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Transition and Integration Experiences of First-Year College Students: A Phenomenological  
Inquiry Into the Lives of Participants in Outdoor Orientation Programs

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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by

Lynn A. Nester

December 2016

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Dr. Bethany Flora, Chair

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Dr. Don Good

Dr. Ramona Williams

Keywords: Freshmen college transition, Freshmen integration, Outdoor orientation, Retention

## ABSTRACT

### Transition and Integration Experiences of First-Year College Students: A Phenomenological Inquiry Into the Lives of Participants in Outdoor Orientation Programs

by

Lynn A. Nester

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to understand the transition and integration experiences of first-year freshmen who participated in an outdoor orientation program at 2 higher education institutions in the Southeastern United States. Student attrition from the first year to the second year and increased time to degree completion are challenges for a number of higher education institutions in the United States (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986; Tinto, 2006). First-year to second-year attrition and lack of persistence to degree completion may be due to an unsuccessful transition to college, the inability to integrate into the campus community, or a lack of student involvement (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Tinto, 2006).

The research setting included 2 public higher education institutions that offer outdoor orientation programs for incoming first-year freshmen. The sample was purposefully selected, using 4 criterion: (1) first-year students who had participated in a university sponsored outdoor based program prior to their first year of college, (2) students who had successfully completed their first semester of college and remained enrolled as a student during the data collection term of the research, (3) students meeting the definition of traditional age (18-21 years old) college freshmen, and (4) students willing to participate in data collection. Traditional age first-year students who participated in outdoor orientation programs at 2 institutions during the summer

2015, and who were enrolled in the spring 2016, were eligible research participants. The sample chosen provided information-rich, illuminative detail on the phenomenon of first-year student transition and integration to college.

Data collection included the creation of 3 concept maps followed by a semistructured in-depth interview. The highest number of mentioned areas on the research participant concept maps included friends, family, and organizations/clubs. A comprehensive support system, the right environment, and engagement in fun campus activities were found to be cornerstones of successful transition and integration to college. The study provides higher education leaders with insight on the lived experiences of first-year student transition and integration as well as evidence related to the impact of first-year experience programs that may guide and enhance institutional efforts.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family, friends, and to all of the higher education professionals who work tirelessly to improve the college experience for the students they serve. May Brett and Trevor one day lay sight on this paper and be inspired to maximize their potential.

*Walk away quietly in any direction and taste the freedom of the mountaineer. Camp out among the grasses and gentians of glacial meadows, in craggy garden nooks full of nature's darlings. Climb the mountains and get their good tidings, nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves. As age comes on, one source of enjoyment after another is closed, but nature's sources never fail.*

- JOHN MUIR

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Student retention and degree completion are key elements for institutional success and goal attainment in higher education. Research on student persistence, student attrition, and withdrawal decisions has largely focused on the critical freshman year of college where attrition is the highest compared to subsequent years (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986; Tinto, 2006). Retention and persistence to graduation of traditional first-year students is generally contingent upon on the ability to transition to college and integrate into the campus community (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 2006).

Transition theory provides a framework for understanding change and adapting to transition (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). A transition is any event or nonevent that causes a change within an individual's environment, routine, relationships, or outlook (Schlossberg, 1984). The three major factors that work in concert to influence adaptation to transition include: the perception and characteristics of the transition, the characteristics of the environment surrounding the transition, and the characteristics of the individual (Schlossberg, 1981). A transition must be defined as one by the individual experiencing it for it to be a transition, and the impact of the event or nonevent on the individual's daily life is the most significant factor (Schlossberg, 1984).

Often categorized as an adult development theory, the transition theory developed by Schlossberg is highly relevant to college students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) identified three components of a transition for adult

learners: “moving into the learning environment, moving through it, and preparing to leave, or moving on (p. 15). A positive transition and integration for first-year freshmen can consist of several aspects including: adaptation to college life, social and academic integration, engagement through participation in cocurricular and extracurricular activities, and peer involvement (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 1999; Tinto, 2006).

A theory of student departure from higher education proposed that student attrition is predominantly due to academic problems, failure to socially and intellectually integrate, or a low level of commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1988) or lack of goal commitment (Tinto, 1993). Positive, integrative experiences for first-year students can increase goal and institutional commitment which increases retention (Tinto, 1993). Most higher education institutions offer orientation programs to acclimate new students to campus, begin academic preparations, and foster social integration (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1986). Additionally, educationally purposeful activities and campus life programs allow for students to become engaged in the campus community.

A student involvement theory developed by Astin (1984), referred to the physical and psychological energy a student spends on academic courses or extracurricular activities. Astin postulated that the more energy devoted by the student the more they will learn, develop, and persist to graduate. In juxtaposing the student departure and student involvement theories, a predominant theme of student involvement emerges as a key to retention and persistence, whereas noninvolvement leads to student attrition.

New student orientation programs are one type of modality that aids in the transition to college (Bell, 2006; Bell, Gass, Nafziger, & Starbuck, 2014; Braxton & McClendon, 2001). An intense and engaging type of orientation is an outdoor or wilderness based orientation program

that offers new students a unique way to start college (Bell, 2006; Bell et al., 2014; Galloway, 2000; Lien & Goldenberg, 2012; Vlamis, Bell, & Gass, 2011). Outdoor orientation programs (OOP) provide opportunities for students to establish meaningful relationships and develop a social network (Bell, 2005; Lien & Goldenberg, 2012; Oravec, 2002) as well as increase sense of place and connection to the institution (Austin, Martin, Mittelstaedt, Schanning, & Ogle, 2009; Bell et al., 2014; Wolfe & Kay, 2011) and involvement on campus (Oravec, 2002).

Extended orientation programs such as outdoor orientation impact student retention and persistence to graduation by assisting first-year students with the transition and integration to college (Lehning, 2008; Lien & Goldenberg, 2012; Oravec, 2002; Wolfe & Kay, 2011). In-depth qualitative research describing the lived experiences of first-year freshmen OOP participants during the transition to college offers insight on how traditional age first-year students describe their transition and integration experiences in college. Students who are engaged on campus and motivated to be involved, both academically and socially, will realize developmental outcomes and are more likely to earn a degree (Astin, 1984, 1993; Gentry, Kuhnert, Johnson, & Cox, 2006; Tinto, 1988, 2006). First-year students who self-select to participate in an optional OOP may be predestined to participate in extracurricular activities or already be committed to the institution; nonetheless, research has shown that OOP participation has positively impacted involvement on campus and increased institutional commitment (Oravec, 2002; Wolfe & Kay, 2011).

### Statement of the Problem

Student attrition, especially from the first year to the second year, is a problem for a number of higher education institutions in the United States (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Ishler

& Upcraft, 2005b; Tinto, 1982). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in fall 2013 there were 10.5 million undergraduate students in college at 4-year institutions; of those students approximately 73% attended public institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). In 2012, 80% of first-time, full-time students who enrolled at public 4-year degree-granting institutions of all acceptance rates returned the following fall semester. For public institutions with open admissions, the retention rate from first year to second year decreased to 60% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). As admission to an institution becomes less selective, not only do the retention rates decline, graduation rates decline as well. The NCES reported in 2012 a graduation rate of 60% for first-time full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students attending public 4-year degree-granting institutions within six years of starting college. The graduation rate, within 6 years, for first-time, full-time undergraduates earning a bachelor's degree from 4-year institutions spans from 89% for highly selective institutions (less than 25% accepted) to 34% for the least selective institutions with open admissions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

There are several reasons why students may decide to leave an institution or why they fail to persist to graduate. A broad explanation of first-year to second-year attrition is an unsuccessful transition to college, the inability to integrate into the campus community, or a lack of student involvement (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005b; Tinto, 1998). For these reasons institutions offer orientation programs that are designed to aide new students in the transition from high school to college (Bell, 2006; Bell et al., 2014; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1986; Perigo & Upcraft, 1989). A deeper understanding into first-year student experiences will provide insight into institutional practices, such as extended orientation programs, and how OOPs impact first-year student transition to college and integration into the campus community.

Higher education institutions with OOPs use valuable resources to staff, fund, and equip the programs (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010; Bell et al., 2014). These programs have specific goals and objectives that can be unique to the program depending on the institution. However, there are overarching goals generally applicable to all OOPs that include building friendships, connecting to the institution, and helping with transition-related anxieties that students have – all aspects that play a role in successfully adapting to a transition and beginning the process of integration (Schlossberg, 2008; Tinto, 1988). According to Schlossberg (1981) interpersonal support systems and social support networks are essential for a successful transition.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the transition and integration experiences of first-year freshmen who participated in an outdoor orientation program at two higher education institutions in the Southeastern United States. For the purpose of the study transition and integration experiences were defined as social, academic, and cocurricular integration to college; a connection or commitment to the institution; a sense of belonging on campus (Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 1998); and the development of a support system on campus (Schlossberg, 1981).

### Research Questions

The central question under investigation is what are the lived experiences during the transition to college and integration to the campus community for first-year students who participated in an OOP? Additional guiding research questions included:

1. How do OOP participants describe their social, academic, and cocurricular integration to college?
2. How do OOP participants view their involvement on campus?



3. What factors do OOP participants indicate as advancing their levels of commitment or connection to the institution?
4. How have OOP participants established a sense of belonging on campus?
5. What support systems do OOP participants describe as important to their college experience?

### Significance of the Study

A qualitative phenomenological study “describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). There is a paucity of qualitative research on the lived transition and integration experiences of first-year freshmen and the impact that participation in an outdoor orientation program has on these experiences. A study of this nature may provide a better understanding of the value of institutional programs and practices geared towards the first-year experience, such as outdoor orientation programs, and the impact these programs have on student transition and integration. An additional area of significance within this study is in the in-depth data on the lived experiences of first-year student transition to college and integration into the campus community, and the high impact practices that higher education leaders will want to continue to offer or develop to enhance the first-year experience.

### Definitions of Terms

For the purpose of this study the following terms are defined.

1. Commitment to institution: Operationally defined for the purpose of this study as student affirmation that the decision to attend the institution was the best choice and

- that the student intends to remain at the institution to earn a degree, with no intent to transfer or depart the institution (Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 1988).
2. Concept map: Graphical tool used to display knowledge in the form of meaningful relationships between concepts via propositions, may be organized in hierarchical fashion with the inclusive concepts at the top and less inclusive concepts arranged below (Novak & Canas, 2008; Novak & Gowin, 1984).
  3. Concept: Used in the construction of a concept map; a perceived regularity in, or record of, an event or object, designated by a word (Novak & Canas, 2008; Novak & Gowin, 1984).
  4. Connection to institution: Operationally defined for the purpose of this study as the student's sense of belongingness at the institution and integration as a member of the campus community (Barefoot, 2005; Tinto, 1988).
  5. First-year Student: Operationally defined as a college student who is enrolled in, and attending, postsecondary school for the first time. (Barefoot, 2005; Ishler, 2005a).  
For the purpose of this study first-year freshman and first-year student are used synonymously.
  6. Orientation Program: A program typically lasting 1 to 3 days for incoming students to become familiar with the institution's policies, procedures, and extracurricular activities, to help students: transition to the college environment, integrate into the new community, and have a quality first-year experience (Bell et al., 2014; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005; Pascarella et al., 1986; Perigo & Upcraft, 1989).

7. **Outdoor Orientation Program:** An orientation or preorientation overnight trip away from campus, for example tent camping, for a small group (15 or fewer) of new students where outdoor adventure based activities are incorporated into a planned curriculum (Bell et al., 2010; 2014).
8. **Proposition:** Used in the construction of a concept map; a statement about an object or event that either naturally occurs or is constructed, and contains two or more concepts linked by a word or phrase (Novak & Canas, 2008; Novak & Gowin, 1984).
9. **Social Integration:** Operationally defined by the following components: the extent of involvement in extracurricular activities, contact with faculty outside of the classroom and the quality of the contact, and the perceived quality of relationships with other students (Pascarella et al., 1986).
10. **Support System:** A system comprised of intimate relationships, family unit, and network of friends (Schlossberg, 1981). For the purpose of this study support system will also include professors, advisors, mentors, peers, and classmates.
11. **Traditional Age Student:** College students who have matriculated typically within 1 to 2 years of completing high school and can be as young as 17 years old and as old as 23 years old (Hermon & Davis, 2004; Spitzer, 2000). For the purpose of this study a traditional age college student is in the range of 18 to 21 years old.
12. **Transition Experience:** An anticipated event that occurs where an individual's adaptation to the transition involves the individual's characteristics, the perception of the transition, and the pretransition and posttransition environments (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). In the college setting a student's transition experience includes the type,

context, and impact of the transition, the student's reaction and assessment of the transition, developing new associations and patterns of behavior, forming a support system, and coping resources accessible to the student (Schlossberg, 1984; Tinto, 1988).

### Limitations and Delimitations

Research projects have inherent limitations that are out of the control of the researcher and delimitations that can be controlled (Patton, 2015). Participation in an outdoor orientation program is generally not a requirement for incoming freshmen. Students self-select to participate and pay a fee to register that provides funding for the program. In rare instances a parent may enroll the student in the OOP against the child's wishes, essentially forcing his or her participation in the program. Outdoor orientation programs are generally based around outdoor recreational activities. Not all students are interested in outdoor recreational activities; therefore, not all entering freshmen will choose to participate in an OOP. The research participants in this phenomenological study self-selected to participate. It could be that the students who participated in an OOP are more likely to be retained due to the nature of early engagement stemming from the program, and as a result of their involvement will likely be engaged in other activities that positively impact retention. These are the identified limitations in the study.

The delimitations in the study include the stipulation that all research participants who participated in an OOP are first-year freshmen at their institution, and are traditional age college students. While this sample provides a group of students who have the common experience of participating in an OOP, there are a number of first-year students who do not participate in OOP and may be facing similar or dissimilar transition and integration experiences. Additionally, the

two institutions that were chosen to be a part of the study are delimitations. Institutional practices, including orientation programs, implemented to enhance the first-year experience are unique to an institution (Barefoot, 2005). Despite these limitations and delimitations the study was important to conduct because little is known about OOP participation in relation to a first-student's transition and integration to college.

### Overview of the Study

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction, statement of the problem, and significance of the research. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature. Chapter 3 is a review of the methodology, data collection, and data analysis in the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 5 offers a conclusion, discussion of the findings, and implications for policy, practice, and future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Low student retention rates and inadequate persistence to degree completion are vexing issues that plague higher education institutions (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Student retention and progress towards degree completion are key elements for institutional success and goal attainment. From a societal perspective to successfully compete in the vast global economy requires a growing highly educated workforce (ACT, 2004). Research on student persistence and withdrawal decisions has largely focused on the critical freshman year of college where attrition is the highest compared to subsequent years (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 2006). Students who have adapted to the transition to college (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1989), are integrated socially and academically, committed to the institution, and involved on campus; these students are more likely to be retained and persist to earn a degree (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 1993, 2006).

