited from involvement in their college’s social and peer networks even though they are less likely to be engaged in such activities. In fact, extracurricular involvement demonstrated a strong positive effect on critical thinking, degree plans, and a sense of control over student academic success (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The results of Pascarella et al. (2004) also reaffirmed previous studies which found that the level of parents’ postsecondary education had a significant influence on the selectivity of the institution a student attends, the academic and nonacademic activities students engage in during college, and academic outcomes. The study also confirmed that second and third-year first-generation students completed fewer credits hours, worked more hours per week, and were more likely to live off campus than their non-first-generation peers. The study also suggested that first-generation students had more responsibilities off campus and participated in less college connected non-academic activities than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). Additional findings found first-generation students had significantly less social interaction with their peers. Although first-generation students took fewer credit hours, these students had lower GPAs than their non-first-generation peers through their third year of college (Pascarella et al., 2004) perhaps due to studying less.

Notably, the researchers did uncover interesting information in that first-generation student involvement in academic and classroom activities had stronger positive effects on second and third-year outcomes than did this involvement for non-first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004). In addition, study results highlighted the fact that first-generation students benefited more from certain extracurricular activities and peer interaction than non-first-generation students. However, although the positive influence of social integration was significant, first-generation students were less likely than their peers to engage in such activities during their college experience (Pascarella et al., 2004).

This study used Tinto's (1975) Interactionalist Model of Student Persistence to frame the individual characteristics that directly influenced first-generation study participant's decision to persist. Pascarella et al. (2004) was used to provide the grounding of which specific academic and nonacademic experiences were perceived by first-generation rural community college students to have influenced their success. Since Tinto's model presented academic and social integration as essential to a student's transition into higher education (Tinto, 1975), understanding which academic and nonacademic experiences aided students to integrate within the community college will provide valuable insight. Finally, as the need to work while enrolled in college has been cited as a strong predictor of attrition (Bryant, 2001), Astin's (1985) talent development model was used within this study to determine if financial aid awards played a role in the persistence decisions of study participants.

Multiple studies have confirmed the key challenges experienced by first-generation students at four-year institutions or large, urban community colleges. However, there is limited research on the experiences of first-generation students attending rural community colleges. Information gleaned by exploring the experiences of first-generation students attending rural community



colleges can be used to help administrators and faculty create a culture of inclusion inviting first-generation students to integrate and persist (Astin, 1988; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton et al., 1997; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

### **First-generation community college students**

The mission of community colleges is to offer open access for all students (Vaughan, 2006). Community Colleges enroll more than half of all undergraduate students attending public institutions in the U.S. (NCES 2011a, Indicator 8-2011, Table A-8-2). In 2008, the Pell Institute reported that 4.5 million low-income, first-generation students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, with 36% of them enrolled in two-year colleges. Seventy-five percent of first-generation students began their college education at two-year or for-profit colleges (Engle & Tinto, 2008), while 54% of non-first-generation students started college at four-year schools (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

### **Rural Community Colleges**

Of the 1,666 publically controlled community college campuses in the United States, 922 are classified as rural two-year colleges (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Community Colleges offer first-generation students a relatively inexpensive, open-access path toward obtaining a degree (Smith Morest, 2013). However, studies indicate first-generation students who begin higher education attending community colleges are more likely to drop out than first-generation students attending four-year institutions (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Lyson (2002) presented the importance of community colleges to rural communities. Lyson posit public community colleges serve the local economy by providing a skilled workforce, which would otherwise be inaccessible to rural communities. Additionally, Lyson stressed that

public community colleges offer underserved populations access to meaningful employment in rural communities.

Not only do rural community colleges provide a skilled workforce, the economic benefits to students and taxpayers are notable (Jenkins, 2015). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) offered that students earning a baccalaureate degree earn 64% more than students with a high school diploma (D'Amico & Dika, 2013). Belfield and Bailey (2011) reviewed 17 studies evaluating the average earning premium for individuals earning an associate degree versus students with only a high school diploma. The earnings premium for men was 13% and women earning an additional 21% over those individuals with only a high school degree (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). The study's authors also discovered that the total taxpayer benefit of an associate degree was "on average two-and-a-half times greater than the taxpayer investment" (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). Students and communities benefit economically from two-year college degrees obtained through rural community colleges.

Although the economic benefit of attaining a college degree or certificate is widely known (Belfield & Bailey, 2011), enrollment rates of rural first-generation students are lower than urban first-generation students (Tieken, 2016). In 2004, 27% of rural 18 to 24 year-olds enrolled in college compared to 37% of students living in cities or more urban areas (Provasnik et al., 2007). Tieken (2016) tied the lower level of rural first-generation student enrollments to lower educational aspirations. Rural students are more likely to be first-generation students (Provasnik et al. 2007). McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky (2010) revealed that rural students have greater socioeconomic barriers and receive weaker academic preparation than students in urban areas.

## **First-Generation Students**

First-generation students are defined many ways. Many researchers define the first-generation student as a college or university student with parents or guardians who have not earned a baccalaureate degree (Choy, 2001; Gofen, 2009; Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman, 2014). Other researchers have limited the term first-generation to students whose parents never attended college (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2003). To align with institutional data provided for use within this study first-generation students are defined as students whose parents never attended college.

### **Challenges facing first-generation students**

First-generation students experience college differently than their non-first-generation peers (Ishitani, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Naumann et al., 2003; Pascarella et al., 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1993). Parents of first-generation students help their children less than non-first-generation parents in selecting a college to attend or with financial aid decisions (Chen, 2005; Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; Gibson & Slate, 2010; Thayer, 2000).

First-generation students tend to come from lower socio-economic homes and have lower educational aspirations (Bui, 2002; Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, first-generation students tend to come from underrepresented minorities groups (Martin Lohfink, & Paulsen, 2005). Perna (2006) explored the characteristics of underrepresented students and categorized this group as disadvantaged, low socio-economic income (based on Pell grant data), first-generation, non-traditional, students-at-risk, ethnic minority, underserved, and students of color.

Many first-generation students struggle to live in two worlds (Hsaio, 1992) the world of college and the world of family responsibilities. As many first-generation students are older, live

off campus, and have families to support (Hodges-Payne, 2006) they are more likely not to attend college full-time and work a high number of hours while in college (Chen, 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Researchers note first-generation students work more and study less than their non-first-generation peers (Bryant, 2001; Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2003). In fact, Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) found that first-generation students work more hours than their non-first-generation peers adding to the likelihood of dropping out of college before their second year of study. Along the same lines, full-time and part-time employment responsibilities, and family obligations have been cited as variables associated with putting first-generation students at greater risk of dropping out from school (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2009; Chen, 2005).

The majority of first-generation students attend community colleges (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012), with 52% reporting that they plan to enter four-year colleges on a transfer track (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Many first-generation students suffer “transfer shock” which describes the experience of students after they transfer to four-year institutions (Berger & Malaney, 2001).

First-generation students are more likely to be academically unprepared for college and require remedial coursework (D’Amico & Dika, 2013; Engle et al., 2006; Warburton et al., 2001). First-generation students tend to take less rigorous coursework in high school (Horn & Nunez, 2000) and have lower high school GPAs (Engle et al., 2006; Majer, 2009; Warburton et al., 2001). Researchers have also found that first-generation students lack strong study skills (Terenzini et al., 1996) and have lower levels of self-esteem and academic self-efficacy (Majer, 2009).

Results of studies differ when it comes to first-generation student grades earned in college. Although Inman and Mayes (1999) found no significant differences between the grades of first-generation students and their non-first-generation peers, other studies contradict those findings. Pascarella et al. (2004) and D'Allegro and Kerns (2010) found that first-generation students earned lower grades in college than their non-first-generation peers.

### **Factors affecting first-generation student success**

First-generation students experience college differently than their non-first-generation peers (Ishitani, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Naumann et al., 2003; Pascarella et al., 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1993). First-generation students lack the support and guidance of parents who have navigated higher education. Lack of knowledge of the cost of college and how to navigate the financial aid process may result in many first-generation students struggling to pay for college. Additionally, the lack of knowledge of financial aid can result in first-generation students working while in college (Pascarella et al., 2004). Working while in college may explain why only one-fourth of first-generation students attain a bachelor degree compared to two-thirds of non-first-generation students (Chen, 2005).

### **Social Capital**

Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p.51). Stanton-Salazar (2001) defined social capital as the value a relationship with another person provides in knowledge and support in a social situation. Parents who have never attended college lack the social capital accessed by parents who have experienced higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004). Perna and Titus (2005) conceptualized parental involvement as a form of social capital. For parents to explain certain

behaviors and expectations associated with higher education, parents need to have had similar experiences. Not restricted to interactions between parents and students, social capital includes interactions between parents and faculty or other parents (Pera & Titus, 2005). In fact, higher levels of parental involvement and support have been associated with higher levels of retention of first-generation students (Choy, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Sullivan, 2001).

### **Role of parents**

First-generation students struggle with their ability to navigate the college application and financial aid process, and the transition into higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The limited role of parents in the decision making of their children is a result of never having attended college (McConnell, 2000). Schunk and Pajares (2002) offered that the family environment could influence student's self-efficacy through encouragement and support.

Parents who have never attended college tend not to prepare their children to attend college, unlike parents who have experience in higher education (Engle et al., 2006; Garcia, 2010; Gofen, 2009; Horn & Nunez, 2000; McConnell, 2000). This may explain why first-generation students are nearly four times more likely to drop out of college than their non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Research results have demonstrated that one of the strongest predictors of persistence among college students is the educational level of their parents (Choy, 2001; McConnell, 2000). D'Allegro and Kerns (2010) study confirmed that first-generation students performed more poorly academically than non-first-generation students.

First-generation students lack the advantage of having parents who attended college and can share experiences with their children (McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011). Consequently, informational resources such as deadlines for financial aid applications are noted as being especially challenging to many first-generation students

(Choy, 2001). Sy et al. (2011) confirmed that parents of first-generation students provided significantly less informational support than the parents of continuing-generation students. Parents of first-generation students lack the knowledge of how to navigate college putting their children at a disadvantage with respect to knowledge of financial aid, navigating the enrollment process, degree planning, and recognizing the value of a college education (Pascarella et al., 2004). Due to their lack of experience in higher education, studies reveal that parents of first-generation students help their children less with decisions including which college to attend than parents of non-first-generation students (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; McConnell, 2000; Thayer, 2000).

Not only are first-generation students challenged with learning how to navigate the college environment on their own, but many of their parents are not supportive of their children's plans to attend college (McConnell, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996; Vargas, 2004). Both first-generation and non-first-generation students indicate support received from their parents, relatives, teachers, and guidance counselors were important variables in their decision to attend college. However, Saenz and Barrera (2007) found first-generation students do not receive the same encouragement their non-first-generation peers receive from their parents. Ishitani (2006) associated low parental expectations with higher rates of attrition of first-generation students.

To compound the challenges first-generation students experience many of their parents do not understand the need for college (McConnell, 2000). Many first-generation parents fear their children will move away from home; may not be able to help with household responsibilities, or will change while attending college (Gofen, 2009; McConnell, 2000; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Smith (2001) found that parents of first-generation students are often apprehensive about the cost of higher education and often refrain from encouraging their children to pursue a college

education. In particular, low-income families of first-generation students struggle to understand the benefit of a college education (McConnell, 2000; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).

First-generation students struggle with navigating their way into higher education, which includes lack of access to “financial information and social networks” (Saenz et al., 2007). First-generation families do not participate in college visits, and financial aid and planning workshops as do continuing-generation families (Choy, 2001). First-generation parents have less influence on their children’s decision of which college to attend (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; McConnell, 2000; Thayer, 2000), with first-generation students citing financial aid, ability to live off campus, and work opportunities as factors used in deciding which college to attend (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001)

Studies have found that low-income, first-generation students are four times more likely to leave college than their non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008), are more likely to be older, employed full-time, and have dependents to support (Chen 2005; Choy, 2001; Smith Morest, 2013). Many first-generation students attending community colleges report they plan to transfer to four-year schools or attend to complete specific courses needed to gain employment (Smith Morest, 2013). Nomi (2005) found in the Faces of the Future Survey, that while most non-first-generation students enrolled in community colleges plan to transfer to a four-year institution, first-generation community college students are more likely to attend college to improve job skills or obtain an associate degree (Nomi, 2005). However, the six-year outcomes for low-income first-generation students are dismal with only 30% receiving an associate degree or certificate, 14% still enrolled, and 51% having dropped out of school (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Comparatively, low-income first-generation students who began and attended four-year public



institutions fared slightly better, 45% received a degree or certificate, 22% were still enrolled, and 33% dropped out of college after six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Whether attending a two-year or a four-year institution, the challenge of completion is shared by a considerable number of first-generation students.

### **Academic self-efficacy**

Academic self-efficacy is defined as a student's self-confidence in his or her ability to successfully perform academic tasks at a designated level (Schunk, 1991). Self-efficacy is based on what students believe is true and not necessarily what is true and is the basis for human motivation (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Zeldin and Pajares (2000) stated that unless people believe they can accomplish a task they have little incentive to act or persevere if challenged.

First-generation students arrive at college less academically prepared, lacking social capital, and needing to navigate the transition into college with little or no useful support from their parents. These challenges provide possible reasons why first-generation students present lower levels of self-efficacy than their non-first-generation peers (McConnell, 2000). Majer (2009) confirmed a significant positive relationship between the level of self-efficacy and cumulative GPA at the end of an academic year. Majer's research confirmed prior studies presenting self-efficacy as a predictor of academic performance (Gore, 2006). Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) found that student self-efficacy is predictive of academic adjustment. Robbins et al. (2006) found that academic self-efficacy was related to increased retention and a strong predictor of cumulative college GPA.

Terenzini et al. (1996) concluded that first-generation students have lower educational aspirations than their non-first-generation peers. Educational goals are believed to relate back to the first-generation student's level of academic self-efficacy (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). If students

do not believe in their ability to be successful in college, they have little motivation to persist especially in light of challenges due to a lack of social capital (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000).