The type of learning and growth experience a student has in the first year of college is critical for success and retention (Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996). Additionally, attachment to the institution, institutional fit, and degree commitment positively impact retention (Bean, 2005; Davidson, Beck, & Grisaffe, 2015; Woosley & Miller, 2009). To assist first-year students in the transition and integration to college, institutions offer interventions or first-year experience programming including orientation programs. Increasingly institutions are offering extended orientation programs, some of which are multi-day outdoor camp or wilderness-based trip experiences (Bell et al., 2010; Haynes & Atchley, 2013; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999).

Orientation programs are designed and implemented to aide new students in the transition from high school to college as well as to provide opportunities to interact socially with other students (Bell, 2006; Bell et al., 2014; Braxton & McClendon, 2001). An outdoor or wilderness based orientation program is an extended, multi-day orientation program that offers new students a unique way to commence a college career and may impact participants in a different way than a traditional orientation program (Bell, 2006; Bell et al., 2014; Galloway, 2000; Gass, 1990; Gass, Garvey, & Sugerman, 2003; Wolfe & Kay, 2011). Retention is a complex challenge with several components that need to be addressed by higher education administrators to have a positive impact on students.

### Student Retention

The retention of students and persistence towards degree completion are challenges for institutions of higher education (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Gass, 1990; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005b; Tinto, 2006). To encourage a focus on student success some states have exchanged funding models based on enrollment numbers for funding models on credit milestones and degree completion (Friedel, Thornton, D'Amico, & Katsinas, 2013; Hillman, Kelchen, & Goldrick-Rab, 2013). The cost of recruiting students is generally more expensive than the cost to retain them (Lau, 2003). Institutions are at a fiscal advantage when students persist to graduate (Schuh, 2005). Early departure equates to a loss in tuition revenue and the loss of a future alumnus (Tinto, 1993). Early contact with faculty and staff as well as the establishment of a community positively impacts student retention (Tinto, 1993).

Higher education leaders are implementing first-year programs and curricular interventions beyond the traditional 1 to 2-day on-campus orientation programs to help new

students with the transition and integration to the campus community (Barefoot, 2005; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005b) and establish contacts within the institution. The goals of the first-year programs and interventions are student retention and persistence towards degree completion (Keup, 2005; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). Institutional efforts to increase retention should be diverse and expansive to meet the myriad of challenges facing students in college from an academic and a social perspective (Deggs & Associates, 2011). According to Braxton and McClendon (2001), “The responsibility for student retention is campus-wide and goes beyond the province of admissions and student affairs to include academic and non-academic administrators and faculty members” (p. 67). Bolstering efforts to orient first-year students increases the likelihood of success (Murtaugh et al., 1999). According to Tinto (1993) incongruence and isolation are the primary reasons for student attrition, more so than lack of academic preparedness; however, social and intellectual integration are fundamental to student persistence.

A retention study revealed that academic and nonacademic factors play a role in increasing college student retention (ACT, 2004). Of the nonacademic factors academic-related skills, academic self-confidence, and academic goals were found to have the strong relationship, whereas institutional commitment, social support, institutional selectivity, social involvement, and financial support were found to have a moderate positive relationship (ACT, 2004). Complete academic and social integration are not necessary for retention; however, some level of integration in the form membership in at least one community on campus is essential for continued persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Student engagement in educationally focused activities has a positive impact on student success in the form of higher grade point average and persistence between the first and second



year of college (Kuh et al., 2008). First-year students generally benefit most from early interventions at key periods of integration; therefore, faculty and staff should communicate institutional values and expectations clearly to first-year students (Kuh et al., 2008). To increase retention rates three principles of effective retention were identified to direct institutional programs and practices. Effective retention programs are:

- Committed to the students they are intended for;
- Dedicated to the education of all students; and
- Devoted to the development of supportive social and intellectual communities for all students as integrated members of the campus community. (Tinto, 1993)

Defining and measuring retention is intricate and depends on the context; with a series of identified measures student retention is more accurate (Hagedorn, 2005). To positively impact student retention higher education administrators need to understand and address why students leave.

### Student Attrition

The antithesis of retention, attrition, is the reduction of the student population as a result of students prematurely leaving the institution prior to degree completion (Hagedorn, 2005). Student departure has been an enduring challenge for higher education administrators as well as a long standing, irksome subject of scholarly inquiry (Braxton, 1999; Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 1975, 1988). Attrition has various consequences for the departing student, the institution, and society (Hagedorn, 2005). The highest percent of student attrition in higher education occurs in the first year and prior to the second year of college (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005b; Tinto, 1993).

Students may be forced to leave the institution involuntarily, or they may volunteer to permanently withdraw from postsecondary school prior to degree completion, take a furlough from higher education, or transfer to a different institution to complete their degree (Tinto, 1993). Students decide to leave college for a myriad of reasons, and one student may cite multiple reasons for departing (Hermanowicz, 2006). There are distinctive reasons students depart prematurely; therefore, institutional retention efforts must also be distinct to make a positive impact (Tinto, 1993). Student characteristics and factors that make the greatest contribution to early departure include: inadequate financial resources, lack of motivation, inadequate academic preparation, poor study skills, job demands, lack of educational goals, and poor integration into the academic community (ACT, 2004) as well as isolation (Tinto, 1993). Intrinsic characteristics impact student success and persistence.

The personality, maturity level, and emotional intelligence of a first-year student can impact the ability to stay enrolled and persist to graduation. First-year students with a stable insecure adult attachment style engaged in suppressive coping tactics including denial, avoidance, and escapism and may be at risk for early departure (Lopez & Gormley, 2002). A study investigating the personality traits in relation to intent to withdraw found that 10 of the 12 traits were significantly related to withdrawal intention; tough-mindedness and openness were not significantly related (Lounsbury, Saudargas, & Gibson, 2004). Lounsbury et al. argued that three personality traits, sense of identity, emotional stability, and work drive, accounted for one fifth of the variance in the intention to withdraw. Timely and well organized institutional interventions and retention programs may reduce student attrition (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1993).

A study on freshmen year persistence and withdrawal decisions found two prevalent direct effects on student persistence: social integration and commitment to the institution; the largest indirect effect found was having attended orientation (Pascarella et al., 1986). First-year students who perceived a greater discrepancy in their expectations and actual experiences in social integration had a harder time establishing friendships and were more likely to depart (Pleitz, MacDougall, Terry, Buckley, & Campbell, 2015). Additionally, first-year students who had a greater discrepancy between their expectations of the institution versus their experiences were more likely to leave the institution (Pleitz et al., 2015). Furthermore, student departure theory proposed that student attrition is predominantly due to academic problems, a failure to socially and intellectually integrate, or a low level of commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1988). The size of the institution may play a role in student departure in particular cases. According to Tinto (1993) students enrolled at large institutions may depart due to isolation, whereas students enrolled in small institutions are more likely to depart due to incongruence rather than feeling socially isolated. Involvement in campus organizations and activities help students become engaged within the new community.

Studies have not supported the premise that extent of involvement in extracurricular activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) nor a lack of extracurricular activities (Hermanowicz, 2006) contribute significantly to student departure. Higher education administrators can assist students in successfully adapting to the transition to college through early contact with students and via community building, which help integrate students to campus (Tinto, 1988, 1993). Students may be members of multiple social and intellectual-based communities within the campus that satisfy various needs; the greater the number of memberships may increase the likelihood of persistence (Tinto, 1993). In juxtaposing the theories of student involvement and

student departure there is a predominant theme of student involvement as a key to retention and persistence, whereas noninvolvement (Tinto, 1993) coupled with academic and financial challenges (Hermanowicz, 2006) leads to student attrition. Student success comes in different forms: grade point average, number of hours taken in a semester, engagement in campus activities and organizations, and persistence to degree completion.

### Persistence

According to Hagedorn (2005) there is a distinction between the institutional measure of retention and the persistence of students: institutions retain whereas students persist. Generally persistence is based on students earning a minimum number of credit hours with an acceptable grade point average and eventually earning the required credits to obtain a degree (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Previous and current academic performance has a direct relationship to retention and persistence (Tinto, 1993). A logistic regression analysis used in a study revealed that weighted high school grade point average has a strong, positive effect on persistence (Caison, 2004). Involvement in extracurricular activities, interaction with faculty and peers, and college grades has a significant direct effect on enrollment in the second semester for first-year students (Allen, 1987). For students with low levels of social integration, academic integration was found to have the strongest positive impact on persistence; this became less pronounced as social integration increased (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). Persistence to degree completion was found to be an interaction of student perceptions and behaviors that influence academic and social integration to college (Kuh et al., 2008). Courses designed for first-year students aim to assist with college integration.

A study researching a first-year seminar program revealed that students who completed the program were significantly more likely to re-enroll the following semester than students who did not partake in the program (Jenkins-Guarnieri, Horne, Wallis, Rings, & Vaughan, 2014). Living in a residence hall during the first year of college is an environmental contingency that has revealed the strongest positive effect on degree attainment (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Research by Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1993) on persistence discovered that the largest total effect on persistence was accounted for by intent to present persist followed by grade point average, institutional commitment, encouragement from friends and family, goal commitment, academic integration, finance attitudes, and social integration. With slightly different results the largest total effect on intent to persist was institutional commitment, followed by encouragement from friends and family, goal commitment, academic integration, social integration, and finance attitudes (Cabrera et al., 1993).

Allen (1999) found significant direct effects for desire and grade point average, and an indirect effect of high school rank, on persistence of minority students. For nonminority student persistence the only direct effect was for grade point average; indirect effects were high school rank and parents' education (Allen, 1999). First year-student success goes beyond student preparation, ability, and motivation; several interrelated factors have an impact on student persistence (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005b). Preparation for the academic rigor of higher education starts prior to college for many students.

Precollege Preparation. Secondary schools have prepared students for college through advanced or accelerated curriculum. Advanced Placement (AP) courses and exams are one approach to increase college readiness of high school students (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian,

2006). High school students who take AP courses and pass AP exams display the ability to successfully complete college level coursework, which increases the probability of earning a college degree (Dougherty et al., 2006). With a myriad of factors playing a role in persistence and student success in college, one that cannot be underestimated is faculty interaction with students.

### Faculty Interaction

The role that faculty play in student success and student-faculty relationships have been incorporated into retention studies with varying results. A study on the relative importance of student and institutional factors and characteristics on retention revealed that faculty interaction variables were not statistically significant (Marsh, 2014). Conversely, faculty interactions and faculty concern for student development and teaching have shown to have a strong correlation to student persistence (Allen, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). A study of curricular interventions in the form of first-year seminars, service-learning, and learning communities discovered statistically significant differences between first-year students who participated in all three and those who did not participate in any of the three programs (Keup, 2005). Measures in Keup's (2005) study included faculty interaction, academic engagement and performance, and interaction with peers and the campus community; participation in at least one of the interventions revealed a statistically significant positive relationship with the intent to re-enroll at the same institution.

According to Seidman (2005) faculty are the key to improving retention rates, as they can identify and assist at risk students post enrollment. Class discussions have been shown to have a direct positive effect on student persistence and a statistically reliable indirect effect on

institutional commitment and intent to persist (Braxton et al., 2000). In addition to faculty interaction there are institutional factors that play a role in student retention.

### Institutional Factors

The characteristics of an institution have an impact on retention and persistence (Lau, 2003; Marsh, 2014). The type of students institutions recruit and admit significantly affect student retention rates (Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987). First-year students with a history of strong academic performance prior to college may positively impact retention rates (Marsh, 2014). According to Astin and Oseguera (2005) selectivity is the institutional characteristic with the strongest effect on degree attainment. A more motivated and better academically prepared peer group at more selective institutions may be the strongest asset (Astin & Oseguera, 2005).

The institutional factor of control, whether a college or university is a private or a public institution, has an effect on degree completion. Research revealed that attending a public 4-year institution had a substantial negative effect on 4-year and 6-year degree completion (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Additionally, the percentage of full-time students enrolled was shown to be a statistically significant predictor of retention (Marsh, 2014). Research revealed that institutional factors that made greatest contribution to attrition at 4-year public institutions were: amount of financial aid available to students, student-institution fit, student involvement, academic advising, and the social environment (ACT, 2004). With the goals of student retention and degree completion, programs tailored to first-year students, in addition to institutional factors have an impact on success.

## First-Year Experience

The freshman year experience, or what is now generally referred to as the first-year experience, has been a popular subject of scholarly inquiry and institutional focus. According to Dwyer (1989) higher education institutions in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s developed institutional initiatives to help traditional and nontraditional freshmen adapt to college. Institutional interventions that foster first-year student success play a significant role in retention and persistence (Levitz & Noel, 1989). Increased retention rates are a by-product of establishing high quality first-year programs that connect new students to the institution (Levitz & Noel, 1989). Student success is fundamentally determined by experiences that shape a student's first year of college with the responsibility of institutions to coordinate and implement first-year experience programs and services (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). The first-year experience consists of many components: programs, courses or seminars, activities, learning communities, and living environments, and the overall impact depend on the institution and the students (Barefoot, 2005). To assist first-year students' adjustment to college life, first-year program enrollment may be a requirement at some institutions (Lau, 2003). Orientation programs are an institutional practice offered at the outset of students' academic career, to which attendance may or may not be required.

### Orientation Programs

Higher education institutions offer orientation programs (OP) to aid in the transition and integration to college by acclimatizing new students to campus, establishing a commitment to the institution, introducing student organizations and activities, and fostering academic and social integration (Bell, 2006; Bell et al., 2014; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1986).



Successful orientation programs treat retention as a multifaceted synthesis of various academic and social components (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Gass, 1990). Scholars have tracked student retention; students who participated in an OOP were retained at a higher rate than those who participated in another type of orientation program or those who did not participate in any orientation program (Gass, 1990; Gass et al., 2003). Research findings may indicate other institutional programs and practices that assist first-year students in the transition and integration as well as help involve and engage students in a meaningful way.

Orientation programs are an integral component of institutional strategies to increase student retention and persistence (Deggs & Associates, 2011). According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2014) OP must inform new students about the institution's history, traditions, and culture to foster a connection and facilitate integration into the intellectual, cultural, and social facets of the institution. As an integral feature of the first-year experience, orientation programs are offered at nearly all colleges and universities in the United States, although the ideal length and time of an orientation program is institution specific (Barefoot, 2005). According to Robinson et al. (1996) orientation focuses on student adjustment and learning in three general areas: the transition to college, academic integration, and social integration. The length of traditional preterm orientation programs were found generally be one and one half days for research-extensive 4-year institutions, whereas 2-year campuses typically offered a one half day program and 4-year liberal arts institutions offered programs expanding more than 2 days (Barefoot, 2005).

Orientation is a vital time in the transition for first-year students; college habits begin to form that establish the foundation for students' academic success and personal growth (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). Deggs et al. (2011) found a statistically significant difference in

participation and attendance of campus activities by students who attended the summer orientation program versus those students who did not attend the orientation program. Students who did not attend orientation were less likely to participate or attend campus activities which indicate they are forgoing opportunities for social interaction and support from campus community members.