### **Academic integration**

Tinto suggested that a student's social and academic integration into the college environment is vital to a student's decision to persist in higher education (Tinto, 1975). Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) defined academic integration as the assimilation of the first-generation student into the academic areas of the college and social integration as the assimilation of the student into the social life of the college. Academic experiences include the level of college preparedness, academic integration within the classroom environment, social integration with faculty and other students, and extracurricular involvement.

Terenzini et al. (1996) suggested that "validating" encounters with administration, faculty, and students are important and help students see that they can succeed in college and are in the right place (Terenzini et al., 1996). Gibson and Slate (2010) found first-year first-generation students' level of student engagement was correlated to their interactions with faculty, staff, and other students.

### **Academic preparedness**

First-generation students come to college less academically prepared than their non-first-generation peers (Chen 2005; Choy 2001; D'Amico & Dika, 2013; Engle et al., 2006; Warburton et al., 2001). Bowen, Kurzwell, Tobin, and Pichler (2006) defined academic preparedness as "the major determinant of differences in educational attainment" (p.224). Researchers offer a lack of social capital and lower socioeconomic status as reasons why first-generation students enter

college with lower GPAs than continuing-generation students and need to take more remedial classes (Chen 2005; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014).

Chen (2005) suggested a lack of social capital results in many first-generation students receiving less guidance and support from their parents, a fact that Engle & Tinto (2008) substantiate. Lack of encouragement and parental guidance is reflective of a lack of generational experience with the demands and processes involved in higher education (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). Less parental guidance may also be the reason many first-generation students report their high school coursework was not as rigorous or challenging as their non-first-generation peers (Choy 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Martin et al., 2014). Parents who have earned a degree or attended college are more likely to share their knowledge of the demands of college with their children (Terenzini et al., 1996). Lack of parental support has been documented to add stress and contribute to a student's decision to leave higher education (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

### **Course load**

Once enrolled in college, first-generation students tend to take fewer credit hours per semester than their non-first-generation peers. First-generation students earn an average of 18 credit hours in the first year of higher education compared to 25 credit hours earned by their non-first-generation peers (Chen, 2005). Additionally, first-generation students report working more hours than other students (Chen 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Smith Morest, 2013; Terenzini et al., 1996). Working has been suggested to result in first-generation students studying fewer hours than their peers and a strong predictor of attrition for community college students (Fike & Fike, 2008). Overall working has been proven to have strong negative implications for first-generation

community college student growth and persistence during college (Chen, 2005; Fike & Fike, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004).

First-generation students come to college with weaker academic skills and preparation than their non-first-generation peers. Fifty-five percent of first-generation students require some remedial coursework. Comparatively, only 27% of non-first-generation students require remedial coursework in college (Chen, 2005). The need for first-generation students to complete remedial courses increases the time to completion, the cost of higher education, and risk of attrition (Chen, 2005).

### **Classroom experiences**

Collier and Morgan (2007) offer that aside from academic ability student success in college requires “mastery” of becoming the “college student.” The researchers posit that students who arrive at college with a clear understanding of what the role of a college student is will better understand the expectations of faculty and respond appropriately. Consequently, first-generation students have no reference or resources to learn about the role of a college student (Gofen, 2009; Thayer, 2000). First-generation students may be challenged in understanding what the role of college student requires (D’Amico & Dika, 2013). Research confirms that parents who have attended college groom their children to enter higher education from an early age (Collier & Morgan, 2007).

First-generation students experience greater difficulty transitioning from high school to college (D’Amico & Dika, 2013). Research has also shown that first-generation students benefit more from classroom involvement; participation, and collaborative learning than their non-first-generation peers (Kuh, Pace, & Vesper, 1997; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Soria and Stebleton’s research (2012) found that even though first-generation students benefit from classroom

discussion, collaboration, and faculty interaction, they were less likely to engage in the classroom than their non-first-generation peers.

Service-learning offers students personalized instruction with high levels of faculty-student interaction (Bui, 2002). McKay and Estrella (2008) suggest that first-generation students would benefit from service-learning courses. Service learning provides the first-generation student with the opportunity to develop relationships with faculty and peers who can help them navigate higher education. Service learning can also offer the first-generation student the chance to build self-esteem by contributing in the classroom and the field (Joyce, Weil, & Showers, 1992; McKay & Estrella, 2008), in turn building academic self-efficacy.

### **Social interaction with peers**

Social integration into the life of the college is important to student success (Tinto, 1975; 1993). First-generation students are less likely to engage with faculty or perceive faculty are concerned about their academic success (Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, first-generation students are less likely to develop social networks with their college peers or become involved with clubs or campus organizations (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Studies have shown that interaction with faculty and peers and involvement in extracurricular activities including clubs and students groups have a significant effect on first-generation students' intellectual and personal development (Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001). However even though these students benefit more from these forms of interaction than their non-first-generation peers, they are less likely to become involved (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). In light of this, it is not surprising that first-generation students are less satisfied with the campus environment than their non-first-generation peers (Terenzini et al., 1996).

## **Financial Aid**

First-generation students tend to come from lower socio-economic households (Bui, 2002; Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, first-generation students tend to come from underrepresented minorities groups (Martin Lohfink, & Paulsen, 2005). Perna (2006) explored the characteristics of underrepresented students and categorized this group as disadvantaged, low socio-economic income (based on Pell Grant data), including first-generation, non-traditional, students-at-risk, ethnic minorities, underserved students, and students of color. Without the financial support of their families many first-generation students are forced to work while in college (D'Amico & Dika, 2013). The need to work creates conflict between work and academic commitments (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

Students enrolled in community colleges tend to be low-income, ethnic minorities, and first-generation students (Kezar & Yang, 2010). These students come from families, which have a limited understanding of higher education including financial aid (Vargas, 2004). In light of these findings, it is not surprising that in 2007 42% of community college students who were eligible to receive financial aid including Pell grants did not file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (McKinney & Novak, 2012).

The FAFSA is deemed a “critical gatekeeper” to most financial aid as the FAFSA is used to determine need-based aid (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2009). As many first-generation community college students come from low socioeconomic households, they are perfect candidates to receive financial aid awards. Failing to complete the FAFSA relates back to a lack of social capital in the first-generation student’s social networks. The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2010) noted foregoing financial aid awards often results in first-generation community college students working while attending college, which is associated

with lower persistence and completion rates. However, Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer (2004) found first-generation students who receive financial aid and work-study awards were more at risk to leave college than their continuing-generation peers.

### **Summary**

Published research related to first-generation college students attending rural community colleges in the United States is limited. Although scholarly research investigating the experiences of first-generation students has increased over the past several decades, the volume of research focused on the experiences of first-generation students enrolled at rural community colleges remains sparse (Majer, 2009; McCoy, 2014; McKay & Estrella, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

The first-generation student population has been increasing over the past 40 years (Capriccioso, 2006; Naumann et al., 2003). Although increasing in the number of enrollments, the number of degrees or certificates first-generation students are awarded has not increased proportionately (Chen, 2005). As 75% of first-generation students begin their college education attending community colleges, but only 24% will complete a baccalaureate degree after eight years (Engle & Tinto, 2008), it is important to learn about their experiences as community college students. Only through this exploration can researchers learn what has had a positive influence on the persistence of first-generation rural community college students.

This chapter has set a foundation to understand who first-generation students are and what challenges can derail their plans to obtain a degree. Chapter III will outline the methodology used to guide a study of first-generation colleges students attending a rural community college and the experiences they believe to have impacted their academic and non-academic experiences.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Problem Statement**

Research related to first-generation college students attending rural community colleges in the United States is limited. Although scholarly research investigating the experiences of first-generation students has increased over the past several decades, the volume of research focused on the experiences of first-generation students enrolled at rural community colleges is still sparse (Majer, 2009; McCoy, 2014; McKay & Estrella, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Of the 1,666 publically controlled community college campuses in the United States, 922 are classified as rural two-year colleges (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Since 1995, first-generation students have composed 36% of enrollments at community colleges nationwide (AACC, 2014; NCES, 2015). Although more first-generation students are gaining access to college, only 24% of the first-generation students entering college directly from high school will earn a baccalaureate degree within eight years (Choy, 2001). In light of the poor completion rates of first-generation students, and the fact that this student population composed 36% of all community college enrollments, there is a need to fill the gap in the literature.

This study explored the experiences of first-generation students attending a rural community college. Data gleaned from this study of first-generation community college students academic and nonacademic experiences can help college administrators, faculty, and staff leaders develop programs and policy aimed at increasing retention and completion rates of this significant sub-population of community college students.



**Purpose**

This qualitative study replicated the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) qualitative study, which focused on first-generation students attending a large urban research institution. The purpose of the present study was to extend Stansberry and Burnett to identify and explore the experiences of first-generation students attending a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States and to determine how students perceive their lived experiences relate to their academic and nonacademic success. The understanding of how the first-generation student lived experiences impact their academic and nonacademic success will help college leaders design support services that will aid efforts to increase retention.

**Research Questions**

1. What experiences do first-generation college students at a rural community college perceive impact their academic success?
2. What experiences do first-generation students at a rural community college perceive impact their nonacademic success?
3. What challenges do first-generation students attending a rural community college perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students?
4. What personal factors do first-generation students attending a rural community college perceive impact their college success?

**Rationale for study replication**

Tukey (1969) stated, “confirmation comes from repetition” (p.84). Through the replication of Stansberry and Burnett (2014), and extending the study to include first-generation students attending a rural community college, the present study sought to advance the understanding of the first-generation college student experience.

### **Rationale for qualitative approach**

This research study utilized a qualitative design to allow for a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-generation rural community college students and how participants perceived these experiences had impacted their academic and nonacademic success. The use of qualitative research provided the opportunity to develop a deep understanding of the perceptions of first-generation students. Thick descriptions are “deep, dense, detailed accounts.... thin descriptions, by contrast, lack detail, and simply report facts” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). Thick description is the comprehensive and focused “picture of a behavior or occurrence” (Hayes & Singh, 2012). The goal of thick description in qualitative research is to generalize findings to a narrow focus or replicate the study in another setting (Hayes & Singh, 2012). A qualitative research design provides useful data and depth in our understanding of the human experience.

Qualitative research evolves through the use of emerging questions by collecting data in themes as the researcher attempts to interpret the meaning of the data (Hayes & Singh, 2012). This method offers the researcher the opportunity to explore social phenomena (Creswell, 1998) by using inductive reasoning, which refers to the belief that data drives theory (Hayes & Singh, 2012).

The importance of context in qualitative research refers to understanding “how participants create and give meaning to social experience” (Hayes & Singh, 2012, p. 6). Through the use of an emergent design and observation of how first-generation rural community college students interacted within a context (Hayes & Singh, 2012), patterns emerged. The underlying assumption of the importance of context in qualitative design is that participants are best “understood holistically and not as a sum of parts” (p. 7).

Focus groups were used to encourage open dialog within a safe setting (Hays & Singh, 2012). The qualitative research process keeps the focus on learning what participants hold true, not what the literature presents, or the researcher brings to the study (Creswell, 2013). The understanding of how first-generation student perceptions of how their lived experiences impact their academic and nonacademic success will help college leaders design support services that will aid efforts to increase retention.

To further the research, through replicating and extending Stansberry and Burnett (2014), the experiences of first-generation students attending a rural community college can be compared to the experiences of first-generation students attending a large, diverse research university. This comparison can offer insight as to whether the size, type or location of the institution affects the perceptions of first-generation students. This understanding may also help to explain why first-generation students attending community colleges are less successful than first-generation students studying at four-year institutions (Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004)

A phenomenological approach was used which considers the human experience as reliable providing insight into the human phenomena rather than a theory to explain phenomena (Morrissey & Higgs, 2006).

As qualitative research related to the experiences of first-generation rural community college students is limited, the use of a qualitative design was appropriate for this study. As phenomenology seeks to understand individuals and the collective human experience (Creswell, 2013), this form of theory formation complimented the research focus of this study.

### **Role of the researcher**

Ontologically, this study's perspective was social constructivism. Social constructivism takes the outlook that truth is contextual and not universal (Hays & Singh, 2012). This study

used a heuristic approach. The use of an epistemological approach, which was heuristic, sought to understand moderately intense experiences (Hayes & Singh, 2012). As a first-generation student, I acknowledge my axiology, as well as the participants' axiology, may have influenced the study. Moreover, it was anticipated that unknown factors or phenomena might have played a role in this research study. Therefore, this qualitative study used an emergent design. Unlike quantitative research or highly structured surveys, qualitative inquiry allowed for a deeper and more intimate look at the phenomena of how first-generation rural community college students perceived their experiences in college impacted their academic and nonacademic success (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Focus groups were used to gather data from study participants. Focus groups allowed for the voices of all study participants to be maximized (Hays & Singh, 2012). This allowed the inquirer to collect data from the students who had experienced the phenomena and use the data to create a “description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals” (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 252).

As part of the pre-analysis phase of the study, bracketing was used to reduce the researcher's bias and assumptions (Hays & Singh, 2012). Journaling was used to bracket researcher views (Creswell et al., 2007) addressing my background as a first-generation student. The practice of epoche was used in order to achieve transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology required the researcher to bracket or remove outside influences or past experiences to be able to focus on the experiences being studied as they are (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher reflected on a situation and reduced the effect of what was preconceived or assumed to achieve Epoche. It was the process of reducing past experiences and biases, which allowed a clear picture of what was actually presented (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche allowed the

researcher to listen and hear what was actually offered by study participants without labels, bias, or judgment (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Sample**

The research participants for this study were a purposeful sample of first-generation freshman and sophomore students attending a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States. The sample did not include transfer in or international students. Prospective participants were initially contacted via email (see invitation email in Appendix A). The researcher ensured that students met the criteria necessary to participate in this study and then invited them to participate. Criteria for participation was as follows: a) participants must have attained the age of 18 or older, b) met the definition of first-generation college students (i.e. neither parent may have continued their education beyond high school), and c) not a transfer in or international student.

Participants were identified as first-generation students by the use of college admissions applications. A first-generation student self-identified as first generation when he or she completed the college's online application. On the application under the category of Family Educational Background, the enrolling students are asked to select a level of education for each parent. The educational options are: a) Do not know, b) Less than High School, c) Attended High School, d) Graduated from High School, e) Attended College, f) Associate Degree, g) Received Bachelor's Degree, and h) Received Post Bachelor's Degree. Any student selecting: b) Less than High School, c) Attended High School, or d) Graduated from High School was contacted by email. Students interested in participating in the study responded to the researcher through email. After first-generation status was confirmed the students were invited to participate in the study.

Students who met the first-generation status criteria and had completed at least 12 but no more than 24 credit hours and were not transfer in or international students were invited to participate as first-year students. Students who met the first-generation status criteria and had completed greater than 24 credit hours and were not transfer in or international students were invited to participate in the study as second-year students. The researcher facilitated all selection communication to create focus groups by email. The goal for the number of first-generation students in each focus group was 7 to 10 participants. The goal for each category of first-generation student, first-year and second-year was 14 to 20 participants. Overall participation was projected to be 21 to 30 first-generation students.

First-generation students who met the selection criteria for the study were invited to participate in a scheduled focus group. Potential participants were asked to respond to an email stating whether they were interested in participating and to provide their availability to aid in the scheduling of the sessions (see Participant Information Form in Appendix B). Two days prior to the scheduled focus group, a reminder email was sent to confirm the time and location of the focus group (see Confirmation Email in Appendix C). A copy of the informed consent form and details of the focus group was attached to the reminder email. The day before the scheduled focus group, the researcher followed up with participants by calling to remind him or her of the scheduled focus group and thanking them for their willingness to participate.

The focus group sessions included an incentive program. During each session, the names of all participants were entered into a drawing for gift cards to local restaurants and businesses. The drawing was held at the end of each session with six to eight prizes. The names of all focus group participants were also entered into an additional raffle for a \$100.00 VISA gift card.

Following the focus group interviews, the transcriptions of all focus group discussion were reviewed by the researcher. If any questions or inconsistencies arose, the researcher contacted the participant(s) by email to follow up and clarify focus group responses.

### **Setting of the study**

The setting for this research study was a small, rural community college located in the Southeastern United States. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defines a rural region as one that has a population of fewer than 50,000 people. The host college has a total enrollment of 6,039 students with full-time enrollments of 2,837. First-generation student enrollment is approximately 28 to 29% (State College System, 2016).

### **Data collection and measures**

Focus groups were held to gain a clearer understanding of the academic and nonacademic experiences of first generation students enrolled at a rural community college. Focus groups allowed for a direct connection between the researcher and study participants. This contact helped to build rapport (Hays & Singh, 2012). Another advantage to focus groups was the socially orientated, relaxed setting. This setting provided an opportunity for data collection while bringing participants together to discuss a common interest (Hays & Singh, 2012). Focus groups also promoted a forum for self-exploration where participants could validate the experiences of others (Hays & Singh, 2012). Focus groups allowed for the collection of large amounts of data in less time than traditional structured interviews. Finally, focus groups offered a safe forum where a participant's views were valued and their input encouraged (Hays & Singh, 2012).

### **Focus groups**

Focus group sessions were conducted using the focus group protocol utilized in Stansberry and Burnett (2014) with modifications for the host college environment. The use of the same

focus group protocol ensured both studies were facilitated in a similar manner, with students having received the same information. During the focus groups, each participant was given the opportunity to ask for clarification or explanations of the questions. At the start of each focus group session, an informed consent form was reviewed with each participant. The signing of the informed consent form was required and completed before starting the session. All participants were given a copy of the informed consent form for their records (see Informed Consent Form in Appendix D). In addition to the informed consent form participants completed a demographic survey (see Participant Demographic Survey in Appendix E) before the start of the focus group interview.

To protect confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were assigned after the initial email confirmation of students' first-generation status and used throughout the study. Pseudonyms were used in all focus group transcripts and documentation. Participant names did not appear on transcripts of the focus group interviews or in study results. The researcher digitally recorded all focus group sessions. All recordings, transcripts, field notes, and documents were stored in a locked, secure location. After the research process was completed, all recordings were destroyed to ensure participant confidentiality.

### **Role of moderators**

The staff of the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness at the hosting community college approved all moderators. Moderators were chosen from trained college staff experienced in the facilitation of focus group interviews. Two moderators facilitated all of the focus group sessions. Through the use of the same focus group moderators, delivery of the interview questions and focus group environment was similar. The researcher, also working in the role of



moderator, ensured all audio recording equipment functioned properly, and recorded notes and observations of the focus group sessions.

The Director of Research and Institutional Effectiveness, a trained expert in qualitative research and focus groups, at the host college, agreed to review the moderator's training guide for content ensuring the validity of the focus group process (see Moderator Protocol and Moderator Training Guide in Appendices F and G). After reviewing the moderators training guide, the Director of Research and Instructional Effectiveness and I arranged a training workshop for the focus group moderators. Before the start of the focus group moderator training, all moderators reviewed the focus group protocol and moderator guide. The training workshop allowed for the researcher and moderators to review the focus group protocol and the steps to be taken during the focus group interviews. The training meeting also provided the moderators the opportunity to ask questions about the process.

### **Moderator guide**

Dr. Don Stansberry and colleagues developed the moderator guide used to facilitate the focus group interviews. The guide was modified to apply to the host community college environment. To achieve a similar experience for participants in this study, the same guide was used. The guide contained instructions, a list of materials needed for the focus group interviews, and details on the format of the focus groups. The guide also included warm-up questions, 10 discussion prompts, probing questions, and two written questions.

The Director of the Office of Research and Institutional Effectiveness at the host college, trained in focus group protocol functioned as a content expert in the review of the moderator guide. This review of the moderator guide ensured content or construct validity to the study's research questions.

**Confidentiality**

To protect confidentiality each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were used in all focus group transcripts, documentation, and study findings. All focus group interview transcripts were reviewed to ensure that only pseudonyms were recorded.

At the start of each focus group session, an informed consent form was reviewed with each participant. The signing of the informed consent form was required and completed before the start of the interview session. The informed consent form provided participants a document outlining their rights as study participants and contact information for the researcher. All participants were given a copy of the informed consent form for their records.

All focus group sessions were recorded. Recordings were stored in the researcher's office locked in a file cabinet only accessible by the researcher. Transcripts of the focus group interviews and any additional lists of participants were only accessible by the researcher. The researcher was responsible for keeping documents secure. The researcher facilitated any contact with focus group participants after the initial interview.

The identity of the host college and all study participants were protected throughout the study. After the research process was complete the researcher, to ensure participant confidentiality, destroyed all recordings.

**Analytical strategy**

Unlike quantitative research or highly structured surveys, qualitative inquiry allowed for a deeper and more intimate look at the phenomena of first-generation rural community college student's perceptions of their collegiate experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The researcher worked with the community college's Office of Research and Institutional Effectiveness to identify study participants. Before focus group interviews began, participants

were made aware of their rights as research subjects. Inclusion in the sample required signing an Informed Consent Form by the participant. The duration of focus group sessions was 60 to 70 minutes, and all sessions were recorded. The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board approval from Old Dominion University and Research Review Committee input and approval from the host community college prior to participant recruitment.

Trustworthiness among the researcher, focus group moderators, and interviewees was paramount. All members of the research team recorded their observations and practiced reflexivity by keeping a field journal. Additionally, regular peer debriefing sessions by the researcher and moderators were held to instill trust, triangulate findings, and enhance study validity. During the transcription or analysis process, if any questions arose about the interview content, the researcher contacted the student participant by email for clarification.

Member checking included clarifying focus group participant responses during the session, and reviewing completed transcript themes with participants via email to ensure an accurate depiction of their experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). Confidentiality was enforced to establish an environment of trust and encourage meaningful sharing between participants and the researcher. Pseudonyms obviated the use of participants' actual names in any of the transcriptions or study findings. The strength of this qualitative strategy is that "the person interviewed is more a participant in the meaning making than a conduit from which information is retrieved" (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314).

Qualitative data analysis is viewed as a cyclical process of reducing and displaying data, drawing conclusions, and verification (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The transcripts from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim along with field notes completed by the researcher and moderators, which were reviewed and bracketed. Bracketing allowed for the isolation of

researcher bias and assumptions (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Focus group transcripts were coded into general meanings. Each focus group session was coded separately. The researcher reviewed the categories of general meanings to highlight the common themes and subthemes that emerged. Redundancies were eliminated to narrow the focus with a final debriefing session held to review the results of the coding process with the research team.

Following the completion of the coding process, the process of member checking began to ensure that the themes and observations that emerged from the focus group interviews were accurate. Member checking took place via email. The focus group participants were given the opportunity to review the summary of each focus group and provide feedback or edits if they felt the data were not representative of the discussion. Member checking helped to triangulate data with observations and interpretations (Hayes & Singh, 2012). As a final step to validate the findings of the study, a town hall style meeting was held. First-generation students participating in the focus groups were invited to attend the meeting to hear the results of the study. Following the completion of the data analysis stage of the study, all focus group recordings and notes were destroyed to protect participant confidentiality.

### **Limitations**

The validity of this qualitative study can be found in the truthfulness of the results. Validity is found through the maximization of the opportunity to hear participants' voices on certain experiences (Hayes & Singh, 2012). To accomplish validity in this study, the researcher sought to accurately capture the voices and reflections of the study's participants. However, it is important to note the researcher had no control over variables during the focus group interviews, which may have influenced the study results.

As first-generation students attending community colleges live off campus and may have numerous personal demands, availability was an issue. Limitations of this study may have also included the perceptions of the study participants. The willingness of participants to share their experiences may have been an obstacle in obtaining useful information.

Limitations also include researcher bias and interpretation of data, which could have affected study findings. The results of this study reflect the perceptions of a sample of first-generation students attending a rural community college in the Southeastern United States. The results of the study may not be representative of first-generation students attending other rural community colleges, those in urban locations, or four-year institutions.

### **Summary**

This chapter has described the methods used in this study. The problem of lack of scholarly research related to first-generation rural community college students and the purpose of the study have been discussed. The selection process for study participants, instrumentation used, data collection, and methods used for analysis, as well as confidentiality protocol, have been presented. Chapter IV will report the results of the focus group interviews derived from the data analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

This chapter presents the data collection and analysis of this study. The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation students attending a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States perceive that their experiences impacted their academic and nonacademic success. Through three focus group interviews with 21 community college students, a description of this phenomenon was revealed through student's words and stories. This description provides an understanding of the first-generation rural community college student experience.

#### **Characteristics of the sample**

A total of 122 first-year and 234 second-year community college students were invited to participate in the first-generation focus groups. The selection criteria were

- (a) Students self-identified as first-generation when he or she completed the college's online application.
- (b) First-year and second-year students were identified by the number of credit hours completed. First-year students had completed a minimum of 12 credit hours but less than 24 credit hours. Students completing 24 or more credit hours were identified as second-year students.
- (c) Participants were not international students.
- (d) Participants were native students (entered the institution as a first-year student).

Study participants included a total of four males (two first-year, two second-year) and 17 females (6 first-year, 11 second-year). First-year participants ranged in age from 18 to 45, and second-year participants ranged in age from 19 to 60. Participants identified their ethnicity as

White ( $n = 14$ ), Hispanic ( $n = 4$ ), or Black ( $n = 3$ ). Marital status of first-year students included single ( $n = 5$ ), married ( $n = 1$ ), separated ( $n = 1$ ), and divorced ( $n = 1$ ). Marital status of second-year students included single ( $n = 10$ ) and married ( $n = 3$ ). Three first-year and five second-year students reported being parents.

Table 1 presents the participant's self-reported family income.

Table 1

*Combined Family Income of Study Participants*

Income Level	First-year		Second-year	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
\$10,000 to < \$15,000	1	12.5	1	8
\$15,000 to < \$20,000	0	0	1	8
\$20,000 to < \$25,000	0	0	4	30
\$25,000 to < \$30,000	1	12.5	0	0
\$40,000 to < \$45,000	1	12.5	2	16
\$45,000 to < \$50,000	0	0	1	8
\$50,000 to < \$100,000	1	12.5	4	30
Unreported	4	50	0	0

The majority of participants ( $n = 9$ ) were enrolled in a university transfer program. Eight participants were enrolled in Nursing and Business Administration Programs. Table 2 displays the programs in which study participants were enrolled.

Table 2

*Focus Group Participants Programs of Study*

Academic Program	First-year		Second-year	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Business Administration	1	12.5	3	24
Human Services	1	12.5	0	0
Nursing	0	0	4	30
Respiratory Therapy	0	0	1	8
University Transfer	5	62.5	4	30
Veterinarian Technology	0	0	1	8
X-Ray Technician	1	12.5	0	0

Five first-year focus group participants reported attending college as full-time students with three first-year students reporting part-time status. Four second-year students were enrolled as full-time students and nine second-year students reported part-time status.

Table 3 offers insight as to the occupations of the parents of study participants. The majority of participant's fathers work in semiskilled ( $n = 4$ ) and skilled manual labor occupations ( $n = 4$ ). The majority of participants' mothers were reported to be homemakers ( $n = 4$ ), or in various clerical positions ( $n = 8$ ).

Table 3

*Parent Occupations of Focus Group Participants*

Occupation	<i>n</i>	%
Father's Occupation		
Appliance & Computer Repair	1	4
Construction	3	14
Farming	2	10
Electrician	1	4
Sales	1	4
Semiskilled Manual	4	20
Skilled Manual	4	20
Truck Driver	2	10
Unreported	3	14
Mother's Occupation		
Administrative Staff	2	10
Bank Teller	2	10
Childcare Provider	1	4
Cook	1	4
Dental Assistant	1	4
Homemaker	4	20
Laborer	1	4
Postal Worker	1	4
Self-Employed	2	10
Unemployed	2	10
Unreported	4	20



## Themes

Transcripts from focus group interviews, moderator's group debriefing notes, and researcher notes were used to inform this study. Through the process of member checking, an electronic copy of a summary of focus group themes was sent to each study participant. Focus group participants were also invited to a town hall where the findings and recommendations from this study were presented.