Research has shown a significant direct relationship between participation in orientation programs and first-year student persistence (Allen, 1987). A study that focused on the influence of orientation programs revealed that participation in the program had a small direct, yet not significant, influence on persistence; however, orientation programs had a relatively significant positive effect on social integration and commitment to the institution (Pascarella et al., 1986). In the model used by Pascarella et al. social integration and commitment to the institution had the largest direct and significant positive effects on freshmen year persistence. Orientation programs are an essential step in the effort to retain first-year students (Braxton & McClendon, 2001). First-year students who have successfully transitioned to college generally have established a sense of belonging and have integrated, both socially and academically, into the new campus community.

There has been a notable trend with the addition of academic related sessions during orientation programs, which include interaction with faculty (Barefoot, 2005). Additional emerging trends in orientation programs include academic program emphasis, student attendance, parent and family attendance, and orientation-related experiences (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). Increasingly viewed as a comprehensive process, orientation has evolved beyond the traditional OP to the first-year experience, which includes extended orientation programs (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2014).

### Extended Orientation Programs

Institutions may offer extended orientation programs that supplement traditional orientation programs (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). These programs may be held on- or off-campus and take place prior to the start of the school year, during the first weeks of school, or proceed throughout the first year. Extended orientation programs are designed to establish and strengthen the connection between new students and the institution (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). Enhanced social identities were found among new students who participated in an extended orientation program (Soria, Clark, & Koch, 2013). Murtaugh et al. (1999) found that attrition is higher among out-of-state students; therefore, extended orientation programs may target this population of students to increase retention. Extended orientation programs generally have a theme or focus, some of which are based on outdoor recreational activities or are held in the wilderness.

### Outdoor Orientation Programs

Outdoor or wilderness based orientation programs are an engaging type of extended orientation program that offers new students a unique way to start college with a group of peers (Bell, 2006; Pierce, 2002). The OOP experience may impact participants in ways that traditional orientation programs do not, such as development of: meaningful relationships, a social support network (Bell, 2005; Gass et al., 2003; Kafsky, 2001), and a sense of place, (Austin et al., 2009). Research has found that OOP participation develops institutional commitment (Wolfe & Kay, 2011) as well as increased involvement on campus (Oravec, 2002). Outdoor orientation programs positively impact student retention and persistence to graduation by assisting first-year students with transition and integration to college through early engagement, development of

connections, and easing anxiety (Gass, 1990; Lien & Goldenberg, 2012; Oravec, 2002; Wolfe & Kay, 2011). Depending on the institution, the outdoor orientation program (OOP) may be called Wilderness Orientation, Adventure Orientation, Freshman Wilderness Experience, or a name unique to the institution.

Qualitative research by Wolfe and Kay (2011) conducted at a mid-sized university in the southern United States examined the perceived impact of an OOP on first-year college students. Specific goals of the program in Wolfe and Kay's study included: establish commitment to the institution, educate participants on the transition to college, promote personal development, and develop relationships with peers and faculty. The data collection used in the study by Wolfe and Kay included participant field notebooks in which students' journaled their thoughts and feelings daily during the six day experience. The following themes emerged from the data analysis:

1. Becoming real;
2. Consequences rather than lectures;
3. I love my university; and
4. My new family and friends. (p. 25)

Wolfe and Kay concluded that the program participants had positive perceptions of the experience and that the aforementioned themes provided evidence that the goals of the program were accomplished. The use of OOPs as first-year experiences within higher education institutions' evolved and expanded over time.

History of Outdoor Orientation Programs. According to Bell et al. (2010), "The use of outdoor orientation as student preparation for the stresses of college itself was an idea heavily influenced by the U.S. Outward Bound (OB) organization" (p. 3). The historical beginnings of

wilderness based orientation programs began in the 1930s with Dartmouth College and, later, in the 1960s with Prescott College; these two programs provided the template for higher education institutions' outdoor orientation programs (Bell et al., 2014). The wilderness or outdoor orientation program did not become prevalent in United States until the 1970s and 1980s (Bell et al., 2010). A census published in 2010 indicated that outdoor or wilderness orientation programs in the United States have been rapidly growing with an average of 10 new programs each year (Bell et al., 2010). Additionally, Bell et al. (2010) found that OOPs of various sizes are offered at all types of higher education institutions with a pattern of concentration of programs at Ivy League colleges. A list of different types of first-year experience, outdoor orientation, and wilderness experience programs is provide in Table 1.

Table 1

*Types, Descriptions, and Sources of First-Year Experience & Outdoor Orientation Programs*

Program Type	Description	Source
Extended Orientation	Supplemental orientation program held either on- or off-campus; prior to the school year or during the first weeks of school	Mullendore & Banahan, 2005
Preorientation Experience	First-year student development of social support	Bell, 2005
Noncredit Outdoor Orientation	Program goals for first-year students: establish commitment to the institution, educate participants on the transition to college, promote personal development, and develop relationships with peers and faculty.	Wolfe & Kay, 2011
Freshmen Adventure Orientation	Outdoor adventure experience focusing on the development of social interest of program participants	Kafsky, 2001
Noncredit Wilderness Orientation	Program that focused on three factors of successful adjustment of first-year students: level of extracurricular involvement, retention, and academic achievement	Oravec, 2002
Adventure-Based First-Year Experience Class	Using the wilderness environment to elicit a focus on personal and group needs; establishment of mutual trust and social support	Bell, 2012

Noncredit Residential Camp		Gass, 1990
Weekend-Long Orientation	Orientation taking place over a weekend; focus on involvement of first-year students academically and socially, and developmental outcomes	Gentry, Kuhnert, Johnson, & Cox, 2006
For-credit Outdoor or Wilderness Orientation	Offered prior to new student orientation; course continued to meet throughout the fall semester providing ongoing support; program was held in the backcountry for 12-14 days; wilderness used to aid in the spiritual development of participants	Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2009

Outdoor Orientation Program Size. The size of the OOP depends on several factors and can alter the impact for participants. The logistics and activities offered must be considered by the program staff. Larger programs of more than 60 participants require more trip opportunities and an increasing number of trained trip leaders. To maximize effectiveness of the program an OOP generally consist of small groups of 15 or fewer students (Bell et al., 2014; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996; Fears & Denke, 2001). Additionally, there are logistical differences such as travel arrangements, equipment needs, and hiking and backpacking permits, and the need to offer additional activities to accommodate the greater number of students (Bell et al., 2010). Over time wilderness-based and OOPs have evolved and been the subject of quantitative and qualitative studies.

## Development of Outdoor Orientation Programs

With the growth trend and development of OOPs across the country, research on programs and the impact on the first-year experience can help expand OOPs to other campuses and enhance existing programs (Bell et al., 2010; Bell et al., 2014). A typical OOP was defined by gathering demographic information of identified programs and exhibited how those OOPs are different based on variables such as size and age (Bell et al., 2010). Additionally, OOPs provide opportunities for collaboration and integration with Outdoor Education academic departments (Bell et al., 2010). Involving academic departments in the planning and implementing of outdoor based orientation experiences, which ideally extend throughout the first semester or year, can benefit the OOP curriculum and the academic transition for new students (Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2009). For program effectiveness, depending on the identified OOP goals, group size is an essential consideration.

Although the number of students participating in an OOP at an institution may be large (greater than 60) it was found that the average group size was 15 or fewer students (Bell et al., 2010; Bell et al., 2014). From a group dynamics and a logistical standpoint the smaller group size is more manageable for trip leaders and to engage students with different activities (Bell et al., 2010; Bell et al., 2014; Galloway, 2000). The smaller group number allows students to meet new people, establish close bonds during the program, and begin to socially integrate, which are goals of OOPs.

Goals and Objectives of Outdoor Orientation Programs. Typically OOPs have clearly identified goals and objectives for the program participants as well as larger, long-term institutional goals. Overarching institutional goals for OOPs include retention and persistence



(Galloway, 2000; Gass, 1990), whereas individual participant goals generally include a successful transition to college, social integration, and becoming involved in campus activities (Bell, Holmes, Vigneault, & Williams, 2008; Gass et al., 2003; Wolfe & Kay, 2001). Although OOPs can vary in the activities and curriculum offered, there are commonalities among them. It was determined that an OOP is an orientation overnight trip, generally camping in a tent, for a small group (15 or fewer) of new students where outdoor adventure based activities are incorporated into a planned curriculum (Bell et al., 2010; Bell et al., 2014). The duration of the experience varied with most trips in the range of 2-8 days.

Galloway (2000) conducted a study on the assessment measures and descriptive variables in higher education wilderness orientation programs. He implemented a questionnaire sent to directors or supervisors of 89 identified programs in the United States, of which there were 57 usable responses. According to Galloway (2000), “Most programs support pro-social goals, such as positive peer group development, enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem, and having fun. Academic goals such as easing transition to college and increased interest in academics were held by fewer programs” (p. 80-81). Furthermore, Galloway found on average every 10 wilderness orientation program participants were typically supervised by two trip leaders; and a prevalent programmatic goal of having fun emerged from the data set. Social integration is an integral component of first-year student success and has been the topic of study in a number of forms.

Kafsky (2001) conducted a quasi-experimental exploratory study that examined the effect of a Clemson University freshman adventure orientation program on participant’s development of social interest, the antithesis of social isolation. Kafsky’s study consisted of a control group that participated in the traditional on-campus freshman orientation, along with a treatment group

who voluntarily chose to participate in the freshman outdoor adventure experience; there were 25 research participants in the two groups who were first-year college students. Kafsky used Crandall's Social Interest Scale that the participants in the two groups self-administered prior to and after the orientation experiences. Kafsky's found significant differences in the post assessment measure of social interest between the two groups at the 0.05 level of significance; the conclusion that there was evidence of a causal relationship between the designed adventure orientation program and increased development of social interest was made.

Bell (2005) examined college student's development of social support in relation to preorientation experiences at Harvard University and Princeton University. Bell noted that the two institutions were selected due to the similarities in preorientation experiences offered to students. The purpose of Bell's research was to use the Campus-Focused Social Provisions Scale to adequately measure social support. Bell incorporated four preorientation programs into the study: wilderness orientation, community service program, preseason athletics, and control group that did not attend any preorientation program. Due to the nature of the programs included, Bell invited all first- and second-year students to participate. The sample included 1,601 students who participated in the preorientation experiences at the two institutions. Bell found via a t-test no significant difference between schools; however a MANOVA identified significantly higher levels of overall social provision scores reported by wilderness orientation participants compared to the other groups. Concepts related to social integration of first-year students, and OOP participants, permeate the research indicating its importance and impact on student success.

One area where OOPs may not provide assistance for first-year students is in the preparation for the academic rigors of higher education (Bell et al., 2014; Galloway, 2000).

Academic integration is an integral component of first-year student success (Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 2006). The majority of research related to OOPs involves the social supports and benefits, adjustment to college, and the role of involvement on campus with little mention of academic integration as a part of an OOP (Bell, 2006; Bell et al., 2008; Oravec, 2002). Outdoor Orientation programs that continue programming throughout the student's first year, or OOPs that are for credit courses, may be able to assist first-year students with academic integration and resolution of academic related challenges. In addition to course credit, there may be a particular focus or theme to an outdoor or wilderness orientation program based on the type, or characteristics, of the institution.

Montreat College in the mountains of North Carolina offered a wilderness program as a for credit course prior to new student orientation and the group continued to meet throughout the fall semester that provided ongoing support in the transition to college life (Bobilya et al., 2009). The wilderness based orientation program in the study was spiritually focused and largely held in the backcountry for an atypically long 12-14 day experience; according to Bobilya et al. (2009) the wilderness was used to enhance the spiritual development of the program participants. Data analysis from the mixed method approach that included 11 research participants revealed four themes that emerged:

- The wilderness expedition establishes community;
- The wilderness expedition develops competence;
- The wilderness expedition enhances stewardship; and
- The wilderness expedition promotes spiritual development. (Bobilya et al., 2009, p. 442)

Orientation experiences that aid students in the social and academic transition to college typically equate to higher retention rates and an increase in the persistence to graduation among OOP participants (Bell, 2006; Gass, 1990; Oravec, 2002; Wolfe & Kay, 2011). The goals of OOPs generally result in positive outcomes for the participants and the institution (Gass, 1990; Gass et al., 2003). Frauman and Waryold (2009) reported partial support to their finding that participation in a wilderness orientation program may contribute to a student's perception of life effectiveness. The impact of OOP participation can reach beyond social and academic integration of first-year students to involvement in campus activities.

A mixed methods study by Oravec (2002) investigated the factors in wilderness orientation programs that impact student adjustment to college, specifically if the program had an impact on three factors of successful adjustment that included: level of extracurricular involvement, retention, and academic achievement of sophomore students. Oravec's quantitative section consisted of a survey that consisted of sample of 85 sophomore students who participated in wilderness orientation at Cornell University, Gettysburg College, or Salisbury University the summer prior to the first semester of college. Survey respondents were invited to participate in the qualitative portion of the study, which consisted of small focus groups at each institution and in-depth interviews with six students, two from each institution. Oravec reported that the quantitative analysis finding did not support a notable impact of participation in the wilderness orientation program on college grades, extracurricular involvement, and retention. Conversely, the qualitative analysis indicated that students perceived the wilderness orientation to have a positive impact on their adjustment to college. Data analysis found several themes that emerged from all three institutions: involvement in extracurricular activities, influence of peer counselor, meaningful relationship development, retention to second year, strong interest in

becoming a peer counselor, development of greater self-confidence, transferability of the wilderness experience to college, the equalizing effect of the wilderness, impact of counselor and faculty on academic achievement, and learning responsibility. The immediate and short-term impact on OOP participation is beneficial to research; however, the understudied long-term impact can provide valuable insight.

Gass (1990) conducted a longitudinal study to research the effects that OOP participation at the University of New Hampshire had on student retention 3 ½ years after the program. A control group of 64 students in addition to the OOP group of 32 students and a third residential camp group of 64 students participated in Gass's study. Gass collected retention data on the research participants at two intervals: 1 year and 3 ½ years after the first day of classes of the first semester. Gass found a significant difference among the three groups 1 year removed and a marginal significant difference 3 ½ years removed. The following percentages of retention per group at each interval, 1 year and 3 ½ years respectively, were reported:

- The OOP participants – 94% and 81%;
- The residential camp participants – 79% and 69%; and
- The control group participants – 69% and 61%. (Gass, 1990)

A longitudinal study by Gass et al. (2003), conducted 17 years after the OOP experience, included interviews of 16 randomly selected participants from the same University of New Hampshire OOP in the Gass 1990 study. The interviews were held via the telephone and tape recorded to later produce transcriptions. Via the open and axial coding process the researchers identified three themes that emerged:

- Challenging assumptions of self and others;
- Peer friendships as a support network; and

- Long-term positive effects of the orientation program during their undergraduate education as well as after graduation. (Gass et al., 2003)

The majority of OOP research focuses on short-term effects of wilderness or outdoor adventure based orientation programs; however, there are positive long-term effects for these students as discovered in the aforementioned study.