Through focus group interviews with first-year and second-year students, 10 themes emerged to be common in their experiences in the rural community college environment. Addressing the first research question of what experiences do first-generation college students at a rural community college perceive impact their academic success, three themes emerged: (a) building relationships with faculty strengthens student motivation to succeed academically; (b) support services and resources are important in assisting first-generation students to persist, and (c) taking less than a full-time course load can help many first-generation students succeed academically.

Addressing the second research question of what experiences do first-generation students at a rural community college perceive impact their nonacademic success, three themes were identified: (a) first-generation students have a strong sense of self-efficacy; (b) students find pride in being the first in their family to attend college but feel pressure to succeed, and (c) relationships with peers help first-generation students to socially integrate into the college environment.

Addressing the third research question of what challenges do first-generation students attending a rural community college perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students, two themes emerged: (a) families of first-generation students lack the social

capital which assists continuing-generation students, and (b) financial assistance is important in helping first-generation students to persist.

Finally, in addressing the fourth research question of what personal factors do first-generation students attending a rural community college perceive impact their college success two themes emerged presenting (a) determination, and (b) family as factors impacting success.

### **Analysis related to research question one**

In exploring the factors that first-generation students attending a rural community college perceived impact their academic success three themes emerged. Students believed that faculty interaction, resources and support services, and course load were important to their academic success.

**Faculty interaction.** Participants shared that their relationship with faculty was one of the most important elements of their educational experience. Students felt that building relationships with their faculty helped them to feel more comfortable in class. Repeatedly students gave examples of how faculty helped them to integrate into the campus through simple acts such as recognizing them on and off campus, meeting at a coffee shop to provide extra help, and providing office time for reasons other than coursework. Students felt that when faculty went above and beyond their normal role they did so because they wanted students to succeed. Robert a second-year student shared

Faculty are my most helpful resource outside the classroom and really have helped me.

There's been a couple of professors in particular that have given a lot of office hours for projects and such I'm not even doing in their class, just things I'm doing outside of the class with internships or stuff. That's been really helpful. That small campus feel

influences where I want to transfer to. When you pass a professor and they recognize you, that's the kind of environment I wanted to learn in.

Gail, a nontraditional student from a different focus group, provided confirmation of the power of relationship building between first-generation students and faculty.

The professors here have a passion, a heart, and a love for teaching, and it shows. It shows in the classroom and their dedication to their students. They are here because they want to be here and the quality of professors, I mean, I've just had maybe one really, really bad professor, otherwise, it's been great. They're here because they have a passion, I know, because they have a passion and I feel it.

Conversely, although Tina, a first-year student, acknowledged the majority of her teachers were supportive she did find issue with faculty using the syllabus as an excuse for not answering questions about assignment requirements.

If it is in the syllabus, do you know it? Because faculty have a real thing about that, it's in the syllabus, you should know. Different teachers have different expectations of how they want things done. A lot of syllabuses look the same and have pretty much all the same information.

Tina's need for more guidance on a professor's expectations on assignments confirms research of how first-generation students lack the academic self-efficacy possessed by their continuing-generation peers (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; McConnell, 2000).

As many of the study's participants were nontraditional students, several with children, they also shared a belief that if faculty knew more about them they would be more willing to help. Candace shared:

Getting the encouragement from your professor really drives you forward. Haley had an injury last year, she fell out of bed and broke her clavicle and my professor was more than willing to be like, "Oh my god, you can take your exam next week, don't even worry about it this week." They were just so willing to work with you.

The support and understanding of faculty send the message to the first-generation student that even when life happens you can work through it and be successful.

**Resources and Support Services.** Participants repeatedly credited the support services and resources available to them as being reasons they succeed. Among the most noted services were academic advising, financial aid, career services, and peer tutoring. Resources cited as impacting first-generation student success were study labs, the CAVE (Center for Academic Vision and Excellence), and college-sponsored scholarships.

Although not always a positive experience the majority of students had good interaction with academic advisors. In fact, several students noted that once they had a good experience with a specific advisor they would make sure they scheduled future appointments with the same advisor. Students repeatedly shared how an advisor could motivate them to persist. Gail shared her experience with an advisor:

She's just such an encouragement. I go in and she builds me up and she praises the accomplishment that I've done. I think that's been a real encouragement when I don't know which direction to go or what class to choose. She's really great.

The positive experiences of participants with helpful support staff included financial aid advisors. As finances were cited as a constant source of stress for students, the assistance provided by the financial aid advisors helped students to remain enrolled. Kimberly, a traditional-aged student, shared her decision to start college without any financial support from

her parents. Although her parents expected her to go to college they lacked the financial resources to help pay for college costs. Additionally, as neither Kimberly nor her parents understood the financial aid process she attended the first semester not knowing how she would be able to pay for college.

That was scary when you're coming out of high school and you have a little itty-bitty paying job. You get your gas in your car and that's about it. That was kind of worrisome, like I guess I'm taking one class, because that's what I can afford until I was told about grants and scholarships. That helped out tremendously. But yeah, man, that first semester I felt like I was in water just drowning, because I had no clue what was going on, and my parents could not help because they were clueless too. They had no clue.

Kimberly's lack of social capital in respect to financial aid could have resulted in her leaving college. Kimberly's experience supports past research providing that first-generation students struggle with their ability to navigate and transition into higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This lack of social capital may explain why first-generation students are nearly four times more likely to drop out of college than their non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). However, Kimberly credits meeting with a financial aid advisor and learning about the resources available with her ability to concentrate on coursework and succeed.

Beth, a non-traditional student and single mother of three young children, provided multiple examples of how the financial aid advisors provided resources that have helped her succeed against what she cited as great odds.

I only applied, you know, thinking I was going to get one scholarship and they gave me two. Like now I have enough money where if I need to pay somebody for some extra study time, I have that instead of trying to bribe my kids to go to bed at 6:30. I have that.

She also went out of her way to tell me about, you know, resources out there that would help you, like this Early Head Start Program. She's like you can apply for this. I don't even have to pay childcare while I'm at work for my one-year-old because of this program that she told me about.

By becoming the champion for Beth, the financial aid staff offered this low-income single mother the opportunity to succeed academically and earn her degree in nursing.

The Career Services office was noted for offering several students guidance on what career choices offered the most potential for job placement. One student stated that once he had met with Career Service staff and discussed the degree plans that would move him toward his desired occupation he understood what classes he needed to take.

Focus group participants also praised the CAVE and other study labs on campus as resources that aided in their academic success. Students shared that the ability to work with other students and peer mentors to study, discuss lecture materials, and prepare assignments helped them to succeed academically. The acknowledgment by students that this form of interaction with their peers helped them build bonds that strengthened their commitment to their education and the college supports past research providing that social integration aids student persistence (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Whitt et al., 2001).

**Course load.** A reoccurring theme heard across all three focus groups was that first-generation students struggle to be successful when taking a full course load. Although research has presented that enrollment status of students is linked with persistence (Chen, 2005; College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004) the participants in this study repeatedly shared how they struggled to work, handle family responsibilities, and take a course load equivalent to full-time status. The majority of students agreed that going slower than a

traditional full-time student in course load has helped them to succeed. These experiences contradict what many researchers believe would help students finish their degrees in a timely manner. Past research presents course load, working, and external variables as having negative implications for first-generation student persistence in college (Chen, 2005; Fike & Fike, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). However, first-generation students in this study felt that a slower path helped them to succeed in college.

Kim a nontraditional first-generation student shared her struggle to attend full-time and succeed in her courses.

Not overloading myself was a huge thing too. When I first started, I wanted to jump in. I was going to do that, 2-year program. I realized, it's okay if I don't. You don't have to push yourself overboard and half fail and I don't think you get a whole lot out of it, where you can just take what you can and do as well as you can.

Tina shared her struggle to successfully complete an anatomy course.

This is the second time I'm taking this class, because I took it my first semester of college, and I was just so overwhelmed. It was just not a good idea to take it my first semester of college just because it is like two classes and I was taking three other classes. I just like the fact that I chose to go part-time and just take one less class and focus on those classes rather than being full-time. It's just worth it to just focus on your goal.

Beth a nontraditional single mother of three shared her struggle to attend college full-time while juggling her other responsibilities.

It's like I keep planning to go full-time. Every semester I'm starting with four classes and then I get in and I see the workload and then I get off from working full-time. You know, you have to be a mom, you have to help with homework, and you cook and you

straighten up and then you put them to bed after you read a book. Sometimes I fall asleep as I'm reading the book and they fall asleep and I put it down, and I accidentally go to sleep. You end up dropping the course. I take what I can do.

Repeatedly, the students in these focus groups who have attended college in a less-than-full-time enrollment status maintained strong grades in their courses. Three first-year students attended college part-time. The average GPA of those part-time students was 2.85 with a median GPA of 2.889. Of the nine second-year students attending part-time, the median GPA was 3.647 with an average GPA of 3.333. The qualitative and quantitative data offer a picture of students who are succeeding academically and persisting even though they are taking longer to complete their college degrees.

### **Summary**

Repeatedly research has found that first-generation students have a difficult time transitioning into higher education (Forbes et al., 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1975, 1993). However, research has found a correlation between first-year first-generation students' level of student engagement to interactions with faculty, staff, and other students (Fischer, 2007; Gibson & Slate, 2010). Overall, focus group participants confirmed this research by offering that interaction with faculty was one of the most important variables aiding the academic integration of first-generation students into the rural community college environment.

Focus group interview results contradicted research related to students' enrollment status as being correlated with persistence. The students in this study repeatedly demonstrated that motivation to persist increased when they were able to reduce their course load and concentrate



on few courses per semester. Although increasing the time to completion, successful completion of courses at a reduced load helped increase students' academic self-efficacy.

### **Analysis related to research question two**

In exploring the factors that first-generation students attending a rural community college perceive impact their nonacademic success three themes emerged. Students believed that a strong sense of self-efficacy, pride in being the first to attend college, and relationships with peers were important to their nonacademic success.

**Strong sense of self-efficacy.** When students were asked what experiences were perceived to have impacted their nonacademic success, participants repeatedly spoke about determination, commitment to goals, stubbornness, and having a strong work ethic. Mary shared how she struggled to find a new balance in her life after separating from her husband and changing jobs while attending college.

For me, it's a bit of stubbornness. I've been tempted to give up, especially this semester with everything in my personal life really upside down. I'm like, no, I've come too far, I've worked too hard, I've done too much to give up now. I can't quit now.

Mary's demonstration of self-efficacy and determination confirms the considerable research that has been completed on a student's ability to cope even when confronted with adversity (Martin, 2002; Martin & Marsh, 2006). Mary's academic resiliency aided her ability to stay motivated even when confronted with challenges and stress (Hansen, Trujillo, Boland, & MacKinnon, 2014). Mary's commitment to achieving her goal of earning a college degree was demonstrated through her self-efficacy and resiliency, even as she was juggling major life changes.

Robert shared how he had to learn everything himself. Having left college for a year and a half, Robert returned when he felt more focused and in the right “head space”. He credits his experiences learning the “system” to building his self-confidence.

I kind of have to educate myself as I go how all this works, how degrees work, how credits and all this stuff, this whole bureaucracy works. In terms of money, trying to find financial aid and things like that. I'm having to teach myself, find it myself, because my parents really can't. I mean they support me but they can't really help me in terms of advice or their own experiences. I have their support but they can't really relate to the experiences I have.

Kimberly shared how her struggle to start college was a “huge confidence builder” and shared how her experiences created a sense of pride in her accomplishments.

I think it is because you come in not knowing, you come in blind. And you have no clue how to pay for it, you have no clue what you're going to do. You have no clue what classes are going to be like. But then you succeed and you get to where you need to be and you turn around and then you go, I did that. And I didn't have to have mom and dad help me. I think it's a huge confidence builder and it's nice for people in your family to see that you've done that. You've got your big kid britches on.

Several students noted that managing their time helped them to succeed in their courses. Many focus group participants were parents juggling not only work and school but also children and family responsibilities. They agreed that putting things off could result in failing their courses. Tina shared her need for a routine in her life.

Getting a schedule going has been really helpful. You could always not do it, but I'm the type of person that's just like, "I've got to get my stuff done." So it does help me.

Commitment to goals, stubbornness, and the ability to persist even when challenged with personal conflicts result in first-generation students building the self-efficacy needed to persist.

**Being the first.** First-generation students repeatedly cited being the first to attend college as creating a sense of accomplishment and pride. Jack discussed how his family did not support his quest for an education but also shared what his college experience has provided.

For me, it's a sense of pride because I'm the youngest in my family and there's nobody else that went to college.

First-generation students are proud of the fact that they are the first and are succeeding in doing something no one in their family has done before. Mary shared

I think we might end up taking things less for granted than someone whose parents had gone to college and it's just the thing to do. For us, we're pushing ourselves over and above what the previous generations did. We realize that what we're getting, we're working for it.

For Susan, pride in being a first-generation student and a role model for other family members has motivated her to complete her degree.

I can say I'm a first-generation student. I have a little cousin. When we all get together, my little cousin who's 22, and is now talking about going to college is like, I'm going to beat you in college.

Beth also found she has become a role model for her sister which has motivated her. She's seen me doing it and now she's like, I don't see how you do it with three kids. If you can do it with three kids, I know that I can do it. Now she's thinking about going back. I think it's just, you know, encouraging others to say we can do better. I like that.

Being the first can also bring the pressure to succeed.

Mary-Ann, a traditional-aged Hispanic student, shared how her father's passion for education adds pressure on her to be successful.

My sister and my brother, they don't want to go to college, so it's all up to me. My dad, he really liked school when he was a young kid, but his family, he had a lot of siblings and his parents couldn't afford it. My dad always wanted to be a professor. He always tells me that he wants to see me get my diploma so he can be happy and proud of me. Yeah, it's hard because they expect a lot. I'm like, "Oh my gosh, what if I don't do this?" Then I'll disappoint them.

**Relationships with peers.** Although not all focus group participants found the time to participate in on-campus activities, or student clubs and organizations, the students cited building relationships with their peers as helping them to feel college was the right place to be. Numerous researchers have cited social integration as imperative to the success of first-year college students (Kuh et al., 2008; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Whitt et al., 2001). By connecting students to the college through peer interaction and participation in student organizations students begin to see their place in college as the correct place to be (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Molly shared how her involvement in a student organization had helped her gain confidence and to integrate into the campus environment.

I've done so much through that group it really helped me grow as a person. When I first came here I feel like I was very different than I am today. I was very quiet, very shy. It was very hard to participate in anything for me but that really changed me so much and opened up a lot of doors and. It's helped me overall.

Not only did her involvement in a student organization result in her bonding with her peers and feeling more comfortable attending college, but Molly also shared how involvement resulted in new skills development.

I think they helped me in many different ways. I actually helped organize one of the events on campus last year. That was a totally new experience for me, just managing a big project like that. It turned out really great and it gave me more confidence in myself, knowing that I could do that.

Randy shared how playing on the soccer team was one of his most memorable experiences in college. He also was a member of a student organization that was designed to aid students of different ethnicities. While Randy struggled to maintain a passing GPA he found motivation and support through his involvement in this student organization.

They've done quite a wonderful job with keeping its focus on what's important you know, like grade level. Most of us don't really have model figures it somewhat helps with school because the next day you want to come back.

Student clubs and organizations were not the only conduits for students to build relationships with their peers. Several students noted how peer study groups helped them to succeed in their classes and build bonds with their classmates. Kimberly noted that when taking a class over the summer the number of students in the class was small. Although that class had a small number of students enrolled they shared experiences, which resulted in friendships, which extended over the past year.

It was a smaller class. We just had the best time together, and we still keep in touch with each other. It was over the summer, so spending the time helped us to bond. We'd go out and do some stuff and it was just fun.

Diana shared how study groups not only help students build relationships but also helped her to learn different study skills.

I just had my A&P study group. It was nice because it was a group of students and when we were, you know, conversing about everything it was interesting to see how they remembered things compared to me. It helped me.

Repeatedly first-generation students referenced the opportunity to discuss class material and study with their peers as a tool for success. Mary, a student majoring in Veterinarian Technology shared how a program specific study lab aided in her success.

We have a study lab strictly for the Veterinarian Technology program. A lot of us will go in there and study together or do projects, kind of talk through different things that we're having trouble with.

General agreement was heard across the three focus groups of how a strong sense of self-efficacy, pride in being the first to attend college, and relationships with peers aid first-generation students to succeed in higher education.

## **Summary**

Focus group interviews reinforced past research citing that a strong sense of self-efficacy aids first-generation students to succeed in college (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). A common theme shared by study participants was that they believed that their determination and stubbornness helped them work through the challenges they encountered in college, in their personal lives, and to persist.

Additionally, students shared how a sense of pride in being the first in their families to succeed in college was a motivating factor. This motivation reverts back to the importance of family to the first-generation student (Auerbach, 2002; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

Lastly, peer interaction was confirmed by all focus groups as being an important variable in the social integration of the first-generation student into the college environment. These findings confirm past research (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Whitt et al., 2001).

### **Analysis related to research question three**

First-generation students in this study recognized that continuing-generation students arrive at college with knowledge that offers them guidance. This guidance is a form of social capital, which is lacking in the families of first-generation students (Chen, 2005; Forbus et al., 2011; Collier & Morgan, 2007; Gibson & Slate, 2010; Thayer, 2000).

**Lack of Social Capital.** First-generation students overwhelmingly cite the lack of knowledge about the college experience as a challenge to not only starting college but also to persistence. Students recognize that their parents and families, having never attended college, don't know the ins and outs of higher education. This lack of social capital challenges first-generation students especially throughout the enrollment process and during their first-year of college.

Tina explained how her parents' lack of experience in applying for and attending college resulted in her having to learn how to navigate college by herself. However, she described her struggle as having a positive outcome.

My parents never really helped me. My whole college, I had to learn how to do everything by myself because they didn't really know what to do. They never applied for college or wrote an essay to get into college or whatever. I was thinking about going to a four-year school, but I chose to go here, but it's just money. I still had to figure out how to apply by myself, get an apartment by myself, and move down here by myself. They

couldn't have really helped me. They couldn't do anything, although I almost like the fact that I had to do it by myself. It really teaches you a lot and helps you grow up as a person.

Diane reinforced Tina's experience with her own.

I had no idea what to expect walking in. No clue. Applying for college, nobody could help me. It was really difficult because I didn't know what I was doing. That was my biggest thing. I had no idea.

Molly a traditional age student shared how it is difficult for her parents to help her.

It's hard for my parents to relate sometimes with the whole experience and what I have to do and go through just to be here. Knowing how everything works. I was going in blind without any support, well not support, but ... they just didn't know how it worked. I didn't know how it worked.

Parents who have attended college start grooming their children for higher education early in life (Majer, 2009). Robert offered insight into the struggle first-generation students experience due to a lack of the social capital.

I kind of have to educate myself as I go how all this works, how degrees work, how credits and all this stuff, all this whole bureaucracy works. Students whose parents went can have an advantage and knowing how to find or at least going to their parents and asking them how it works or stuff. In terms of money, trying to find financial aid and things like that. I have to teach myself, find it myself because my parents really can't. I mean they support me but they can't really help me in terms of advice or their own experiences. I have their support but they can't really relate to the experiences I have.

Repeatedly study participants discussed how the lack of guidance from their parents and families resulted in a difficult transition into higher education. From registering for the wrong



courses, enrolling in the incorrect programs, overloading their schedules with online courses, or missing opportunities for financial aid, lack of social capital is a significant challenge to persistence for first-generation students.

**Financial assistance.** One of the major worries of first-generation students is how to pay for their education. Although community colleges are known to be an affordable option for students, many first-generation students come from low-income homes and worry about the cost. Mary discussed her fear of the cost and how it was a variable in her decision-making process.

Affordability held me back for a long time. I was like, how in the world am I going to afford college? Once I did one semester and was able to make it, it gave me the encouragement I needed to keep coming back.

Kimberly shared how her first semester was overwhelming due to her family's and her own lack of knowledge of how to fund college.

It was really, really overwhelming. Extremely overwhelming. Obviously, my parents were like, you should go to college, you really should, you need to go. But then they were like; we're not paying for it. You go get a job and you go pay for it yourself. That was scary when you're coming out of high school and you have a little itty-bitty paying job. You get your gas in your car and that's about it. That was kind of worrisome, like I guess I'm taking one class because that's what I can afford. Until I saw the grants and the scholarships. That helped out tremendously. But yeah, man, that first semester I felt like I was in water drowning, because I had no clue what was going on, and my parents could not help because they were clueless too. They had no clue.

Tina shared her mindset suggesting that continuing-generation students have parents who have access to the financial resources needed to fund their children's education.

I know that I can't fail. A lot of people whose parents are really wealthy, they have this college background, they're a trust fund baby, they know that they can fall back on it and they don't try as hard because they know, "My parents are rich, my parents did this, they can help me, they can take care of me my whole life."

Neil reinforced Tina comments

Yeah. I've seen a lot of the kids at summer classes that I'm taking, they'll come to one class and then they'll miss three or four and then come to another class. It's like, you put the time and effort, you're paying for these classes, but their parents are paying for classes, it doesn't matter. They'll bomb this semester and then do it all again next semester.

Comments such as Tina's and Neil's suggest that first-generation students see their continuing-generation peers as having many advantages, including financial resources. Robert offered that although many first-generation students struggle to pay for college they see themselves as valuing their education more than their continuing-education peers.

My family's a working family and I grew up knowing the value of a dollar. I've worked in service for 10 years and I've seen non-first generation college students and how they act and a lot of them are spoiled. My parents worked really hard to give us what they gave us and I appreciate that, so I think that is the biggest advantage or positive thing about being a first generation student, is knowing the hard work it takes to be here.

## **Summary**

This study's participants recognized that their parents and families lacked the social capital needed to help them with their college experience. The students also felt that students who came from continuing-generation families arrive at college with a greater advantage in

understanding the enrollment process and acquiring the financial resources needed to pay for college. The experiences these students shared confirmed the volumes of past research citing the lack of social capital as one of the greatest challenges first-generation students encounter when entering higher education (Chen, 2005; Forbus et al., 2011; Gibson & Slate, 2010; Ishitani, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Naumann et al., 2003; Pascarella et al., 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

#### **Analysis related to research question four**

The fourth research question explored what personal factors first-generation rural community college students perceived to have impacted their college success. Students shared how determination or grit and the role of family motivated them to succeed.

**Determination.** Focus group participants repeatedly discussed how their determination was a major factor helping them to persist, taking at times one course at a time to finish their degree. Determination and stubbornness were credited by several students for their ability to navigate challenging situations. Determination also resulted from the expectations of other people. Some students shared how their parents expected them to succeed, while other parents have the expectation that their children will earn a degree and then help their families. Other students shared that their parents were waiting for them to fail. Neil provided insight on the struggle many first-generation students have with parents who do not support their goals.

My parents and just about everybody I know they are basically a step away from waiting for me to fall on my face and quit and just stay complacent at the job I'm at. It's that stubbornness that's, I don't want to keep doing this for the rest of my life. You might be comfortable with it, but I want something more for me and my kids. That's what keeps pushing me.

Although Neil's family and friends did not value his goal of a college education, his determination helped him to stay focused and remain in school.

**Family.** The theme of family was present across discussions throughout all focus group interviews. What was clear was that first-generation students valued the support of their families. Although a few students shared the negative opinions family members held toward higher education, most participants were motivated to succeed by their families.

Many focus group participants were parents and see that they were becoming role models for their children. Neil noted how his children once tried to distract him but now are motivated by his progress.

The first semester my children would want me to engage with them. Once I got the next semester under my belt and did good and then the next one and did well, they started seeing my progress. My vision became their vision. My daughter, this year she's a freshman in high school and she's already doing dual enrollment. She hopes to have her associate's degree before she even gets out of high school. I can offer her that kind of motivation and that's amazing.

Kim another nontraditional student with a teenage son shared  
My son's 18 and a couple years ago, before I started here, I said, "What are you going to do? You need to go to college, you need to do this." It's awful to say, but you don't want to end up doing a job like Mom does for so many years. Now, two years later, his grades have gone up, now he's talking about going to college. I'm like, this is great, I'm like a role model. When they see you trying to do it, they're like, "Yeah, okay, I can do it too." It brings more good things into your life.

Family was a reoccurring reason to succeed and a motivation for students. Mary provided her experiences with her sister.

One of my sisters, she's home schooled, and she decided to just get her GED instead of finishing her high school. Now she's like, I can go to college. I can encourage her it's a good thing. It feels good to me to know that my little sister's really looking up to me and to be that encouragement to them, even though one of my little sisters pushed me.

Whether parents, children, siblings, relatives or friends, when first-generation students are looked to positively for their efforts to earn a college education the resulting sense of accomplishment and pride motivates students to persist.

### **Summary**

There was an overlap in the findings from research questions two and four. Overall participants believed that their determination impacted their success in college. Additionally, students shared that their need to succeed was motivated by how their family responded to their college goals. Although some families did not support the student's pursuit of a college education whether negative or positive, family was a driving force for the majority of student participants.

### **Focus group feedback**

At the end of each focus group participants were invited to provide suggestions for college administrators to use to help first-generation students. Among the advice offered several themes emerged including providing more assistance in the enrollment process, helping with paperwork including the FAFSA, providing mentors who reach out to first-generation students during the first month of classes, providing academic advisors who specifically work with first-

generation students, providing a first-generation student transition program, and providing on-campus events that encourage family members to become involved in the college.

Focus group participants were also invited to provide one piece of advice for future first-generation students. Among the themes that emerged were don't be afraid to ask for help, get to know your professors they are there to help you, there are many resources available to you, apply for financial aid and campus scholarships even if you don't think you will receive any, work hard, do not procrastinate stay on schedule, and get to know your advisor and see them often. A complete list of feedback can be found in Appendix H-K.

In the next chapter, I will present a discussion of the results of the study as well as implications, suggestions for programs to assist first-generation students, conclusions, and areas for future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how first-generation students attending a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States, perceived that their experiences impacted their academic and nonacademic success. This study replicated and extended the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) qualitative study, which focused on first-generation students attending a large urban research institution.

Tukey (1969) stated, “confirmation comes from repetition” (p.84). Through the replication of Stansberry and Burnett (2014), and extending the study to include first-generation students attending a rural community college, the present study sought to advance the understanding of the first-generation college student experience.

Using a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological approach this study sought to consider the experiences shared by first-generation students as reliable insight into the human phenomena rather than using a theory to explain phenomena (Morrissey & Higgs, 2006). Twenty-one first-generation students participated in three focus group interviews to offer insight as to what experiences and personal factors impacted their academic and nonacademic success. Developing an understanding of how first-generation students perceive their lived experiences impact their academic and nonacademic success will help college leaders design support services that will aid efforts to increase retention.

In the following sections, I will emphasize findings and discuss how they can contribute to a growing body of research related to first-generation college students. I will also present recommendations for interventions and programs designed to assist first-generation rural community college students, limitations of this study, and suggestions for future research.

## **Summary of Major Findings**

This section will offer a discussion of the major findings of the focus group interviews as well as the related research reviewed in Chapter II. The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation students attending a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States, perceived that their experiences impacted their academic and nonacademic success. Although the majority of the findings from this study support existing research, this study contributes to the knowledge of what factors impact the first-generation rural community college student's experience.

## **Discussion of Results**

### **Factors affecting first-generation student success**

The variables that students in this study confirmed to have aided their success confirmed past research (Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al. 1996; Tinto 1975, 1993). Students cited relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, self-efficacy, and family support as important to their success.