An area in need of further research is the integration of OOPs with academic departments, for-credit courses, or first-year experience programs, as well as longitudinal research to exam the longer term impact of OOP participation on persistence and alumni connectedness to the institution in the form of involvement and charitable donations. Additionally, the impact OOPs have on the student trip leaders who implement the programs is largely unknown (Bell et al., 2008) and is an identified gap in the research. Another integral component of first-year student success is developing a sense belonging on campus or a sense of place within the new community.

Sense of Place. Outdoor or wildness program participants reported a perceived increase in sense of place and social benefits that aided in the adjustment to college (Austin et al., 2009; Bell et al., 2014; Oravec, 2002; Wolfe & Kay, 2011). Students who develop a sense of place on campus and become socially integrated generally experience a more positive transition to college (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1986). In a study on first-year students' strengths awareness, students who gained a greater self-awareness felt more connected to the campus community and developed a deeper sense of belonging (Soria, & Stubblefield, 2015). Students who do not establish a sense of place on campus may be less likely to develop, or have been unable to develop, a social network within the college, and therefore may successfully

adapt to the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Norris and Mounts (2010) found that the relationship between school peers and campus belongingness was not significant but did find a positive relationship between involvements on campus and school belonging.

Outdoor orientation programs provide opportunities to develop a sense of belonging among participants who are new to the college (Bell et al., 2014). Students with a strong sense of belonging are typically able to socially integrate into the new community; this integration aids in the development and persistence to degree completion (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella et al., 1986; Pierce, 2002). Even with an established sense of place and a social network first-year students may have a number of anxieties and fears.

Anxiety and Fear. First-year students face a number of personal challenges such as: emotional problems, stress, (Hicks & Heastie, 2008), apprehension, anxiety, and fears (Bell & Williams, 2006; Kafsky, 2001; Wolfe & Kay, 2011). A study focusing on a Harvard University wilderness orientation program activity called “Fear in a Hat” consisted of approximately 1,000 first-year students in a 4 year span (Bell & Williams, 2006). Program participants anonymously wrote down their greatest fear and placed it in a hat; then each student drew a fear and read out loud, and the group discussed (Bell & Williams, 2006). The researchers collected all fears, a total of 1,016 responses, and findings indicated that incoming freshmen were primarily worried about interpersonal competence, N = 436, followed by intellectual competence, N =219 (Bell & Williams, 2006). Orientation programs that help new students establish a sense of place and a social network at the institution may help quell worries that freshmen have about interpersonal competence and ease the transition to college (Austin et al., 2009; Bell et al., 2014; Oravec, 2002; Wolfe & Kay, 2011). The long-term goal is for OOPs is to positively impact retention and

persistence. A short-term goal of OOPs is to assist first-year students with the transition to college.

### Transition

First-year freshman will have a unique transitional experience as they depart from the familiarity of high school and matriculate. Transition theory hypothesized that an individual's characteristics and his or her perception of the transition, as well as the pretransition and posttransition environments, play a significant role in the adaptation to the transition (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). With the environment playing a critical role in a transition, the three key components of pretransition and posttransition environments are: internal supports systems, institutional supports, and physical setting (Schlossberg, 1981). According to Schlossberg (1981), "All adults experience change and often these changes require a new network of relationships and a new way of seeing oneself" (p. 3). First-year students face a number of changes and challenges as they embark on a college career.

To help cope with a transition Schlossberg (1989) identified four components, referred to as the "4 Ss system": situation, self, supports, and strategies (p. 160). To assist first-year students in the transition to college, orientation and first-year experience programs should take into consideration three imperative pretransition environment components: internal supports systems, institutional supports, and physical setting is essential (Schlossberg, 1981). Additionally, orientation programs may address the situation, self, supports, and strategies involved in transition to help new students through the process.



A critical area of concern for higher education leaders that has a positive impact on retention and persistence is new student transition to college and the first-year experience (Barefoot, 2005; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005b; Mattanah et al., 2010). Institutional programs and practices have been developed to help students adapt to the transition and aid in the integration into the campus community as well as to get involved and establish a sense of belonging on campus (Barefoot, 2005). Institutions of higher education offer traditional orientation programs and outdoor or wilderness based orientation experiences that aid students in the transition to college (Bell et al., 2014; Gass, 1990; Vlamis et al., 2011).

Bell (2006) conducted a study comparing reported levels of social support measured by the Campus-Focused Social Provisions Scale (CF-SPS) after four different preorientation experiences at two colleges. The CF-SPS measured individuals in six areas: attachment, social integration, reassurance of worth/competence, reliable alliance/tangible support, guidance, and opportunity for nurturance (Bell, 2006). Out of the four preorientation experiences, the only program that participants reported higher levels of social provisions in all six areas of social support was in the wilderness orientation program (Bell, 2006). A study of first- year college students in a social support intervention program reported reduced loneliness and increased social support, factors positively effecting transition to college (Mattanah et al., 2010). Students who do not isolate themselves from supportive people in their lives may have a more successful adjustment to college than those who do isolate themselves (Mattanah, Brand, & Hancock, 2004). Students who have successfully transitioned to college have generally adjusted to college life, established a social network, and are doing well academically.

According to a study of the Moving Mountains OOP at California Polytechnic State University, participants indicated that the experience had a significant impact on the transition to

college as well as having an impact on a social and individual level (Lien & Goldenberg, 2012). While specific to that program, the study revealed that OOPs have the potential to aid in the development and personal growth of the student, they also help with the transition to college life (Lien & Goldenberg, 2012). To successfully adapt to the transition new students must feel a connection to the institution and establish belongingness by developing a sense of place (Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 1993). After the transition to college a first-year student's level of commitment to the institution and to graduate impacts the decision to stay enrolled at the institution.

### Commitment

Retention rates and persistence are impacted by the level of commitment to the institution and commitment to earning a degree by individual students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 1993). Social integration within a campus community may lead to commitment to the institution (Wolfe & Kay, 2011). Davidson et al. (2015) revealed that academic and social integration, as well as degree commitment, have a direct effect on institutional commitment, whereas advising effectiveness, academic efficacy, and collegiate stress had an indirect effect. Woosley and Miller (2009) found that academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment predict retention and academic performance.

The curriculum of an orientation program or extended OP may have particular traditions that are program specific or activities that are connected to the university; these experiences generally create bonds among the participants and build institutional commitment (Bell & Williams, 2006; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005, Wolfe & Kay, 2011). Commitment to the institution was found to have one of the largest direct effects on the persistence of first-year

students (Pascarella et al., 1986). Conversely, first-year students who reported feeling less connected to their institution than they anticipated were less committed to the institution and more likely to depart (Pleitz et al., 2015).

Student loans and credit hours attempted may be indicative of student commitment to higher education. A study on predicting retention revealed that students who had attempted the highest number of credit hours and had mid-range loan amounts were the most likely to persist (Bebergal, 2003). First-year students may or may not be able to develop a commitment to the institution based on perceived and actual fit within the new community.

### Institutional Fit

The degree of fit between a student and the environment of the institution impacts student success. Student and institutional characteristics play a role in the interactive relationship that determines the congruency between the student and the campus environment (Williams, 1987).

Five identified steps to improve the fit between the student and the institution include:

- assessment of first-year student characteristics;
- assessment of institutional characteristics;
- identification of congruency or fit;
- evaluation of levels of fit; and
- implementation of environmental interventions. (Williams, 1987)

First-year college students who are enrolled at a campus where their personality fits their environment are more satisfied and committed to the institution (Lounsbury, Levy, Saudargas, & Gibson, 2006). To enhance student fit to the college environment, it is essential that students and advisors have proper knowledge and understanding of the student's personality traits (Lounsbury

et al., 2006). A campus environment that is supportive and affirming promotes students success (Kuh, 2001).

Incongruence may stem from an intellectual divergence between the student and the institution (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration may be stymied by an intellectual mismatch at the institution increasing chances of student departure (Berger & Milem, 1999). Interaction with faculty in and out of the classroom is one component by which students judge their degree of fit within the institution (Tinto, 1993). First-year students who are in the right collegiate environment may have a better transition to college and persist to graduate.

### Campus Environment

A college campus is an ecological system that can influence first-year students; the impact of the influence depends on variables such as the location, size, and demographics of the institution, as well as programs and facilities available (Banning, 1989). First-year students may have a more challenging transition to the college environment if the environment in which they came from is significantly different, than if the environment was similar (Banning, 1989). The degree of student-institution fit, or ecological congruency, between first-year students impacts student satisfaction, retention, and academic achievement (Williams, 1987). The living environment may be the location where college students spend the most of their time and has an impact on their experience.

The college experience and student success is significantly influenced by their living environment (Zeller, 2005). On-campus residential environments contain programs and support systems that assist first-year students in the social and academic transition to college. Many institutions have an on-campus living requirement for first-year students (Tinto, 1993; Zeller,

2005). Residence life initiatives for first-year students are increasingly supportive in academics and connected to the mission and goals of the institution (Zeller, 2005). Living in a residence hall is positively associated with involvement on campus and increased persistence towards earning a degree (Astin, 1984). First-year students living on campus may be better situated to establish a support system on campus and take advantage of institutional support resources. In addition to, and a part of environmental fit, an integral component of student success in college is the ability to integrate socially.

### Social Integration

First-year students often enter college without an established peer group, social network, or interpersonal support system on campus. There are a wide ranging number of benefits as a result of successful social integration including communication skills, increased self-efficacy, stress coping, and a sense of belonging (Bell et al., 2014; Braxton & McClendon, 2001). Students who are able to become socially integrated within the institution are more likely to be retained and persist towards degree completion (Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 2006).

First-year students who are not members of any campus communities, have not integrated sufficiently, or lack affiliation to others on campus are at risk of social isolation and early departure (Tinto, 1993). The early stages of the first semester are a critical time period. According to Woosley (2003) first-year students who perceive that they have made friends, adjusted well, and are satisfied socially during the first 3 weeks of school were more likely to persist to degree completion within 5 years. In a study by Braxton et al. (2000) class discussions

and higher order thinking activities revealed a statistically significant positive influence on social integration.

In addition to the academic adjustment, the task of meeting people, building friendships, and creating a social network can be challenging for first-year students. The most successful first-year experience programs foster the development of community where new students have the opportunity to create healthy, meaningful peer connections (Austin et al., 2009; Bell et al., 2014). A focal point of outdoor orientation programs, beyond the social aspects of meeting new people and building friendships, is to develop the participants' sense of belonging on campus (Austin et al., Bell et al., 2014). Incongruence or lack of fit between the student and the institution and isolation, insufficient interactions, often result in the inability to socially integrate to the campus community and lead to student departure (Tinto, 1993). Social integration within the campus community is an integral component of student success, and whether physically on campus or off campus students need a support system.

### Support System

First-year students garner support from family, friends, peers, mentors, advisors, and professors. Morrow and Ackermann (2012) found a small but significant positive relationship with faculty support and the intent to persist. Student interaction with faculty inside and outside of the classroom positively influences student learning and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Orientation and extended orientation programs provide an opportunity for early contact with faculty and staff; the more often and positive this early interaction is, the more likely students will persist (Tinto, 1993). Other sources of support are integral to student retention and success.

Prior to college concerns about losing precollege friends and establishing new friendships were found to be significant intervening factors of students' self-esteem and friendship satisfaction 10 weeks into the first semester of college (Paul & Kelleher, 1995). According to Paul and Kelleher (1995), "New college friendship satisfaction was not significantly associated with self-esteem, whereas precollege friendship satisfaction was linked to self-esteem" (p. 518). Friendship development for first-year students may be a slow process, and first year experience programs and interventions can assist students in their social integration (Barefoot, 2005; Paul & Kelleher, 1995).

First-year students who participated in a social support intervention program scored higher in university adjustment and had fewer behavioral problems in the semester following the program than students who did not participate (Pratt et al., 2000). Research findings have shown that a mentoring program can assist first-year student adjustment to college and contribute to student success and retention (Redmond, 1990; Schwitzer & Thomas, 1998). Mentors, whether peer or adult, provide information, guidance, and support to the students they mentor (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Effective mentoring can encourage mentees to take a critical look at their lives and make change and decisions that result in positive outcomes for students (Bean & Eaton, 2001) in the realm of nonacademic support.

In a study examining the role that nonacademic supporters have in student development, a majority of the research participants had someone in their lives they considered to be a supportive other who provided guidance, a third of which referred to this person as a mentor (Fruith, 2015). Peer relationships are a factor in lowering levels of loneliness in first-year students (Norris & Mounts, 2010) and have been found to be statistically significant in the adjustment to college life (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Research has shown that peer

support is a stronger predictor of adjustment and college grades than family support (Dennis et al., 2005). First-year students challenged with adjusting to college and possibly experiencing homesickness can find emotional support from quality relationships with peers, professors, advisors, and counselors (Mattanah et al., 2004). Notably, peer support has been found to be a significant predictor of second-year retention (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

According to Bell (2012) the wilderness environment elicits a focus on personal and group need that often leads to the establishment of mutual trust and social support. In a study that examined adult attachment style, first-year students who maintain a secure attachment style throughout their first year of college are more confident in their ability to cultivate romantic partners than are students who have a stably insecure or less stably secure attachment style (Lopez & Gormley, 2002). Research on college persistence revealed that encouragement and support from significant others are important factors that should be incorporated into the examination of student persistence (Cabrera et al., 1993). In addition to a support system, student success and retention rates are affected by students' level of involvement on campus.

### Involvement

A highly involved or engaged student is more likely to be retained, conversely a student who is not involved at his or her institution is more likely to withdrawal (Berger & Milem, 1999; Moore, Lovell, McGann, & Wyrick, 1998; Tinto, 1998). Student involvement inside and outside of the classroom impacts learning, development, and ultimately his or her success at the institution (Astin, 1993; Becker, Cooper, Atkins, & Martin, 2009). According to Berger and Milem (1999), "Early involvement in the fall semester positively predicts spring involvement and has significant indirect effects on social integration, academic integration, subsequent



institutional commitment, and persistence” (p. 658). In a study by Norris and Mounts (2010) student involvement in campus activities was positively related to lower levels of loneliness. Institutional characteristics and missions vary, impacting opportunities for engaging students.

Seven types of higher education institutions based on pattern of engagement were recognized:

- Diverse, but interpersonally fragmented;
- Homogeneous and interpersonally cohesive;
- Intellectually stimulating;
- Interpersonally supportive;
- High-tech, low-touch;
- Academically challenging and supportive; and
- Collaborative. (Pike & Kuh, 2004)

The type of environment and institutional characteristics has an impact on student engagement and interactions among campus community members (Pike & Kuh, 2004). Student retention initiatives generally include the engagement of students and increasing levels of involvement in campus activities (Tinto, 1993).