**Academic integration.** Study findings confirmed past research that academic integration positively impacts the collegiate experience of first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto 1975, 1993). As first-generation students struggle to academically integrate into the college environment (Chen, 2005; Gibson & Slate, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto 1975, 1993) it is not surprising that academically successful first-generation students found support through interaction with faculty and staff. A constant theme heard from study participants was that they believed that faculty cared about them and wanted them to succeed. Robert shared how his student to faculty interaction impacted him, "the faculty were so accessible, I mean they remembered you. I ran into a professor I had at a job, he was offering to write letters of



recommendation and help me.” Heidi, a nontraditional student reinforced Robert words by sharing “the teachers believe in you and that gives you faith, that you can do it, even if you've been out of school for a long time.”

These experiences confirm Gibson and Slate’s research (2010) which found that first-year first-generation students’ level of engagement was correlated to their interactions with faculty, staff, and other students. Study participants felt a connection to faculty even through the most simple of acts such as remembering their names on or off campus and finding time to help them on non-course related projects.

Students also connected with academic and financial aid advisors. The majority of their interactions with these staff members were positive. The students reported that advisors provided encouragement and highlighted the student’s accomplishments. These actions helped the students to believe that they belonged in college. One study participant explained how her academic adviser motivated her, “she's just such an encouragement. I go in and she builds me up and she praises the accomplishment that I've done. I think that's been a real encouragement when I don't know which direction to go.” This positive interaction between advisor and student confirms Terenzini et al. (1996) suggesting that first-generation students need validation to succeed. They must be able to see that they can succeed and that they are in the right place.

Although not all interactions with faculty and staff were reported as positive the majority of the students reported building relationships with college personnel. Through the building of these relationships, students received the message that their success was important. These interactions strengthened study participants’ commitment to their educational goals and to the college (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The findings of this study confirm the findings of the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) study which focused on the experienced of first-generation students attending a large, diverse research university. The first-generation students in the Stansberry and Burnett study reported positive interaction with faculty, which helped them to succeed. However, it is interesting to note that the students in the Stansberry and Burnett study felt that they had experienced some level of poor academic fit during their college experience. These students also expressed frustration by their lack of knowledge as to the support services available to them. In contrast, the students in this current study did not feel the same. The first-generation students in this study felt the small rural community college was a good fit due to the availability of faculty and staff. The students also reported that the resources and support services provided to them at the rural community college helped them to succeed.

**Social integration.** Study findings confirmed past research that social integration and building relationships with peers is important to the success of first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto 1975, 1993; Tinto & Engle, 2008). Pascarella et al. (2004) determined that first-generation students benefit more than non-first-generation students when engaged in the college's social and peer networks. Other studies also confirmed that although first-generation students benefit from this type of interaction, they were less likely to engage in such activities (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Pascarella et al., 2004; Smith & Zhang, 2010).

Findings of this study revealed that peer study groups, membership in clubs and student organizations, and friendships with peers were all cited as improving the first-generation student's college experience, confirming past research (Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto 1975, 1993; Tinto & Engle, 2008). However, the majority of students did not belong to student clubs or organizations. The majority of the focus group participants benefited more from peer interaction

and study groups. Not only did study groups help with social integration, the study participants learned new ways to study by discussing materials with their peers, increasing academic self-efficacy. The positive impact of peer support can be heard through Diana's words "I just had my A and P study group. It was a group of students conversing about everything it was interesting to see how they remembered things compared to me. It helped me." The resulting improvement of this student's academic self-efficacy increased her commitment to her educational goals, again supporting past research (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000).

The findings of this study contradicted the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) study. The first-generation students in the Stansberry and Burnett study reported being highly involved in clubs, organizations, volunteerism, and in local church groups. They reported that their social integration on and off campus, as well as their relationships with peers, strengthened their commitment to their education. In contrast, although several students in this current study were involved in college-sponsored student groups or volunteered in the community, the majority of the students in the current study reported that they did not have time to participate in these forms of activities. The majority of the first-generation students in this study did report that they benefited from peer interaction and study groups, but due to work and family responsibilities did not have time for clubs, student organizations, or volunteerism.

**Academic self-efficacy.** Past research has found that first-generation students present lower levels of academic self-efficacy than their non-first-generation peers (McConnell, 2000). The participants in this study struggled in their transition to higher education, reflecting a lower level of academic preparation, lack of social capital, and low levels of academic self-efficacy. One focus group participant explained, "this is really different from high school because here the professors they lecture and you have to take notes. It was a huge adjustment because the

professors here treat you as an adult.” However, it is interesting to note that these successful first-generation students presented high levels of determination and motivation. These personal factors helped the first-generation students in this study successfully transition to college even when presented with challenges. These findings confirmed past research suggesting that academic self-efficacy is predictive of academic adjustment (Cribbie, 2007).

**Role of parents and family.** Although the participants in this study shared positive and negative experiences related to their families and their decision to attend college, what stood out was how the support of parents and family members motivated these students. Fourteen of the 21 study participants discussed how serving as a role model for siblings, cousins, or children motivated them to succeed. Serving as a role model and example for others created a sense of pride of being “the first” to attend college, which motivated the students. One student shared “I think it's just, you know, encouraging others to say we can do better than what our past generations have done. I like that.” These findings confirmed past research offering that family support and encouragement could influence student’s self-efficacy (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Schunk & Pajares, 2002).

The findings of this study confirm the results reported in the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) study. The first-generation students who participated in both studies reported that although family involvement can be positive or negative, parental support and family involvement played a major role in their academic and nonacademic success.

### **Challenges experienced by first-generation rural community college students**

The challenges experienced by first-generation rural community college students include an absence of social capital to aid in their transition to higher education. Resources available to

finance the students' college education and the ability to succeed academically while taking a full-time course load were also challenges the students encountered.

**Social Capital.** Findings from the focus group interviews conducted from this study confirmed past research suggesting that due to the lack of social capital first-generation students experience many challenges transitioning to college (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). Having never attended college, the parents of study participants could not assist their children or provide advice. As a result, the students confirmed that they had to learn everything by themselves. One student shared his experience "I had no idea what to expect walking in. No clue. Applying for college, nobody could help me. You know? It was really difficult because I didn't know what I was doing. That was my biggest thing. I had no idea." These findings confirmed past research that due to a lack of social capital first-generation students struggle to understand how to apply to college, enroll in classes, find the resources needed to be success, and worry about how to pay for their educations (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Sy et al., 2012). In addition, several study participants shared how due to a lack of experience, their parents could not help them with decisions about which college to attend. One focus group participant confirmed past research by sharing "my parents never really helped me. My whole college, I had to learn how to do everything by myself because they didn't really know what to do." This confirmed past research suggesting that parents of first-generation students help their children less with decisions about college than the parents of non-first-generation students (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; McConnell, 2000; Sy et al., 2012; Thayer, 2000).

The results of this current study confirmed the Stansberry and Burnett (2014) study. Both samples of first-generation students confirmed that the lack of social capital in their families was

a challenge to their college transition. Both studies confirmed past research that revealed first-generation students struggle to transition to and navigate college due to the lack of social capital.

**Financial Aid.** Access to financial aid and college-sponsored scholarships were repeatedly cited by study participants as providing an opportunity to attend and remain in college. Only one of the 21 study participants did not have to worry about how to pay for college. The majority of study participants ( $n = 16$ ) reported receiving no financial assistance from their families. This lack of support resulted in the need for students to work while attending college. These findings support the literature suggesting that without the financial support of their families' first-generation students find it necessary to work while in college (D'Amico & Dike, 2013). Additionally, several students discussed starting college while trying to pay all the costs of attending without the help of financial aid. This too supports past research suggesting that due to a lack of social capital first-generation students who were eligible for financial aid including Pell grants do not file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (McKinney & Novak, 2012).

This study also confirmed that educating first-generation students about the financial resources available through the FAFSA and other sources could decrease the stress associated with paying for college costs and in turn increase student persistence.

The results of this current study were similar to the results reported in the Stanberry and Burnett (2014) study. The majority of both samples of students reported that finances were a concern in paying for college. The majority of both samples of students reported working while in college, receiving financial aid, and being self-supporting.

**Course load.** Those students who take fewer credits per semester increase the time to completion. This increase in time enrolled has been studied to have strong negative implications for community college student persistence (Chen, 2005; Fike & Fike, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). However, the opposite is true of the current study's participants who were taking less than a full-time course load. In fact, findings from this study contradict past research by finding that these successful first-generation students ( $n = 12$ ) have found that taking fewer credits has increased their ability to earn high grades and successfully complete challenging courses. This success has resulted in an increase in students' academic self-efficacy, motivation, and determination, in turn resulting in persistence. One focus group participant stated, "I just like the fact that I chose to go part time and just take one less class and focus on those classes rather than being full time. It's just worth it to just focus on your one goal".

As community college students juggle work, family responsibilities, along with their courses, many study participants shared that taking a full-time course load is not conducive to their academic success. However, succeeding in their courses, whether attending as a part-time or full-time student, motivated them to persist.

### **Comparing Stansberry and Burnett to the current study's findings**

Findings from the current study offer confirmation of several of the findings noted in Stansberry and Burnett (2014). Interaction with faculty, staff, and peers was noted by focus group participants in both studies as being important to their sense of belonging and academic success. Academic advising, financial aid, family support, self-efficacy, and pride in being the first to attend college were also cited by both samples of first-generation students as aiding in their academic and nonacademic success.

Differences between the studies included an importance to students in the current study to enroll as part-time students. A majority of students in the current study reported struggling academically when enrolled with a full-time course load. However when the students reduced their course load by one or two courses per semester they reported being able to succeed academically. In contrast, the students in Stansberry and Burnett did not struggle with the decision whether to enroll as a part-time or full-time student. The students in the Stansberry and Burnett study discussed their desire to have more options in their choice of required courses.

Support services were noted by both samples of first-generation students as being valuable to their academic success. However the students in Stansberry and Burnett noted frustration in not being made aware of the resources until well into their first year of college. The students in the current study did not have the same experience. These students reported being made aware of the resources available to them early in their first-year of college. This difference in the student experience may be reflective of the size of the institution attended. It may be easier to learn about the resources available to students attending a small community college than the resources available to students attending a larger institution.

Other differences between the two studies included on campus living and employment. Both variables were not discussed by the first-generation students in the current study but addressed as variables impacting the success of students in the Stansberry and Burnett study. Lack of social capital was a major challenge experienced by the first-generation students in the current study while only referred to occasionally in Stansberry and Burnett. The first-generation students attending the rural community college fully recognized that their lack of social capital was a major challenge to their ability to begin college and then succeed in the role of college student.



## **Recommendations**

The first-generation students in this study believed that a college education is a path to obtaining more opportunities to build or better their lives. These students shared insight as to what helped them succeed in college and what challenges they encountered. As the final step in this research study, a town hall was held where the study's participants were invited to hear the findings of the study and the recommendations that would be made. The students that attended the town hall unanimously supported the following recommendations.

### **Recommendations to assist the transition to college**

First-generation students in the current study provided insight as to the struggles they encountered in preparing to start college. Programs designed to prepare students academically and to build their knowledge about the college enrollment process can help to smooth the transition to higher education.

**Develop early college preparation programs.** First-generation student struggle to transition into higher education (Berger & Malaney, 2001; D'Amico & Dika, 2013). High school programs that inform students and their families about the opportunities available to them to access a college education can help prepare students and aid in their transition. Many high schools offer college-planning workshops to students in their senior year of high school. However, by colleges offering an early preparation program starting during middle school or no later than freshman year of high school, first-generation students could receive guidance on how to prepare for college academically. As students progress through high school this program could also help with the college application process, applying for financial aid, and career planning.

Community college administrators should partner with the middle and high schools in their service area to create programs that provide first-generation students with a clear path into

college. McCarron and Inkelas (2006) posit that first-generation high school students may not be receiving information on the demands of college. Specialized workshops should be offered to assist in determining which college is the best fit for the first-generation student, the options available to pay for college, how to complete the FAFSA, and how to prepare for college placement exams. The inclusion of parents in these workshops could help increase parental support and reduce college culture shock (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Campus tours, shadowing programs, and activities designed to introduce parents to the college environment could help to reduce the stress associated with the first-generation student's transition to college.

**Develop a defined pathway into college.** To address the challenge of understanding what a student needs to do to enroll in college and acquire funding, a more defined pathway should be developed. This pathway should provide step-by-step guidance on the process, which would help first-generation students understand what they need to do when enrolling. This could decrease the risk of first-generation students missing valuable steps such as applying for financial aid. Community Colleges must provide a clear pathway, which enables students to navigate what they currently find as an overwhelming and intimidating process.

A checklist approach could help to increase student awareness that there is a form, test, or process they must complete before they are officially admitted to the college. This pathway or checklist must be designed to be used by students who arrive at the college to enroll in person, or enroll through the college's website. A clear linear process could help to guide first-generation students through the unknown and into college.

**Provide first-generation bridge program.** The results of this study's focus group interviews overwhelming called for assisting incoming first-generation students in acquiring the tools they need to understand their role as a community college student. These skills could help

prepare students to transition successfully. Additionally, creating a peer support system within the first-generation student population could create an environment of inclusiveness aiding with social integration. A summer bridge program targeting incoming first-generation students would address both of these goals.

The impact of summer bridge programs on new student retention has garnered attention over the past two decades. Past research has proven that the transition to college is a period of time that sets the stage for the success or failure of first-generation students (Gail, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000). Strayhorn (2011) found that students self-reported significant increases in academic skills and self-efficacy through participation in bridge programs. Studies also have found that summer bridge programs achieve two purposes, preparing students academically for the rigors of college, and helping students to socially integrate (Ackermann, 1991; Garcia, 1991; Gutierrez 2007; Robert & Thompson, 1994). Douglas and Attewell (2014) posit students that participate in summer bridge programs are 10 percentage points more likely to finish college.

Community College bridge programs should be structured to promote critical skills development in first-generation students. Bridge programs should provide information and preparation in areas that first-generation students struggle with in their transition to college. Acclimating students to the college environment and the resources available to them could help students feel more comfortable on the first day of classes. Providing seminars on how to read a syllabus, what the role of a community college student is, and how to effectively take notes and study could equip students with the tools needed to be successful in college. Additional workshops focused on diversity, leadership, and financial literacy could equip college students with knowledge, which may help them in college and in life. These experiences could also increase the first-generation student's sense of self-efficacy.

A cohort based bridge program designed for first-generation students transitioning from high school could help to build the students' on-campus support system. Through interactions with their peers who are also first-generation students, bonds can be developed that provide ongoing support. Providing an inclusive environment for first-generation students may also help to increase the student's sense of belonging in college and aid in social integration.

**First-generation new student orientation.** To prevent first-generation students from beginning their college experience feeling disconnected and isolated (Tinto, 2003) a first-generation new student orientation could help students realize that they are not alone. Recommended by this study's focus group participants and supported by Tinto (2003), providing shared peer group experiences as early as possible could prevent first-generation students from experiencing college as a spectator and not a participant. Similar to a first-generation bridge program, a first-generation new student orientation that is focused on filling the gaps in the student's knowledge could increase student's self-efficacy and help smooth the transition into college.

### **Recommendations to assist enrolled students**

The first-generation students in the current study cited the importance of relationships to their successful integration into the college environment. Aiding first-generation students to build relationships with faculty, staff, and peers can help this population of students to increase their sense of belonging in college.

**First-generation cohorts and learning communities.** Learning communities and cohorts link students by tying courses and experiences together (Tinto, 2003). First-generation learning communities or cohorts could provide the opportunity for social integration and relationship building by empowering students from similar backgrounds through their courses.

Where the majority of learning communities or cohorts focus on a topic tied to the curriculum (i.e. environment, business, or social work) first-generation learning communities or cohorts would move students through one or two semesters of courses tied together by their similar backgrounds as first-generation students. Additional support could be offered through the cohort model including advising, financial aid assistance, and student success skills. The use of shared learning experiences such as community service projects could also help students integrate with faculty and peers (Tinto, 2003).

**Extracurricular involvement.** Engagement matters especially engagement with other students (Komarrajum, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010; Tinto, 2015). First-generation students benefit from social interaction with their peers. Student clubs and organizations offer first-generation students with the opportunity to build bonds with their peers and the college. However, although studies have supported the positive effect these forms of enrichment programs offer the first-generation student (Fischer, 2007), this population is less likely to participate. While some of this study's focus group participants had become members of student organizations, several students reported not knowing how to make that connection. These student programs should be promoted through the proposed first-generation summer bridge program, first-generation new student orientation, and first-generation learning communities and cohorts.

**Faculty interaction.** First-generation students' belief in their ability to succeed can be influenced by faculty. When first-generation students have positive experiences with faculty they believe that their success is important. Positive faculty-student interaction aids in the academic and social integration of the first-generation student, however, subtle messages in the classroom can also be construed as negative (Tinto, 2015). Every interaction matters and negative impressions can jeopardize a students' sense of belonging (Tinto, 2015).

In light of the importance this study's participants placed on their interactions with faculty it is recommended that community colleges invest in faculty development. This faculty development should increase awareness of how faculty can help first-generation students succeed inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, faculty training should highlight the importance of how behavior and interaction with first-generation students could affect student's self-perception and persistence (Tinto, 2015).

**First-generation academic advisors.** Folger, Carter, and Chase (2004) note that the transitional needs of first-generation students often require more than the traditional college support systems. As first-generation students comprise a large portion of the student population enrolled in rural community colleges, the position of designated first-generation academic advisor(s) or specialist(s) should be created.

Ideally, first-generation students should be flagged while enrolling in college and referred to a first-generation academic adviser or specialist. This adviser should be available to work with first-generation students to create a clear pathway of courses needed to move the student through the requirements of a specific certification or degree program. First-generation students should only be cleared to enroll in classes after meeting with this designated academic advisor. These required meetings would decrease the risk of first-generation students enrolling in courses which do not count toward their certification or degree programs, which in turn increases the time to completion and the cost of college.

After the first-generation student begins classes intrusive academic advising should be employed through the use of an early warning system to flag students who are academically at-risk of failing. This can help to catch students who are floundering before they become

overwhelmed and leave college. Advisors could then match the at-risk first-generation student with academic or peer tutors to provide support.

First-generation students should return to the same first-generation academic adviser throughout their community college career. This would build a relationship between the student and the advisor. In turn, this relationship building could help to motivate students and increase their sense of belonging. In fact, academic advisers can highlight the success of their first-generation advisees as a platform to inspire first-generation student retention (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014).

**First-generation financial aid advisors.** Similar to the role of the first-generation academic advisor, a first-generation financial aid advisor could focus on helping this student population apply for and navigate the financial aid process. As first-generation students struggle to successfully fund their educations and are intimidated by the FAFSA, having a designated financial aid adviser who is trained to address the unique challenges of this population could benefit students. Similar to the discussion related to the impact of the first-generation academic advisor, building a relationship between a financial aid adviser who is aware of and sensitive to the struggles of first-generation students, and the first-generation student could help increase student success.

**Course offerings.** Online courses were reported as being particularly challenging to the first-generation students in this study, especially in the first year of enrollment. A common misconception shared by the study participants was that online courses were easier and less time intensive than the traditional brick and mortar class. Additionally, several study participants' cited online classes as a reason for failing a course within the first semester. It is recommended that first-generation students be blocked from taking online courses during their first semester of

college. Waiting until the second semester to participate in online courses could help the student successfully transition to college and build their academic self-efficacy.

Additionally, as many of this study's participants were working and had family responsibilities, providing a wider range of course options should be explored. Course schedules should be evaluated to ensure that first-generation students are provided with course options that provide an opportunity to take courses in the late afternoon, early evening, or on the weekend.

Service-learning courses are a high impact educational strategy (Pelco, Ball, & Lockerman, 2014), and positively impact first-generation student experiences (McKay & Estrella, 2008). McKay and Estrella (2008) suggest that service-learning courses can aid in the social and academic integration of first-generation college students. Pelco, Ball, and Lockerman (2014) revealed that first-generation students reported gains in personal and academic skills through service-learning classes. In light of the positive impact service-learning classes can have on first-generation students, institutions should provide faculty professional development training which encourages the use of this pedagogical tool.

**Family integration programs.** Family has been confirmed to be of particular importance to a majority of first-generation students, it is important to investigate ways to include families in campus activities. This integration and involvement could help teach family members why obtaining a college education is important. Studies have found that increasing parental involvement and helping parents and families understand the value of higher education, decreases the stress experienced by first-generation students (Hodges-Payne, 2006; Hsaio, 1992; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).



### **Limitations of this Study**

Limitations of this study include the small size of the sample. As the sample size was small ( $n = 21$ ), a larger sample size may have yielded different results. Additionally, as to the voluntary nature of this study, the sample may not be representative of the college's population. Students volunteered to participate in this study, which may have resulted in the sample being different than a randomly selected sample. Although this sample consisted of first-generation students attending a rural community college it may not be representative of all rural community college first-generation student populations.

The second limitation of this study was that the researcher is a first-generation student. As a first-generation student, I was familiar with many of the experiences shared by the study participants, which could have influenced the analysis of the study's data.

A final limitation is that the participants in this study could be considered successful first-generation students. As students had completed a minimum of 12 credit hours of coursework they were successful in persisting through at least one semester. Hence, the experiences shared by this sample of first-generation students may not be representative of all first-generation rural community college students, in particular, those who were not successful in their first semester of college.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Results from this study have laid the groundwork for future research of first-generation students in the rural community college environment. In light of the importance of first-generation students and their families, future research should evaluate how providing training and assistance to parents early in their children's academic careers could influence support and persistence. Programs that provide information to the families of first-generation students should

be explored to see if earlier access to information on enrollment and the financial aid process improve the level of support provided by families. Future research should also explore whether involving families of first-generation students in campus related events could increase family support.

Focus group participants shared how advising experiences had impacted their college experience. Future research should compare the persistence rates of first-generation students who experience traditional advising models compared to first-generation students with advisers trained on the unique challenges of this student population.

Several focus group participants discussed their decision to take online courses in their first semester only to discover that online courses were not the best possible choice for an incoming first-generation student. Further research should be completed to assess whether a policy restricting students from taking online courses within the first semester increases first-generation student persistence.

Repeatedly the first-generation students in this study spoke of how their interactions with faculty provided motivation. Research should explore class formats that offer first-generation students more intensive interaction with faculty. For example, service-learning courses provide a higher level of faculty and peer interaction than a traditional lecture style course. Could the use of service learning increase first-generation student persistence?

Finally, this study should be replicated to include a larger sample of first-generation community college students. Both rural and urban first-generation community college students should be studied. Through study replication, a greater understanding of the first-generation student experience can be obtained and the findings of this study confirmed.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

One of the fastest growing student populations on American college campuses is students who are the first in their families to attend college (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006), comprising 36% of U.S. community college enrollments (AACC, 2014; NCES, 2015). However, only 9% of first-generation students starting their educations at two-year colleges obtained a bachelor's degree within six years of graduating from high school compared to 29% of non-first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In light of the low success rate of this at-risk population of students, the need to create programs and interventions to improve persistence is clear.

As a result of this study, I have made recommendations designed to aid in the persistence of first-generation students. Through the information gleaned from three focus groups, the first-generation students have offered insight as to what helped them to succeed in college and what presented them with challenges. My hope is that college administrators, faculty, and staff will use the findings of this study to design programs which will aid in the persistence of first-generation students.

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**APPENDIX A****Recruitment Email**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Greetings!

*I am contacting you as a \_\_\_\_\_ student who is the first in your family to attend college. I am emailing to ask you to join a research project and tell us about your college experience. If you accept this invitation, you will be helping to make \_\_\_\_\_ an even better for other students as they begin their college journey.*

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of your academic and nonacademic experience at \_\_\_\_\_ College. I will ask for a maximum of an hour of your time to participate in a focus group where you can tell us about your experiences. During the focus group you and other \_\_\_\_\_ College first-generation students will be given an opportunity to share what you have discovered about being a first-generation student.

If you are willing to help make a difference by participating in the focus group, please complete the participant information form and email it back to me. I will use the information to find a time that is convenient for you to participate. Snacks will be provided at the focus group and all focus group members will be entered into a raffle drawing for local restaurant gift certificates and a master raffle prize of a \$100 VISA Gift Card.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at \_\_\_\_\_ or call me at \_\_\_\_\_.

I hope you will agree to help with this project!

**APPENDIX B**

**Participant Information Form**

Name:

Address:

Cell phone or phone number:

Email address:

Best **days** for participation in focus group:

Best **times** for participation in focus group:

**APPENDIX C****Confirmation Email**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_ . This focus group will begin at \_\_\_\_\_ and will be held in the \_\_\_\_\_. As I reminder, the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of your academic and nonacademic experience at \_\_\_\_\_ College. I will ask for a maximum of two hours of your time to participate in the focus group. During the focus group you and other \_\_\_\_\_ College first-generation students will be asked a series of questions and given an opportunity to share your experience.

I have attached a copy of the informed consent form that you will be asked to sign prior to the start of the focus group. This form outlines in detail the process of the focus group. We will also review this form and answer any questions prior to the start of the focus group. Dress is casual! Snacks will be provided and your name will be entered into a raffle drawing for local restaurant gift certificates and into a master raffle for a \$100 VISA Gift Card. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at \_\_\_\_\_ or give me a call at \_\_\_\_\_.

I look forward to meeting you.

## APPENDIX D

### Statement of Informed Consent

My name is Rebecca Evans. I am currently a doctoral student in the Community College Leadership Program at Old Dominion University. I am conducting research as part of my research for my dissertation focusing on first-generation college students. The study is focused on learning more about the first-generation college student experience and their academic and co-curricular experience at \_\_\_\_\_. Participating is completely voluntary and will involve your participation in a focus group with other first-generation students with approximately 7 questions and will last approximately 60 minutes. At no time will your name will be used in the study, and all of the information collected will remain confidential. If at any time you are uncomfortable answering a question, you will not have to answer and you may stop or withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Although we expect the focus group to be a positive experience for participants, if the experience raises any concerns for you, the study's director will be available to provide consultation.

The researcher will maintain recordings and any notes from the focus group, and your participation in the focus group and signature on this form will grant permission to record the focus group. Once the focus group has been completed and major themes summarized, you will be provided with a summary the group's comments for your review and approval. Following your review and approval of the summary, all audio recordings and notes will be destroyed in an effort to preserve your confidentiality. You will be provided with the typed summary via email. Additionally, if needed you will be invited to respond to a few follow-up questions to provide me with an opportunity to verify the data.

If you have questions regarding the focus group or your participation in it, you can contact me at 540-292-9613. This study has received Human Subjects approval by Old Dominion University \_\_\_\_\_ College. However, should you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a volunteer participant in this project, please contact Dr. Dana Burnett at [dbumett@odu.edu](mailto:dbumett@odu.edu) or 757.683.3287.

**Consent Statement:**

I have read this form. I understand that nothing negative will happen if I choose not to participate. I know that I can stop my participation at any time. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX E****Participant Demographic Information Survey**

Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: Black \_\_\_\_\_ White \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_ Asian \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status: Single \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any children? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes how many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

Combined Family Annual Income: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you live at home? \_\_\_\_\_

High School GPA: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you take any dual enrollment courses in high school? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you take college prep classes in high school? \_\_\_\_\_

Program of Study at BRCC: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you attend BRCC full time or part time? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you attend New Student Orientation? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a member of a student club on campus? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you receive financial aid of any type (scholarships, grants, loans)? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a work-study student? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you employed? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes how many hours do you work a week? \_\_\_\_\_

Mother's occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Father's occupation \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX F

### Focus Group Protocol

The researcher will provide all supplies needed to conduct the focus groups.

This includes:

- A list of participants
- Copies of informed consent forms
- Pens and paper
- Name tags
- Audio recorders
- Flip chart and markers
- Copies of moderators guide
- Index cards

Researcher will ensure that room is set up correctly and supplies and refreshments are present prior to the start of the focus group. Researcher will check each participant in and review the informed consent form prior to the start of the focus group.