Theory of Student Involvement. The theory of student involvement developed by Astin (1984) includes five postulates:

1. Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience;
2. Involvement occurs along a continuum;
3. Involvement has quantitative and qualitative features;

4. The amount of learning and development a student realizes is directly proportional to the quantity and quality of their involvement; and
5. The effectiveness of a program is directly related to the ability to increase student involvement in the program.

Student involvement theory postulated that the more students are involved on campus, the more energy they devote, which increases their learning and development as well as their time to degree completion (Astin, 1984; Astin, 1993). Additionally, the theory can be used as a tool by educators in the design and implementation of more effective learning environments and in evaluating the degree to which institutional policies and practices increase or decrease student involvement (Astin, 1984). The degree to which first-year students are involved on campus may impact the ability to successfully integrate from an academic perspective.

### Academic Integration

Upon entering college students may or may not be adequately prepared for higher education (Erickson & Strommer, 2005). First-year experience courses and programs assist students' academic integration into the institution. According to Tinto (1993) academic involvement tends to increase student effort that results in enhanced learning. Academic involvement generally matters more than social involvement; however, both forms of involvement influence student persistence (Tinto, 1993). There may be a discrepancy between the expectations of first-year students and the academic rigor of college and what they actually experience (Pleitz et al., 2015). Academic integration was found to directly influence student levels of institutional commitment, which has a direct effect on persistence (Pascarella &

Terenzini, 1983). Courses designed specifically for first-year students are a component of the first-year experience to help students integrate to the campus community.

First-Year Courses. Courses, seminars, or colloquium have become commonplace in higher education to enhance new students' transition to college and increase student success (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). First-year courses exist in a variety of forms:

- A seminar may be a continuation of new student orientation;
- A seminar may have a specific academic or transition theme;
- New students may be required to take the course or it may be optional; and
- College credit may be offered. (Zerr & Bjerke, 2016)

Social and academic realms are integrated in a first-year seminar, and there are opportunities for peer interaction (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Zerr and Bjerke (2016) found that students enrolled in an academic-themed seminar realized a greater benefit in terms of academic engagement than students enrolled in a transition-themed seminar. Padgett et al. (2013) found significant indirect effects suggesting that participation in a first-year seminar promotes meaningful learning and increases students' need for cognition. As first-year courses assist students in the transition to college and expand their knowledge, as do learning communities.

Learning Communities. In an effort to engage students, involving them in their learning experience, many higher education institutions have incorporated learning communities that are based on a collaborative pedagogy (Tinto, 2003). A learning community consists a cohort of students who take academic courses organized around a particular subject with the goals of enriching the student experience and increasing student success (Laufgraben, 2005). The general

premise of learning communities is the integration of diverse assignments and programs that promote student involvement in academic and social activities that extend beyond the classroom (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Student engagement in activities outside of the classroom are more likely to form a connection with peers and lead to deeper, more personally relevant learning (Zhao & Kuh, 2004) that has a positive impact on student success and retention (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). The participation in learning communities is positively related to academic performance, engagement in educational activities, and overall college satisfaction (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Learning communities have been incorporated into on-campus residence halls to form what is referred to as living-learning communities.

*Living-Learning Community.* A living-learning community is a residence-based curricular and cocurricular experience where a cohort of students live and learn collaboratively with the primary goal of integrating living and academic environments to positively impact student success and retention (Laufgraben, 2005). Living-learning communities are generally structured around an academic theme or purpose and may provide students at a large campus with a small campus experience (Zeller, 2005). A successful retention effort at large public institutions is the segmenting of campus into smaller communities to facilitate first-year student academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993). According to Purdie and Rosser (2011) an improvement in student retention is a result of programs that connect the curricular and residential experience.

In a study of first-generation students in a living-learning community findings support a limited, but statistically significant, effect on their academic and social transition to college (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). Student participants of learning-living communities

perceived that supportive residence environments eased the transition to college and these students were found to be more involved on campus than nonparticipants (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). According to Stassen (2003) living-learning communities can have a positive effect on academic performance and persistence. In a study by Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, and Johnson (2006) student in a living-learning program were statistically more likely to discuss academic, career, and sociocultural issues with their peers than students who did not participate in the program. A strong relationship between living-learning communities and peer interaction measures can enhance the student experience and increase student success (Stassen, 2003). Academic advising likewise plays an import role in student success.

### Academic Advising

First-year students often enter higher education undecided about their major and future career. The lack of clearly defined goals or changes in goals are generally not cause for concern; however, students who exhibit prolonged uncertainty and fail to identify goals is problematic and may lead to departure (Tinto, 1993). Quality academic advising and support is essential to first-year student success (Kuh, 2005) and may be the most important interaction that occurs between first-year students and an institutional representative (King & Kerr, 2005).

According to King and Kerr (2005) the ideal model for first-year student advisement at 4-year institutions remains faculty advising on matters related to the student's program of study and professional staff advisors provide guidance on academic policies and class registration. Interaction between students and their advisors should be a continuous, on-going process throughout the school year (Lau, 2003). The use of academic support services such as writing centers, learning centers, and career centers reduce student attrition and increase student success

(Lau, 2003; Reyes, 1997). First-year experience professionals may serve in an advising role, assisting first-year students with guidance and information on courses and majors (Cuseo, 2011). Academic advisors have an important role to play with the academic development of students, and while in college the development of the whole person is likewise a part of student success.

### Student Development

As traditional aged high school students matriculate they are simultaneously developing into young adults. Colleges and universities are charged with educating students as well as assisting in student development into well-rounded and healthy citizens (Astin, 1984, 1993; Pleitz et al., 2015). The realm of student development encompasses several components. Depending on the maturity level, development to date, and academic preparedness, individual students will need assistance in different areas and in varying degrees (Ishler, 2005a). First-year students face a number of changes as they develop into independent adults in college. A model for assessing student change postulated that student's growth and development are affected by five sets of variables:

1. Students' precollege traits
2. The institution's structural/organizational characteristics
3. The campus culture/environment
4. Socializing agents on campus
5. The quality of effort put forth by the students. (Pascarella et al., 1986)

The ability to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships and the ability to develop a sense of self through identity exploration are broad indicators of first-year student success (Upcraft et

al., 2005). In addition to relationships, the broad spectrum of student development includes employable skills and leadership in the workplace.

Employment while in college may have an effect on the leadership development of students. Research findings support the notion that students who work off campus more than 20 hours per week had a significant positive direct effect on overall leadership, individual leadership, group leadership, and community leadership (Salisbury, Pascarella, Padgett, & Blaich, 2012). Whereas students with on-campus employment realized virtually no impact on their leadership development; the only significant effect was with the leadership for change score for students working on campus for 10 or more hours per week (Salisbury et al., 2012). First-year programs, including OOPs, seek to positively impact student development.

A study at a small private liberal arts college examined the effects of an adventure based orientation program on student development behaviors consisted of a sample of 71 students who volunteered to participate in the 6-day residential adventure orientation program and opted to participate in the study, along with a comparison group of 140 randomly selected students who did not participate in the program (Vlamiš et al., 2011). The research participants completed the condensed version of the Student Development Task Inventory-2 (CSDTI-2) on three separate occasions: on the first day of the adventure orientation program or for the comparison group on the first day of the traditional campus orientation, at the end of the fall semester, and in the middle of the spring semester (Vlamiš et al., 2011). The instrument tested research participants in several areas of student development, and the scores of the adventure orientation participants increased significantly in Task Developing Autonomy, Emotional Autonomy, Instrumental Autonomy, Task Developing Purpose, and Appropriate Educational Plans (Vlamiš et al., 2011). According to Vlamiš et al. (2011) the adventure orientation participants' scores were lower in

most areas than the comparison group prior to the experience and start of the semester, which suggests that participation in the adventure orientation program enabled students to become more in line with their peers in particular areas of student development. First-year students who face separation anxiety and struggle with homesickness may lack the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills required for socially integrating into the campus community (Claborn & Kane, 2012). Institutional programs, services, and interventions for first-year students challenged with the transition or adjustment to college can have a positive impact on success and retention (Lau, 2003).

### Chapter Summary

Institutions of higher education in the United States offer first-year experience programs to help new students adapt to the transition to college and integrate into the campus community with the overarching goals of increased student retention and persistence to graduation. The social and academic systems that first-year students are a part of are distinct yet intertwined (Tinto, 1993). There are a number of factors beyond academic performance by which to gauge first-year student success (Upcraft et al., 2005), including social integration, cocurricular involvement, and a sense of belonging. For first-year students to return for a second year of college it is essential that the first-year experience, consisting of several components, was a positive, successful experience (Barefoot, 2005). Extended orientation programs such as wilderness or outdoor orientation experiences supplement traditional orientation programming. There are several goals for and benefits of these types of programs that have been the subject of a number of studies.



Wilderness or outdoor adventure based programs can benefit from research documenting the impact on participant transition and integration to college as well as positive correlations to student involvement, commitment and connection to the institution, and sense of place, which in turn impact retention and persistence towards degree completion. Research conducted on the lived experiences of first-year freshmen will provide insight on the impact that institutional practices and first-year programs have on the transition to college and integration into the campus community. A successful transition experience and positive integration will reduce student attrition and increase persistence to degree completion.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the transition and integration experiences of first-year freshmen who participated in an outdoor orientation program at two higher education institutions in the Southeastern United States. For the purpose of the study transition and integration experiences were defined as: social, academic, and cocurricular integration to college; a connection or commitment to the institution; a sense of belonging on campus (Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 1998); and the development of a support system on campus (Schlossberg, 1981). The study was focused on the lived experiences of outdoor orientation program (OOP) participants at two public 4-year universities.

#### Research Questions

The central question under investigation was: what are the lived experiences during the transition to college and integration to the campus community for first-year students who participated in an OOP? Additional guiding research questions included:

1. How do OOP participants describe their social, academic, and cocurricular integration to college?
2. How do OOP participants view their involvement on campus?
3. What factors do OOP participants indicate as advancing their levels of commitment or connection to the institution?
4. How have OOP participants established a sense of belonging on campus?

5. What support systems do OOP participants describe as important to their college experience?

### Qualitative Design

Qualitative inquiry involves gathering data on naturally occurring phenomena with the use of words rather than numbers, as well as incorporating the use of open-ended questions (Creswell, 2014; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Additionally, qualitative research dissects how meaning is constructed and involves interpreting data and documents via inductive analysis to identify emerging themes (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). The reporting of qualitative research has a flexible structure with a focus on individual meaning of participant experiences within the topic under study and the encompassing complexities (Creswell, 2014). The research was focused on transition and integration experiences of OOP participants during the first year of college.

### Role of the Researcher

The experience of the researcher includes a 17-year career as a higher education professional in campus recreation, 7 years of indirect oversight of outdoor recreation programs, and 5 years of indirect oversight of the OOP at ETSU. Indirect oversight came in the form of directly supervising the professional staff member who directly oversaw the OOP. The prior exposure of the researcher includes 17 years of supervising and working with college students including first-year students. Additional exposure to outdoor orientation programs includes serving as a staff member on the 2012 pilot OOP at ETSU.

The participants were informed of the role of the researcher, the data collection process, and potential for power imbalance between researcher and research participant. I avoided leading questions and built trust between myself and the research participants to mitigate the power imbalance (Creswell, 1998). Additionally, concept maps were used as a source of data collection. Concept mapping helps balance power between the investigator and research participants as well as increase participant involvement (Freeman, 2004).

### Ethics

Qualitative research may be more intrusive than quantitative research and ethical guidelines regarding consent, confidentiality, anonymity, deception, and privacy need to be established (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Seidman, 1991). In higher education Institutional Review Boards (IRB) exists to approve, monitor, and review research involving human subjects (Patton, 2015). The safety, privacy, and confidentiality of a study's participants are essential aspects of the study for the researcher to address, and the proper training on conducting research with human subjects is required (Creswell, 1998). To build trust with the participants of a study the researcher needs to be forthright and objective as well as work towards developing a rapport and building trust.

As a part of the IRB process the researcher submitted the research protocol and was granted IRB approval (Appendix E). Participation in the study was voluntary; participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty or repercussions and that their privacy and confidentiality will be maintained. To ensure confidentiality, names, locations, and identifying information were masked with pseudonyms and concealed to protect the participants (Patton, 2015). Additionally, a master file of names was maintained in a separate

location stored on an electronic hard drive in a password protected file. To encourage participation an incentive of a \$20 Visa gift card was offered to research participants in accordance with IRB policy.

### Setting

The research setting included two higher education institutions that offer OOPs for incoming first-year freshmen in the Southeastern United States. The two sites were purposefully chosen for their similarities in institution control and location as well as for their differences in enrollment size and curriculum. Additionally, the cost effectiveness of the close proximity to the researcher and gatekeeper access were factors in choosing research sites.

The first site was East Tennessee State University (ETSU), a 4-year public regional institution of approximately 15,000 students located in Johnson City, Tennessee. The 2014 undergraduate admissions rate for ETSU was 92%; 69% of first-year, full-time, bachelor's seeking students were retained from Fall 2013 to Fall 2014, and the overall graduation rate within 6 years for students who commenced their studies in Fall 2008 was 43% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The outdoor orientation program at ETSU is called Buccaneer Outdoor Adventure (BOA). The BOA program consists of a combination of nights spent in a residence hall and tent camping over 3 to 4 nights with activities such as the bike riding, hiking, stand-up paddle boarding, trail service, and informative sessions. At ETSU there is an extended orientation program for first-year students called Preview that is held over 3 days prior to the first day of classes. Two of the four ETSU research participants took part in Preview in addition to the OOP.

The second site in the study was the University of North Carolina at Asheville (UNCA), a 4-year public liberal arts institution of approximately 3,900 students located in Asheville, North Carolina. The 2014 undergraduate admissions rate for UNCA was 73%; 77% of first-year, full-time, bachelor's seeking students were retained from Fall 2013 to Fall 2014, and the overall graduation rate within 6 years for students who commenced their studies in Fall 2008 was 64% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The program at UNCA is called the Pre-Rendezblue Wilderness Experience, which is one of nine special-interest programs for new students that showcase Asheville. The Wilderness Experience spent the first 3 days and 2 nights backpacking in the Pisgah National Forest followed by 2 nights tent camping at a base camp with day activities that included rafting, rock climbing, biking, or canoeing. The UNCA extended orientation program for new students is called Rendezblue and is held the 3 days prior to the first day of classes.

### Sampling Strategy

With purposeful sampling, research participants are selected because they can provide in-depth, illuminative information on the central question under investigation (Patton, 2015; Polkinghorne, 2005). Purposeful sampling provides targeted sampling of information-rich research participants who have insight about the phenomenon; the goal is an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, not empirical generalizations (Patton, 2015). Participants were selected using a criterion sampling strategy.

In this study the sample was purposefully selected using the following four criteria: (1) first-year students who had participated in a university sponsored outdoor or wilderness based program prior to the first semester in college, (2) students who had successfully completed their

first semester of college and remained enrolled as a student during the data collection term of the research of Spring 2016, (3) students meeting the definition of traditional age (18-21 years old) college freshmen, and (4) students willing to participate in data collection including concept mapping and interviews. The study used purposeful sampling to the point of data saturation.

### Sample

The traditional age first-year students who participated in outdoor orientation programs at ETSU and UNCA during the summer 2015 and who were enrolled in the spring 2016 were eligible research participants. The sample was specifically chosen to provide insight on the transition and integration to college by first-year students. Demographics, previous experiences, or academic achievement levels of the students were not considered in the selection of research participants. There was an attempt to have equal gender representation among the research participants; however, only female research participants materialized from UNCA. The sample consisted of eight first-year, traditional age college students who volunteered to participate in the study. These students were rich with information that provided illuminative detail on the phenomenon under investigation.

### Data Collection

The researcher contacted the UNC Asheville IRB chair to inquire whether or not UNCA IRB approval was necessary to use the campus as a research site. The chair replied that approval through UNCA IRB was unnecessary, that permission to conduct the study at UNCA was approved provided ETSU IRB grants approval. The Director of Campus Recreation at UNCA was emailed as the gatekeeper at that institution and access was granted. At ETSU, as the

Director of Campus Recreation, I served as the gatekeeper with permission to access the research field from the Vice President of Student Affairs. The traditional age first-year students who participated in respective outdoor orientation programs at ETSU and UNCA during the summer 2015 and who were enrolled in the spring 2016 were contacted via email by the researcher. The purpose of the IRB approved email was to explain the study and recruit research participants. Students who responded that they were interested in participating were sent a reply with the IRB approved informed consent and options of dates to meet with the researcher. Four students from ETSU, two females and two males, participated in the study. Six students at UNCA were initially interested in participating in the study, four females and two males; however, the researcher was unable to confirm a date to hold the session with either male student. Therefore the four research participants from UNCA were female.

The sessions at which concepts maps were created and the interviews took place were held on the ETSU and UNCA campuses in prearranged rooms that were free from noise and distractions. Data collection included two phases. Phase one consisted of three concept maps created by each research participant. Concept mapping is the graphical organization and demonstration of knowledge or experience (Novak & Canas, 2008; McAleese, 1999; Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009) with the use of propositions that link concepts to represent meaningful relationships (Novak & Gowin, 1984). A concept map generated by a participant in a study can assist in communicating lived experience in way that facilitates the researcher's understanding (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009) as well as provide an opportunity for emergent questions to be identified and corroboration of interview responses (Kinchin, Streatfield, & Hay, 2010). Additionally, concept maps are participant-centric and increase research participants' level of engagement in the study (McAleese, 1999; Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). The researcher



provided an explanation of the use of concept maps, demonstrated how to create a concept map, and gave instructions for creating three concept maps (Appendix D). Research participants produced three concept maps on the following subjects:

1. Involvement and activities on campus,
2. Support system and social network, and
3. Transition to college life and integration on campus.

Phase two consisted of an in-depth interview. An inquiry with a focused, in-depth interview consisting of open-ended questions reconstructs the experience of the participant, with the goal being to explore, understand, and make meaning of the phenomenon under study (Seidman, 1991). A semistructured interview protocol was used with a pre-established list of open-ended questions. Interview questions were derived from the conceptual framework triad of theories on transition, student involvement, and student departure. The interview portion of the session was recorded with a digital recorder. The original list of questions was reviewed with undergraduate students as a pilot, provided in Appendix A. After the review the list of questions were edited for improved clarification, understanding, and flow; a final version is provided in Appendix B. Additional interview questions emerged from the participants' concept maps and were asked in addition to the pre-set list of questions.

A research blueprint (Appendix C) was constructed to connect specific interview questions and concept maps to one or more research question. The concept mapping and interview session with each participant lasted approximately 90 minutes. The sessions were conducted in March and April, 2016.

## Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher prior to analyzing the data. Data analysis of a phenomenological study entails analyzing statements to identify common categories, patterns, and themes among the data collected (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2015). The process of coding allows researchers to organize data into categories and subcategories (Saldana, 2009). The researcher read through the transcripts prior to coding and made notes on first impressions.

The process of coding qualitative data involves labeling, sorting, categorizing, and synthesizing data to appropriately conduct data analysis (Charmez, 2006). A code is a word or short phrase that captures the spirit of the datum (Saldana, 2009). Coding complete transcriptions allows new ideas to emerge and can lead the researcher to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Charmez, 2006). After initially reading the interview transcripts the researcher conducted initial, first-round coding followed by second-round coding of the transcripts. Emergent codes were identified during data analyzation and a master list was created. Line-by-line coding, where each line of data was assigned a code, was implemented during the initial coding (Charmez, 2006). As codes emerged during first round coding, categories under which these codes logically fall became apparent. Conceptual saturation was realized by the eighth transcript with no new categories emerging. After coding the transcripts the codes and categories were reviewed and subcategories were established. Second round coding of the interview transcripts allowed for reclassification and filtering of coded data as needed with a focus on emergent salient themes (Saldana, 2009). Constant comparative analysis was used throughout the coding and categorizing process and to identify themes, patterns, and findings (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

Initial coding of the concept maps was conducted using codes established during the coding of interview transcripts. Axial coding was used to analyze the concept maps in conjunction with the interview transcripts. The purpose of axial coding is to bring the data back together in a coherent whole and form connections between categories to explain the phenomenon (Charmez, 2006). When the categories were compared and consolidated, themes and patterns emerged (Saldana, 2009). The analytical iterative process continued with the development of pattern variables and the application to the data set (Anfara et al., 2002). Code mapping comprised of three iterations of analysis and is detailed in Table 2. The research participant profiles, analysis of the data, and summary of the research findings are presented in Chapter 4.

Table 2

*Code Mapping: Three Iterations of Analysis (to be read from the bottom up)*

CODE MAPPING FOR TRANSITION AND INTEGRATION TO COLLEGE

(Research Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5)

RQ1: How do OOP participants describe their social, academic, and cocurricular integration to college?	RQ2: How do OOP participants view their involvement on campus?	RQ3: What factors do OOP participants indicate as advancing their levels of commitment or connection to the institution?	RQ4: How have OOP participants established a sense of belonging on campus?	RQ5: What support systems do OOP participants describe as important to their college experience?
--	--	--	--	--

(THIRD ITERATION: APPLICATION TO DATA SET)

A comprehensive support system, the right environment, and engagement in fun campus activities are the cornerstones to successful transition and integration to college.

(SECOND ITERATION: PATTERN VARIABLES)

- |                       |                                  |                                 |                                      |                                    |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1A. Support/resources | 2A. Being engaged and having fun | 3A. Environment/characteristics | 4A. Being oneself/carving own path   | 5A. Institution resources/supports |
| 1B. Academic pursuits | 2B. Connection and experiences   | 3B. Challenges/independence     | 4B. Adjusting to the new environment | 5B. Personal supports              |

(FIRST ITERATION: INITIAL CODES/SURFACE CONTENT ANALYSIS)

- |                               |                          |                                |                                |                                       |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1A. Supportive relationships  | 2A. Pursuing interests   | 3A. Institution type/size      | 4A. Connection/niche           | 5A. Institution resources             |
| 1A. Overcoming challenges     | 2A. Clubs/organizations  | 3A. Location/city              | 4A. Positive outlook/open mind | 5A. Programs                          |
| 1A. Being pushed/comfort zone | 2A. Recreation/exercise  | 3A. Nature/mountains           | 4A. Introversion/extroversion  | 5A. Encouragement                     |
| 1A. Programs/activities       | 2A. Doing fun things     | 3A. Welcoming/low stress       | 4A. Time to adjust             | 5A. Professors/mentors/advisors       |
| 1B. Pre-college experiences   | 2B. Meeting new people   | 3B. Independence               | 4B. Environment                | 5B. Self/self-motivation              |
| 1B. Faculty interaction       | 2B. Develop friendships  | 3B. Finances/paying for school | 4B. Living space/roommate      | 5B. Friend/peers                      |
| 1B. Interests/course material | 2B. Employment           | 3B. New experiences/learning   | 4B. Familiarity                | 5B. Family                            |
| 1B. Attending class/studying  | 2B. Service/volunteering | 3B. Future/goals/career        | 4B. Love of institution        | 5B. Church members/spiritual advisors |

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the transition and integration experiences of first-year freshmen who participated in an outdoor orientation program at two higher education institutions in the Southeastern United States. One central question under investigation with five supporting research questions informed this qualitative study. Research participants created three concept maps providing a visual representation of their college experience. Additionally, semistructured interviews further described their first year of college. The analysis and research findings of the concept maps and interviews are presented in this chapter.

This qualitative study measured what it was intended to measure, and credibility stems from member checks of interview transcripts, data triangulation of interview transcripts and concept maps, and theory triangulation. Transferability equates to the positivist construct of external validity where research findings are generalizable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Generalizations are not possible in qualitative research; however, the goal is to formulate a plausible working hypothesis that is transferable to a similar context (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Purposeful sampling and rich, in-depth description with adequate contextual information were incorporated into this study to increase the transferability of the findings. A dependable study is logical, traceable, and documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The strategies employed to ensure dependability were creation of an audit trail and triangulation. A confirmable study produces research findings based on the experiences and thoughts of the research participants, not on the knowledge or preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation and

reflexivity were used in this study to increase confirmability. Data were reduced inductively allowing key concept and themes to emerge from the data sources (Seidman, 1991).

Eight research participants were involved in the study. The concept mapping and semistructured interviews took place in one session during the months of March 2016 and April 2016. The research participants created three concept maps prior to the recorded interview portion of the session. For the purpose of the study the eight research participants were given the option to either chose their own pseudonym or have the researcher assign a pseudonym. The research participants are profiled in the following section.

### Participant Profiles

This study's eight research participants were enrolled as first-year college students during the 2015-16 academic year. Four of the research participants were East Tennessee State University (ETSU) students and four were University of North Carolina at Asheville (UNCA) students. All eight students met the selection criteria for the study, which included: (1) first-year student who had participated in a university sponsored outdoor or wilderness based program prior to the first semester of college, (2) successful completion of their first semester of college and remained enrolled as a student during the research data collection term in March and April, 2016, (3) were traditional age (18-21 years old) college freshmen, and (4) were willing to participate in data collection that included concept mapping and an interview. All eight research participants lived in on-campus residence halls during their first year of college; however, that was not a condition of the study. The students who participated in the study were rich with information that provided illuminative detail on the phenomenon under investigation. Each research participant is described in the proceeding profiles.

Zoe is an ETSU student from Kingsport, Tennessee. She had a hard start to the beginning of the school year. Zoe found it difficult to successfully integrate to college largely due to the change in her relationship with her boyfriend, which became long-distance as the two left their hometown to attend college hundreds of miles apart. Zoe has been able to make friends and as the year progressed, she claimed “It got a lot better and even better this semester”. As a member of the Air Force Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) all 4 years of high school, Zoe’s college plan was to attend the Air Force Academy. Due to a past health condition discovered in the application process Zoe was disqualified and “That wiped out my plans, and I guess I waited too late, not that I would have applied anywhere else. This was kind of my back-up plan, so that is why I came here”. Self-proclaimed to be “sort of introverted” Zoe said that participating in the OOP prior to the start of the school year helped her to meet new people. Additionally, Zoe stated that ETSU "feels like home to me" and "feels good here". One reason that she has been able to integrate to college, despite the challenge of a distance relationship with her significant other, is that her hometown is approximately 30 minutes away. Outside of attending class Zoe enjoys spending lot of time in the laboratory and she has a passion for running and weightlifting, activities that help her relieve stress.

An ETSU student from Chattanooga, Tennessee, Kara has had a tough first year of college as she has struggled with depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder. With regards to participation in the OOP, Kara was nervous about going with people she did not know, but she found the trip leaders to be encouraging and established a friendship with them. According to Kara the program “Helped me find my passion in outdoors and stuff, and helped me find things that I enjoy. And through one of the girls I met one of my best friends now”. Kara is involved with several organizations on campus that feed her interests as well as give her support and

friendship; she also uses the Counseling Center, a university resource, for assistance. Kara identifies as queer and has established a group of friends at the institution that give her a sense of belonging. She stated “When I came here I met such a big variety on the spectrum that really helped me feel like I belonged”. Originally planning to double major in Spanish and Biology to eventually become a veterinarian, Kara has struggled academically in her first year. Due to the academic difficulties Kara changed her decided not to pursue a career as a veterinarian and mid-way through her second semester when the interview occurred Kara was undecided about her major.

Rick is an ETSU student hailing from Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He has had a great first year of college and started off strong by participating in multiple programs and becoming highly involved. In addition to participating in the OOP, Rick also attended Preview and multiple Welcome Week events offered the first week of classes. Preview is a multi-day program offered by ETSU New Student and Family Programs to help new students acclimate to campus in the days leading into the first week of classes. Rick also participates in the Pre-Health Living and Learning Community (PHLLC) on campus. When asked about the OOP experience Rick stated:

I thought that was really cool and it really warmed me up. It gave me a like a warm-up session for when I went to my PHLLC early move-in, I was really ready to talk to people and be a good listener and ask a lot of questions. Asking a lot of questions is what I found out was the most effective way to make friends so that, and I just love the outdoors. It really opened my eyes to how much natural beauty is around this area.

Rick feels that he has found a niche on campus:



It's such a blessing to be with like-minded people in college right off the bat because some people don't find that until later, but I never really thought of it as a support group really, just kind of like they have an influence as friends on who I am, so that's probably the biggest is the Pre-health Living Learning Community and the friends I've made.

Rick's plan is to attend medical school after college with the goal of becoming a chiropractor. East Tennessee State University was Rick's number one choice for colleges due to the affordability and the PHLLC.

An ETSU student, Charlie, is from Manchester, Tennessee which is in the middle of the state, approximately 4 hours from campus. Charlie states "My college experience has been pretty awesome I feel. I think I've adjusted pretty fast to the environment". Charlie is involved with the ETSU Quidditch club and Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, which he said is like a family that likes to do fun activities and provides support. With regards to participation in the OOP Charlie said that "It was so much fun. It was scary at times, but it was a lot of fun. The first thing they made us, well the second day, they made us wake up early and we had to bike ride, and I was so terrified because I've had a horrible experiences riding bikes. So I did not know what to expect, but I had so much fun doing that bike ride because we got to see all of Johnson City." As far as college choices ETSU was Charlie's number one pick. In high school Charlie took Advanced Placement courses that he feels prepared him well for college. Charlie was originally planning on majoring in History; however, during his first year of college he changed his major to Spanish as he realized that he was passionate about the language and the culture. One of the things Charlie looks forward to most on campus is attending his Spanish class.