#### *Introductions (5 minutes)*

All focus groups will use the same format to ensure consistency. Participants will be greeted as they arrive will be asked to make a nameplate for the facilitators to be able to easily call them by name. Focus group facilitators will have a facilitators guide provided. Keep in mind; moderator should speak less than 1/3 of the time.

#### *Overview of study & focus group process*

Each focus group will be greeted and thanked by the researcher. The researcher will briefly introduce the co moderators by name. Researcher will exit the room.

Focus group facilitators will turn on the audio recorder and introduce themselves. Participants will introduce themselves as well.

Facilitator will explain focus group process and informed consent form. There are no right or wrong answers.

While one moderator facilitates the discussion the other will be taking notes for analysis BUT NO NAMES will be recorded.

Respect the confidentiality of each participant by not quoting or attributing comments to anyone outside of the group.

- All should participate
- Discussion and disagreement are encouraged; no need to reach consensus
- Please be open and honest about your attitudes, opinions, and experiences — we want to hear it all

Speak one at time, encourage active participation. Clarify any questions or concerns before

starting.

Sessions will be recorded. Only the researcher will have access to the tapes. They will only be used for data analysis.

- Only group results will be shared; no individuals or individual responses will be shared.
- Direct quotes may be used to illustrate a particular point.

We ask that we all respect each other and the confidentiality of the information that is shared during the focus group session.

Ask for any needed clarification, or questions and then begin the focus group.

*Introduction of Participants (10 minutes)*

- Each participant should share their name, major and hometown

Warm up activity. Each participant will be asked to share their favorite \_\_\_\_\_ College memory so far.

*Discussion Questions (60 minutes)*

**Which experiences do first-generation college students attending a rural community college perceive to impact their academic success?**

- Please describe any academic challenges you have faced as a \_\_\_\_\_ student.
- How have you actively engaged in your academic experience outside of attending classes?
- What \_\_\_\_\_ experience(s) would you identify as having the greatest impact on your academic success?
- What about the experience aided your academic success?

**Which experiences do first-generation college students attending a rural community college perceive to impact their nonacademic success?**

- Please describe any nonacademic challenges you have faced as a \_\_\_\_\_ College student.
- How have you actively engaged in your nonacademic experience at \_\_\_\_\_?
- What \_\_\_\_\_ experience(s) would you identify as having the greatest impact on your nonacademic success?
- What about the experience aided your nonacademic success?

**What challenges do first-generation students attending a rural community college perceive themselves facing in relation to non-first-generation students?**

- Describe what challenges do you believe you experienced as a first-generation college student that a non-first-generation student did not?

**What personal factors do first-generation students attending a rural community college perceive impacts their college success?**

- What factors do you personally possess that you believe impacts your college success?

*Conclusion (10 minutes)*

Each participant will be given two index cards.

On the blue index card and be asked to write one piece of advice they would give to the College administration that would make their experience as a first-generation college student better.

On the white index card each participant will be asked to write one piece of advice they would share with other first-generation students that they wish they would have known sooner.

Thank everyone for participating. Explain follow up process. Each participant will be given an opportunity to review the summary notes and offer any edits prior to it be included in the dissertation.

*\*The questions in bold serve as the research study questions. The bulleted questions will be used as the focus group questions.*

*Moderator guide has been adapted (Stansberry 2014; Pickering, 2013)*

## APPENDIX G

### Focus Group Moderators Training Guide

#### MODERATORS GUIDE

#### 1. INTRODUCTIONS & OVERVIEW (2 MINUTES)

##### *A. Overview of study & focus group process*

“First let me thank you again for agreeing to participate in today’s discussion about your experience at \_\_\_\_\_ College. I would also like to thank (names of moderators) for guiding today’s discussion. You will have a fun experience I am sure. Hopefully as you tell your story, you will learn a little more about yourself and something about the others in the room.”

##### *B. Researcher will explain the purpose of the focus group.*

“The purpose of the focus group is learning more about your experience as first-generation students at \_\_\_\_\_ College. At this point, I am going to hand you over to (moderators names) so you can get started.”

##### *C. Moderator Introductions*

Moderator 1: “Are you ready to get started? (*energy and excitement from moderators*) My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and this is \_\_\_\_\_. Our job is to facilitate your discussion, record your responses, and keep time to make sure that we thoroughly cover ALL of the topics.”

#### 2. GROUP GUIDELINES (2 MINUTES)

*Please feel free to adjust wording to fit your style.*

“I am going to review the group guidelines before we get started with the focus group questions.”

“Unlike a test you may have taken in one of your classes, **there is no right or wrong answers.**”

“ We are a team (*points to other moderator*) you will notice that while one moderator facilitates the discussion the other may be taking notes for analysis **BUT NO NAMES will be recorded.** We want to make sure we capture the great discussion that is happening.”

“This is a safe space. We will **respect the confidentiality** of each participant by not quoting or attributing comments to anyone outside of the group.”

“We are counting on each of you to be **active in the discussion**; everyone should participate.”

“We want to have a discussion about your experience at \_\_\_\_\_ and **disagreement is encouraged**; each of you may have a different story to tell, there is no need to reach consensus.”

“Please **be open and honest** about your attitudes, opinions, and experiences -- we want to hear it all. In fact, we are counting on hearing it all.”

“In order for us to hear from everyone we are going to ask that we all **speak one at time**, encourage active participation.”

“**Are there any questions before we begin?**”

“**Can we all agree to these guidelines?**”

*Clarify any questions or concerns before starting*

### 3. AUDIO RECORDINGS ( 1 MINUTES)

“We will be recording the sessions. Only the **researcher will have access to the tapes**. They will only be used for data analysis.”

“Only group results will be shared; **no individuals or individual responses will be shared**.

Direct quotes may be used to illustrate a particular point.”

“Just a reminder, we all agreed to **respect each other and the confidentiality of the information** that is shared during the focus group session. Last chance, any questions before we begin the discussion.”

“If there are no questions, let’s begin.”

### 4. INTRODUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS (5 MINUTES)

#### A. Introduction of Participants

“Now we would like to know a little about you. Let’s have each of you **introduce yourself by sharing your first name, major and hometown**. Who wants to go first?”  
(*Make sure that everyone responds*)

### ***B. Warm Up activity***

“Now I would like for each of you to share with us your **favorite \_\_\_\_\_ memory so far**. Who wants to get us started?” (*Please note, make sure each participant shares their favorite memory.*)

## **5. TOPIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (40 MINUTES)**

### ***A. Academic Success***

1) How would you describe your academic experience?

These are to be used if you need additional prompts.

- What is it like to be a student at \_\_\_\_?
- What has helped you to be successful in your courses?
- What about the bumps in the road?
- What academic experiences have you engaged in outside of attending classes?

2) What academic experience(s) would you identify as having the greatest impact on your academic success?

### ***B. Nonacademic Success***

“For this next set of questions, I would like for you to think about **your experiences outside of the classroom**. For example work, involvement with clubs and organizations, attending campus events, and programs.”

1) How would you describe your experience outside of the classroom?

- What is it like to be a student at \_\_\_\_\_?
- What has helped you to be successful in your other campus experiences?
- What about the bumps in the road?
- What nonacademic experiences have you engaged in outside of attending classes?

2) What BRCC nonacademic experience(s) would you identify as having the greatest impact on your nonacademic success?

- What about the experience aided your nonacademic success?

3) Besides studying, what do you do when you are not in class?

4) What allowed you to be successful outside of classes?

### ***C. Challenges***

1) What was different about your experience than other students who were not the first in their family to attend college?

These are to be used if you need additional prompts.

- Describe the challenges you believe you experienced as a first-generation college student that a non-first-generation student may not have?
- Any benefits you may have experienced as a first-generation student?

### ***D. Personal Factors***

1) What do you like about being a first-generation student?

2) What has made your experience at \_\_\_\_ positive?

These are to be used if you need additional prompts.

- What factors do you personally possess that you believe positively impacts your college success?
- What factors do you personally possess that you believe may negatively impact your college success?

## **6. WRAP-UP/CONCLUSION (10 MINUTES)**

### ***A. Advice Sharing by Participants***

“If you were giving advice to the College Administration that could make the experience of a first-generation student better-what would it be?” *(Record answers on flip chart)*

“If you were giving one piece of advice to another first generation student that you wish you would have known, what would it be?” *(Record answers on flip chart)*

## **B. Index Cards**

“You just brainstormed some great advice to share with others. Now I would like for you to decide which piece of advice would be most helpful to share. It may or may not have been on our list.”

“On the blue index card each participant will be asked to write one piece of advice they would give to the College administration that would make their experience as a first-generation college student better.”

“On the white index card each participant will be asked to write one piece of advice they would share with other first-generation students that they wish they would have known sooner.”

*At the 4 minute point, announce that there is 4 minutes remaining, repeat at 2 minute point. Collect cards once participants have completed them.*

## **C. Thank You and Closure**

“This has been great. **Lots of really good information shared tonight.** What happens next? We will summarize the major themes we heard tonight, share them with \_\_\_\_\_, and then she will send you an email with the major themes. Each participant will be given an opportunity to review the summary notes and offer any suggestions prior to it be included in her dissertation. So, we encourage you to review the email and make sure we have captured what happened this evening. Any questions?”

You will also receive an email inviting you to attend a Town Hall meeting where the results of what we have learned from all of you will be shared with the students who participated in the focus groups. Attendance is optional but you are encouraged to come.

“OK, well again, thank you and have a good day”

*\* Moderator guide has been adapted (Pickering, 2013) and modified from Stansberry & Burnett (2014).*



## APPENDIX H

### First Year Student Advice to Future First-Generation Students

Make sure to balance your time. If you are going fulltime it will take up a lot of your time. You may have to give up or cut back on other activities in order to do well.

Don't procrastinate getting your work in. You have less time than you think to get everything done!

Talk to people and do not be afraid to ask for help, or seek out the help you need. Do not give up if you don't get help the first time.

Make an appointment with an academic advisor and during the appointment make sure you're in the right program and taking the right classes.

Actually like the services provided. Don't think that is "cheesy" to go to the CAVE to get the help you need.

Get to know your teachers. If they know more about your life they may be willing to help you in the future.

You must always stay positive and tell yourself you CAN do it negativity will only hold you back.

Don't tell yourself you'll get your work done and then watch TV instead. You're only lying and impacting your own life.

You're doing this for yourself no one will benefit from your hard work and success but you!

Always remember where you came from and don't be afraid to show who you are.

## APPENDIX I

### Second Year Student Advice to Future First-Generation Students

If you're struggling with a class or topic – ask for help from a professor, staff member, or school counselor.

Make use of tutoring, etc. DON'T wait till you're struggling.

Always apply for financial aid even if you don't think you will get the funds.

Study hard everyday and don't give up – there is always help here.

Go to the career counselor before starting to pay for school so you know what you want to do and spend money on.

Read the Student Development (SDV) book.

Never be afraid to ask questions or for advice.

Seek assistance from advisors and professors.

Apply for financial aid and scholarships. There is so much to apply for. SO DO IT!

Fill out scholarship forms.

Don't be afraid of your professors! They are there to help you. They want to see you succeed!

There are resources available if you seek them out, especially faculty. Come to school ready to be an adult and earn your degree.

Resources are there – find them and use them.

Take your time and do all the assignments even if they are not graded.

## APPENDIX J

### First Year Student Advice to College Administration

Find more resources for students who are not sure what they are going to major in to help them make the right decision.

Need more opportunities for full-time workers. More night class options. Daycare for kids would be nice!

Please make all the online quizzes available to look over to study for exams. Please advise teachers to let us have our quizzes to look over.

If you're unable to be in your office during listed office hours, even if you just step out, leave a note on your door saying when you'll be back.

Help more with paperwork. A lot of new students have never even files taxes before.

Provide more classroom time options. As a single-working parent it is extremely hard for me to find classes that work with my schedule.

Give 100% to your students if you want them to give 100% in return.

Enough with the "its in the syllabus" just answer the question because face to face communication is ten times better than reading a paper.

Make quiz questions accessible so we can use them to study.

Peer to guide us – from applying to degree choice.

**APPENDIX K:****Second Year Student Advice to College Administration**

Offer more course options

Provide mentors who reach out to students in the first week to month of classes, 1on1 to walk you through things.

Daycare – since there is none close to the campus, especially for evening classes.

Clean up the grounds. Get rid of weeds, landscape and have someone take care of what is planted.

Take after school sports seriously.

Provide more in depth information online on course descriptions.

I would ask administrators to change nursing requirements back to the way it was before when the overall percentage of at least 45% would allow you to apply rather than each individual section.

It would be nice to have a select group of academic advisors just for first time college students and their families. It would help maybe to educate us more on the steps we need to take for our success.

Mentor for first time students – where classes are located, whom to see in financial aid for assistance on scholarships, etc.

As a first-generation student I would like to see more resources available to us. Possibly in the form of mentors or outreach programs.

I would like the bus to go on Saturday and Friday later than 5 pm. Maybe on Friday should be till 8pm.

First-generation students need a peer to guide them through starting college and what to expect and how it all works.

Give more guidance on scholarships and programs.

## VITA

**Rebecca Margrete Evans**  
Educational Foundations & Leadership  
120 Education Building  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, Virginia 23529

### **EDUCATION**

#### **Doctor of Philosophy, Candidate, 2016**

Community College Leadership, Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, Virginia

#### **Master of Business Economics, 1997**

Business, Southern Connecticut State University  
New Haven, Connecticut

#### **Bachelor of Business Administration, 1996**

Business, Southern Connecticut State University  
New Haven, Connecticut

### **PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS in brief**

**New Horizons Conference**, Virginia Community College System Spring 2016  
Community College Faculty Perceptions of Teacher Evaluations

**New Horizons Conference**, Virginia Community College System Spring 2012  
Being Green – How BRCC Earned Recognition for its Green Ways

**New Horizons Conference**, Virginia Community College System Spring 2012  
Collaborations in Internationalization: How BRCC is Developing Collaboration with Various  
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**New Horizons Conference**, Virginia Community College System Spring 2012  
Collaborative Learning Through Volunteerism

**New Horizons Conference**, Virginia Community College System Spring 2008  
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