Sandi is a UNCA student from Baltimore, Maryland. Her first year of college has been smooth and in her words "All in all it's been an amazing experience." Sandi enjoyed the Wilderness Experience program and when asked about a takeaway from the experience she stated "I guess it was also the first time I've been more or less alone in nature, and again I grew up in a very flat city, so I think the biggest takeaway thing for me was having that connection with nature, it was very cathartic and meditative. There is a section where they let us hike alone for about a mile, someone stayed behind and someone was in front, it was a clear path and hiking alone was one of the coolest things I've ever done. So I would say that the nature aspect is my biggest takeaway". Sandi attended a college preparatory all-girls school from kindergarten through high school, and she felt that she was well-prepared the academic rigors of college. In actuality, her first year college courses have not been academically challenging for Sandi thus far. She stated "I mean I don't have really have a problem with cruising. It's not a problem for me at all, I'm enjoying it. I have leisure time and I get to go to the gym and not spend every waking minute studying". Sandi applied to 10 schools of varying institutional types and sizes, and when she visited the UNCA campus she knew it was the place for her: "I totally had that feeling when I walked onto campus. I love it, I love everything about it". Sandi is interested in majoring in either Political Science or Economics and will be taking courses in these fields during her third semester of college to help her make the decision.

Calin is a UNCA student from Beaufort, North Carolina; however, she moved with her family to Florida the summer prior to her first year of college. Calin was able to retain in-state residency for her first year of college because she had lived in North Carolina for 10 years prior to her first year of college. She plans on moving into an apartment the summer after her first year of college to re-establish in-state residency in North Carolina. Calin's first year of college

has been overall positive as she stated that “The institution has been very welcoming and I’ve so far enjoyed it. My classes are really great, my professors are really good”. Calin grew up surfing and has a surf scholarship, a partial scholarship, which helps cover the cost of her education. She is not receiving any financial assistance from her family. In addition to being a full-time student Calin works full-time to pay for her education, which she identified as a challenge and motivates her to earn her degree in 3 years. In her response describing the Wilderness Experience program Calin stated “That was so much fun...we were all split into groups before we went and my two leaders are now some of my good friends. One of my best friends, and I only have like three best friends that I talk to regularly, she was in my group with me and then her roommate is now one of my other of the three, so it very much influenced how my college experience is right now”. The University of North Carolina Asheville was Calin’s top choice of institution’s to attend and she stated that “I was excited to have a change of scenery in the mountains”. Calin applied to UNCA a Psychology major; however, she has switched her major to Mass Communications, as she would like to be a Health Communicator.

An out-of-state student at UNCA, Skylark, is from Omaha, Nebraska. Out of the eight research participants, she moved the furthest from home to attend college, and stated that "The transition was really big". Skylark bonded with the other students on the Wilderness Experience trip and also established a connection to the environment “It was definitely one of the founding experiences that built up in my mind that wow I really love this environment. I really love nature and how do I keep it this way for years and years to come. So it was definitely impacting in my entire college decision. Environmental studies also was not even a dream of what I wanted to do”. Upon entering college she was planning to major in Anthropology and English; however, in her first year of college Skylark decided to double major in Anthropology and

Economics and a minor in Environmental Studies. She is excited about the future possible careers that the double major and minor will afford her. In her first year Skylark has worked two jobs and is involved with the Belly Dancing club on campus, which is one of her passions. She is planning on moving into an apartment for her second year of college to gain in-state residency in North Carolina which would allow her to be eligible for in-state tuition rates her junior and senior years. After applying to several colleges, UNCA became one of the top two on her list, especially considering that she has family in the state and that she is extremely fond of the environment and mountains in the Asheville area.

Felicity is a UNCA student from Cary, North Carolina. In reference to her first year of college Felicity states "It's been really amazing" and she looks forward to spending time with friends and attending classes. She comes from an academically rigorous high school and was accepted into the Honors College at UNCA. The Honors College classes, programs, and faculty have been influential in Felicity's first year of college. As a self-proclaimed introvert, Felicity finds it challenging to meet new people; the Wilderness experience that she participated in prior to her first year of college helped her with that. She stated that "It was just so much fun altogether, because that crazy exercise (backpacking up mountains) really bonded us together and at the end we had a few days of rock climbing and rafting, which were our fun". With Felicity's list of colleges to she wanted to attend UNCA was towards the top, and she choose the institution because of the "nice distance" from home, the natural beauty of the surrounding area, and the smaller size of the school. She is involved with events that the Honors College offers, and is planning on starting a Bee Club at the institution. Felicity is passionate about the environment and has declared her major in Environmental Science with a concentration in Earth Science with the goal of going into Hydrology.

## Researcher's Notes and Memos

The principal investigator journaled field notes, personal memos, and emerging ideas throughout the interviewing period that occurred in March and April 2016. The semistructured interview protocol used allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions as they emerged, in addition to the pre-established list of open-ended questions. Observations made by the principal investigator of the research participants during the data collection sessions are provided in the following paragraphs.

Zoe was prompt for the session and she had a mature demeanor. She was calm and did not seem nervous throughout the session. Zoe had done concept mapping before took her time as she thoughtfully created her three concept maps.

The day of the session Kara requested to change her time for the session, which the principle investigator was able to accommodate. She brought her phone charger with her to the session and asked if she could charge her phone during the session, to which the response was yes. Kara was notably fidgeting throughout the session and seemingly nervous. She was observed checking her phone repeatedly throughout the session. Kara had done concept mapping before and took little time to complete the three maps.

Rick had a friendly and warm demeanor yet seemed slightly anxious or nervous throughout the session or potentially just had nervous energy. He noticeably fidgeted during the interview portion of the session. Rick gave thorough and insightful responses to all the interview questions. Rick had done concept mapping before and took his time to carefully construct the three maps.

Charlie had a very laid-back demeanor with a warm and easy smile. He was calm but may have been a little nervous. Charlie's interview answers seemed forthright, and he mentioned the word "fun" many times, as having fun and doing fun things seemed to be prevalent during his first-year. He had not previously done concept mapping and asked clarifying questions as needed while he constructed his three concept maps.

After the conclusion of the first four sessions with research participants the principal investigator noted that important areas of concern for first-year students include meeting new people, developing friends, fitting in, and finding a sense of place. Two key emergent themes permeated from the first half of the data collection sessions were involvement and supports.

The first research participant at UNCA, Sandi, seemed slightly nervous at the start of the sessions. She appeared to be confident and forthright in her answers and less nervous as the session proceeded. Sandi spoke fast and had open body language. She had not previously done concept mapping and asked clarifying questions as needed. Sandi did her three concept maps very quickly and they were simplistic. During one of Sandi's responses to a question the principal investigator made a note about a reference to the Wilderness Experience being "so long ago" in Sandi's words. In reality it was 8 months ago, which is of interest to note the perspective of the student as to when events occurred in the past. For qualitative research purposes this may be an important consideration in garnering student's perspectives and reflections in a timely manner before they forget key details.

Calin seemed slightly nervous at the beginning of the session and hesitant to open up; however, she became more comfortable as the session proceeded. She had not participated in concept mapping before, and after an explanation was provided Calin looked over the concept

map instructions and completed her maps quickly. She did not ask any clarifying questions and the concepts maps were not elaborate.

Skylark arrived a few minutes late to the session and out of breath, slightly frazzled. After settling in after the session began she became comfortable quickly. She had not previously done concept mapping and asked clarifying questions. Skylark took her time and completed three elaborate concept maps. She answered interview questions extensively and at times became sidetracked with her responses. Skylark was candid and provided great insight.

The eighth and final research participant, Felicity, arrived a few minutes late to the session; she had noticeably rushed to the meeting location. She was nervous at the beginning, but became comfortable as the session proceeded. She had not previously done concept mapping and asked clarifying questions as needed. She created three elaborate concept maps. At the start of the interview Felicity's answers were noticeably short; however, as the session proceeded she began to give quite a bit of detail and in-depth answers.

Additional notes made by the principal investigator after the conclusion of the research participants' sessions included:

- Impressed by the students' level of candor - the research participants were willing to share significant details of their experience including personal details of their lives.
- Beneficial insight from came from responses to questions one "Please tell me about what your college experience has been like so far during first year." and eight "What advice would you give a first-year student coming to college?"

- Challenges and areas of concern for first-year students include meeting new people, developing friends, finding a sense of place or a niche, doing well academically, and determining a major. Key emergent themes permeated from the data collection sessions were getting involved on campus, supportive relationships, resources, and having fun.

### Interview Analysis

There is no formula to extrapolate research findings from the data in the process of qualitative analysis (Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015), “Findings emerge like an artistic mural created from collage-like pieces that make sense in new ways when seen and understood as part of a greater whole” (p. 521). All research participants received a typed copy of their interview transcription and were encouraged to review their responses for accuracy. The procedure of member checking this data source was effective and errors identified by research participants were corrected.

After the completion of member checks the researcher read through the transcripts prior to coding and made notes on first impressions. The two key first impressions were: (1) first-year students want to make friends in college and develop those friendships, and (2) that having fun is important and doing fun activities has impacted their first year experience. First round coding of the transcripts were done line-by-line. The codes that emerged throughout the transcription process were added to a master list (Appendix F) and separated into categories and subcategories. As the iterative coding process unfolded with second round coding select codes were revised, eliminated, or combined, and the categories and subcategories were edited and



reorganized. The analysis of the research participant interviews is incorporated into the ensuing section.

### Interview Results

Prior to the session with the principal investigator the eight research participants were provided a written explanation of the purpose of the study and given the informed consent document to review. At the start of a session the principal investigator orally reviewed the purpose of the study and informed consent document with each research participant. Informed consent was received from the research participants prior to commencing the session. After the concept mapping portion of the session was completed a recorded interview was conducted. Direct quotes relevant to the five research questions are provided in the following sections. The selected quotes from the transcripts are incorporated to support the themes that emerged from the study.

#### Research Question 1

*How do OOP participants describe their social, academic, and cocurricular integration to college?*

*The need for a comprehensive support system.* Supportive relationships, as well as institutional resources and programs comprise a college student's support system. Integration into a higher education community and determining a major may present challenges to first-year students.

When asked about the college experience thus far, Kara replied:

It has definitely been tough I can't lie. I came into college with a clear idea of what I wanted to do which was I wanted to be a dual major in Spanish and Biology and be Pre-

Vet and here I am in my second semester thinking about dropping my Spanish major to a minor and not wanting to do Vet school at all. I do struggle with mental illness like depression and anxiety, so those have definitely taking tolls on my grades. So I have struggled academically and mentally, but I have great friends here that have really helped me.

Advice that Kara would give to an incoming first-year student included: “Definitely seek help from tutors and study guides, and talk to your advisor. And if you need to, go to the counselors and stuff because they really do help, and there is no shame in that at all. Definitely seek out sources to help you because it’s really beneficial.”

Social integration for first-year students involves meeting new people, developing friendships, and navigating romantic relationships as they concurrently integrate academically. Skylark was asked to describe any challenges she experienced in the transition to college:

Personal relationships. Really academics wasn't a huge problem because I had gone through rigor before. I know how to pull myself up by the boot straps. I know when I need to start getting more serious about studying, and I know when I can do something a little more social or relax a little bit more, or sleep instead of cramming. So personal relationships was definitely where a lot of my stress did and is coming from. That doesn't just pertain to romantic relationships, it pertains to making new friends and that learning process of wow, I'm not really going to have really close friends immediately. But then again also romantic relationships was a big deal because I didn't really do any dating in high school. So starting to date, like I started dating and I had my first boyfriend, and that was a hectic roller coaster that ended in two months. I learned a lot from it. But that

was like this concept map, first semester I actually remember thinking this to myself the four things that I do are my classes/homework, my work, my boyfriend, and my belly dancing club. Those are the four things that I do, that I stick to you, and spend time on. Of course I have friends too. I didn't only hang out with my boyfriend, but it was really interesting spending so much time with one person, and then having it not work after two months. It's really altered my perception on what relationships are, how they work, and how they can be sustained, and that's actually kind of something I'm still scratching my head over. How does this work? But I feel like I'm not the only one, so I'm OK.

In a follow-up question about personal relationships being a challenge during the first year, Skylark was asked if there have been strategies that have helped her overcome the challenge, or if there are barriers present. She replied:

There are some barriers that are just there. The first semester was the hardest. Physical exercise and just taking care of myself has been immensely helpful in making my attitude better. I don't think I really understood that. I am not an unhealthy eater, but I was not exercising a lot, and I probably wasn't drinking enough water, and I think those contributed to a lot of loneliness. I would just feel like lying in my bed. I felt like I didn't have anyone to talk to, like if I wanted to talk to someone it would impose upon them. I didn't want to do that, or I just didn't see the point. I also started getting more comfortable with talking to my mom and my grandmother weekly, not all the time, around once a week, maybe biweekly when it gets busy. I think especially after winter break into second semester, I got more comfortable with understanding that I'm not the only one who is going through this loneliness, and learning that you do have people to text and it's also okay to take a nap like if you feel drained. I sometimes confuse, I think

this feeling of, being really emotionally drained with loneliness. So sometimes I'll take a nap and then see if I feel better, and if I still feel kind of down I'll go get food. And the really cool thing about going to get food on this campus is that you will inevitably run into somebody that you know. I would not of had that in Denver I don't think or in a larger institution, and that is super nice. Even sometimes when I'm eating dinner alone and I'm being kind of introspective to my thoughts someone will come sit down, and kind of like with my roommate I'll just get pulled into that conversation, and I'll be forced to have this social interaction. And I'm not a huge introvert. I think I'm kind of both an extrovert and an introvert, and there's time for both, but sometimes you need to talk to people to have that connection. Romantic relationships that was a learning process. I think that was a lot to do with negative emotions of loneliness, especially first semester and kind of in the second semester, but I've had a different relationship the second semester, and I think I had experienced the first one and that prepared me for the second one. I've learned a lot.

When asked to describe challenges faced in the transition to college Felicity responded:

I would have to say it is hard for me to meet new people. I've been doing it, but for me it happens very slowly. Unfortunately I'm not want to those people that can just run up to people and make new friends. I do have one of those friends and she is bubbly and crazy and amazing, but I'm definitely not that person. I'm the kind of person that I could eat with 10 friends to have breakfast in the morning or I could just bring a book and eat by myself. So that has been hard for me because I do like my alone time and sometimes that's hard to incorporate with introducing yourself and making new friends.

Establishing and maintaining friendships is an integral component to successful integration.

When asked what he most looks forward to on campus Rick answered:

It's probably just seeing my friends and having them so close because I live with all of them in the same residence hall, and so hanging out with them all the time has been a blast, so it's really what keeps me going per se because I'm a very extroverted person I like having constant contact with people and being around people, so if it really wasn't for that I feel like I'd be in that that freshman depression that I see a lot of people in.

Extended orientation experiences provide an opportunity for first-year students to meet new people and develop friendships. In describing the OOP experience Rick stated:

When I first got there I didn't think anybody really liked me because I'm a little bit of an oddball and so most of the jokes that I was making, nobody was really socializing much out of their comfort zone, so it was kind of iffy, but I made a couple pretty good friends through it. Well everyone that was in it I still say hi to because we ended on a good note ...actually the people that I really consider more of closer friends are the guides, when I see them around campus I'm like "hey man what's going on" and we stop and have a conversation. I thought that was really cool and it really warmed me up. It gave me a like a warm-up session for when I went to my PHLLC early move-in. I was really ready to talk to people and be a good listener and ask a lot of questions. Asking a lot of questions is what I found out was the most effective way to make friends so that, and I just love the outdoors. It really opened my eyes to how much natural beauty is around this area...Lake Watauga was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen was that lake. Laurel Falls. What else, we camped out in this one place and we paddle boarded on this

river, I don't remember what it was called. We started out at a bridge and we ended up at some campsite I don't remember, that was a lot of fun because it was kind of rainy and I love like swimming while it's raining too because you don't care if you're getting wet, you don't usually go out in the rain enjoy yourself and that's one time you can. It was just really cool especially the camping out because that was where everyone started intermingling and talking, and I had my guitar...so I was playing songs, but the songs that I knew weren't the songs that others knew, so it was kind of this little thing, so I got to show off that talent which people enjoyed and it was a good time.

Additionally, outdoor and wilderness based orientation programs provide opportunities for students to be pushed out of their comfort zone, not unlike the transition to college. When asked about the OOP experience Zoe responded:

Well it really made me come out of my comfort zone for sure. I was in ROTC in high school for all eight semesters and I went to several leadership camps for that. So it is very similar without the military aspect of it, but it helped me to really get me out of my comfort zone with the rock climbing, with the swing on the cables, and I guess just being forced to talk to new people. It helped me get used to being out of my comfort zone, so it helped integrating into a new school.

After a follow-up question regarding the main takeaway from the OOP Zoe stated: “Aside from the physical aspect, I mean the physical aspect was demanding and I liked it because I am into that kind of thing, but I feel like the most important part of BOA was teaching you how to talk to new people and interact with people you don’t know.”

When asked what advice he would give a high school senior Charlie incorporated some of his own precollege and first-year experiences into his response:

I would say check out transition programs. I would definitely recommend a program like BOA because I think it's a lot of fun, to just do all these crazy outdoor activities, and sort of seeing what you can do. So then once you get to college you're already well-adjusted and you know the area, and you've already experienced so much. I felt like I was already a college student when everyone else came for Preview. I was like I already know this place, I know what's here. I would say take AP classes. I feel so prepared after taking AP classes, because my AP teachers pushed me to the limit. My English teacher was absolutely insane, so was my History teacher. I made pretty decent scores on my AP tests, so I got the credit. I think it really helped out. Let's see, just get involved. You'll meet amazing people and joining different clubs, because each club has their own unique sort of like a click, but not quite a click. Like my Quidditch guys... and my Inter-Varsity people they are sort of laid back I feel, they just want to do fun stuff together, like a family.

In addition to friends, family and adult mentors help first-year students in the integration process. Sandi was asked to describe any adults in her life that have been supportive or helpful in leading up to college or during this first year, and she responded:

Obviously my mom, and my stepdad is kind of a surprise for me. We had always been kind of close, but this semester I took an economics class and a political science class, and those were his major and minor when he was in college and I didn't even know that. He helps me with papers which is awesome. I'll just call him or send him it just to look

over before I turned it in. He is a business owner now and especially on economy side he could help me a lot with that. I would say almost every professor I had, which is huge surprise for me even though they have how many ever students in class, they are still willing to reach out. There was one my first year writing course professor last semester was very helpful. I was in her office once a week, if not for a paper just to like talk and hang out. She's an adjunct professor, so she's not here this semester, but she definitely helped with the transition.

Institutional support in the form of programs and resources in addition to friends and family support can positively impact first-year student integration from a social, academic, and co-curricular perspective. When asked about her support system during her first year of college Felicity's answered:

Well I have a very loving mother who likes to call all the time... the family has definitely been a loving one...And then there's of course friends which I made either during Pre-Rendezblue, I had during high school, or met through fitness classes or regular classes, and the professors have been amazing...It also helps that during the Pre-Rendezblue one of my really good friends now, who comes all the way from Wyoming, she had the same first year colloquium class that I did, which was Humans and Honeybees, if you can believe that. It was super interesting, our professor when she came in the first day she said "I know this sounds weird but I'm actually a math professor." She has been amazing. She actually got a bunch of us together and we're starting a Bee club now...So the professors have been amazing...And then the Honors College was another big support system and help. The heads of the program have been amazing, you can stop by whenever you want and they tell you about their day, and you tell them about your day,



and get some food or coffee... Sometimes they will have events, they had mandatory first year events for people to get to know each other. Unfortunately, I had a language class that was right at the time of all those events. For the rest of them they have pancake nights where people can get together. They had stuff for Halloween. They have the reading day breakfast, which they make up a giant spread for everyone they can come in and get some breakfast and all sit down and study together, mutual tension and worry for the exams, but it's all fun. I think the best part is that no matter what they're doing if they're in their office they're willing to drop everything and talk to you whether just about your daily life, or about classes or about honors requirements, or things that they're teaching, they are just always there.

Faculty support and interactions outside of the classroom can impact student success and integration. In describing what her interactions were like with professors outside of class Skylark stated:

Professors here are really cool. Something that to my understanding as a tour guide, that not all colleges have, is that all professors have open office hours which is when you can just walk into their office on these days from this time to this time, and talk about anything you want. It's an open office hour, skies the limit, but also besides the open office hours I have encountered tremendous person-ability with all of my professors or most of my professors at least. What's funny is that professors that I don't even have. I emailed the religious studies department about some spiritual questions, and they all emailed me back that these are questions more for a spiritual counselor than the religious studies department. Which is true, but one professor emailed me back and said even though I'm a professor religion is a very big part of my life, so if you want to drop in and

talk you can. Then three weeks after I got that invitation I was just walking to the building that he was in, and I was like you know maybe I will take him up on that; I will just poke my head in the door and see if he's available if he's not, okay. I ended up finding him and we talked for an hour - just about general things and the club that I mentioned earlier networking with different religious leaders, I got that idea through him and I should probably check up with him because he's really cool. Similar experiences with different professors, connecting with these brilliant adults who take you seriously when you present yourself seriously. I haven't had any "you're just a student you can't do this yet", they're more like do you want to do this, if you do, then this is how you do it.

Not all students engage with faculty outside of the classroom, which may be in part due to the demeanor of the professor or to the personality of the student. Charlie described his interactions with his professors outside of class:

I honestly don't really talk to my professors that much outside of class. I guess it's just a bad habit I have, I'm sort of I wouldn't say scared of adults, but I always just like I don't want to get super involved with them, I don't know why. I just feel like, I don't know, I'm a person that doesn't like to bother people. I know I got to trust myself more. I need to talk to them because like my Spanish teacher I should probably talk to her more about the Spanish major, her experiences with it. I just haven't, I don't know, I just don't talk to them that much.

Students enroll in college to learn and earn a degree; therefore their ability to integrate academically and persist cannot be underestimated.

*Academic pursuits.* Academic integration into the higher education community is an essential component of student success. This realm of integration involves ability and desire to do college level work as well as finding an academic passion or career path in which to major, and in some cases choosing a minor. As demonstrated by Kara's first year the academic path for first-year students may be clear upon entering college; however, it may change or evolve over time. Sandi was asked to discuss her decision about a major and the thought process in declaring one:

I mean coming in I had no idea what I wanted to do. In high school I was interested in History and Religious studies, and English kind of, but I really had no clue. It was actually my first year writing professor that said "you'd make a great lit major you should take a few other classes, you might as well try it", and I did. I'm taking two literature classes right now, one of which is Literature of the Old Testament which I find fascinating. It is a lot less literature and more religion. I'm taking Intro to Literature and we are reading 14th century poetry, and I couldn't care less, and that's when I realized I probably shouldn't be a lit major. I love writing, but I don't love reading. I'll do it, but I guess the analytical and research aspect of that, and I guess poetry is little too abstract for me. He was assigning books that didn't capture my attention, I had a hard time reading, and I am taking a political science and economics class, and I am loving both of those. I think that's kind of when you know, when you are loving what you're doing, then that's what you should probably major in. Even though I'm just taking Microeconomics and a class called Political Ideas and Imagination. Micro is a social science, but unlike literature I can relate it to almost everything I do in terms of what I buy and stuff like that, so I really like that. The same with political science, I mean it has a purpose. I think literature will definitely teach you how to read and write and communicate well, and it'll

set you up for grad school pretty well, you know if you're great writer that is something you definitely need, but for me this has a little bit more application to my life and that's what was important to me in picking a major...as of right now I'm anticipating to major in political science and minor in economics.

It is not atypical for students to change majors during their college career. Calin described her experience in declaring a major:

I originally thought I was going to be a psych major. I applied as a psych major and then I realized that I had been writing for a newspaper in high school. That I had an in at that newspaper if I needed a job. I could write for them. I realized that psychology freaks me out, so that was pretty much it, I was like wait a second I've been doing all along what I would like to do, so that's what is what made me switch. So I came in kind of knowing Mass Communications, I just applied as a psych major.

In a follow-up question about her choice of a minor Calin continued:

I'd like to be a health communicator. I'm a huge advocate for healthy living, both nutrition-wise in physical activity-wise. And I am fascinated by childhood obesity which is something that affected me. There are just certain things I would like to write about as a Mass Communications major and I think it would benefit me to have a minor in the health and wellness. It would benefit me more to have a major, but that would take 3 1/2 years to do at minimum, so it's just better for me to just get a minor in it.

Conversely, Felicity knew upon entering college what she was going major in and has not changed her mind. When asked about a major Felicity replied:

Yes, Environmental Science with a concentration in Earth Science. I'm thinking about going into hydrology because honestly I think, well originally I was interested in renewable energy, but after a few higher-level math courses in high school I realized that probably wasn't the road for me, but you know it's freshman year and still debatable. But I think that hydrology is definitely an area that's going to need a lot of focus because of the growing population on earth, and a limited amount of freshwater that we have, and how people are using that water is all very interesting. One of my favorite quotes which I can't remember word for word was this scientist saying that within the next 50 or 100 years water is going to be the new gold.

When asked a follow-up question on if her decision of a major began in high school or developed this year, Felicity insightfully proffered:

I think it started in high school. I've always loved nature, and my parents have been active people who always are like let's go out for a hike this weekend, or let's go bike riding, walk in the woods, or something that always made us appreciate nature. And then I signed up for this precollege program over the summer, I think my junior year of high school, and we went to Costa Rica and it was beautiful. I loved it. Their main focus was on environmental science, and it was just an amazing story on how Costa Rica turned from a place that was almost predominately cattle farming into a place where all the rain forests have grown back up, and they're working on mostly ecotourism right now. It is so beautiful there. It gives you hope for the future to see a place like that, to see that they can bounce back from the big agriculture and the big moneymaker for their company, and make money off of something that is beautiful, and helps the rest of the world. So that definitely gave me a giant nudge onto the environmental science side of things. And then

I have always loved water. I've always loved the ocean, lakes, and I definitely think that something that's going to be a big consideration for the future - how we are going to manage our water, and hopefully come up with a process that will desalinate water in a cheap way, and just the way that we can keep ourselves on the earth. It always cracks me up when environmentalists say that we are destroying the earth, because I've read so many books that say don't worry the earth will survive this. Even if we tear it up, it might take a long time, but bacterial will form once again and creatures will crawl out of the ocean and become themselves. It's we humans that we have to worry about. If we mess this up, we mess it up for us. So I always thought that was interesting to think about. We're not worrying about the planet, which we should worry about, but the real threat is to us. The earth will survive whatever we do to it.

Some students may rely on peers as well as themselves as a source of support and motivation. Additionally, precollege participation in Advanced Placement courses in high school prepares students for college level work. When asked about his best source of support from an academic standpoint, individuals who assist with academics or help him study, Rick responded:

That would definitely be my immediate friend group, if I really need tutoring on something I don't understand I'll go to an SI study session or I'll just read the book, because of my AP classes I'm able to look at information and interpret it, remember it, and draw links between other things. For academics if it's not my friends I really try to rely on myself. The best way that I learn is figuring it out myself, and so it's through that that I get a lot more out of it than having someone explain it to me because I'm not a very audible person, I'm a very visual person. So I'm reading the text and I remember what the

words look like when they are next to each other, so that's why I do better on multiple choice than free response. That's basically it.

In a follow-up question asking him to elaborate on his high school AP classes Rick continued:

Well AP classes, I've been in the Oakridge school system my entire life, so it didn't really feel intensive to me. Everybody was like I can't take all these AP classes, it's too much work, and I was like this is what I'm used to, what else is there. I was talking to my friends that decided not to take a second year of AP English and went down to the regular English, and they're like "we've literally been reading Hamlet for last two weeks that's all we've done in class." I'm like this is where our tax dollars are going to every single day, they are just reading Hamlet and not getting anything from it, so I kind of feel like that is something we should change in our school system, but I'm not going into education, so yeah, I think the AP classes really help, because when I got here this is the same amount of work that I've always had to do, so it's not that big a deal, and some of the AP classes that I took are the same subjects that I'm taking here, so I remember a lot of stuff and that helped.

Academic integration may also be a source of trepidation for first-year students. Charlie was asked to describe any challenges that he experienced in the transition to college and he stated:

I guess I was just terrified about what to expect, because my mind had it that it was going to be super, super challenging. I was like what's going to happen? Am I going to get C's or B's? How bad is it going to be? I think my number one fear was grades. I think I adjusted pretty well when I came here, because I was so used to the campus by then because of BOA and Preview. I was used to all the buildings, where everything was, so it wasn't super scary for me. I wouldn't say I'm a total loner, but I'm used to being alone. I

do a lot of stuff on my own, so I wasn't super concerned with friends by then. I knew I would make friends. I wanted to get involved, and I wanted to see what people God would provide me here. I guess what I'm trying to say, I wasn't super concerned about not making friends here.

Students may fear being underprepared for the academic rigor of higher education. Those students who attended academically rigorous high schools or college preparatory high schools, like Sandi, may have different concerns about their college education. At the conclusion of the interview Sandi was asked if there was anything she wanted to add regarding her first year of college, to which she responded:

For a while in the beginning, I wasn't actually looking into transferring, but I was thinking about it. Because when I got to college, I was like wow, this is way easier than I thought it was going to be, and I even talked to my college counselor, and I was like did I do something wrong, she's like "no you want to kick ass high school." And I was like OK. My mom wants me to enroll in honors program, to try to get that extra challenge. I mean I don't really have a problem with cruising. It's not a problem for me at all, I'm enjoying it. I have leisure time, I get to go to the gym and not spend every waking minute studying, which I enjoy. So yeah I think college has been overall a great learning experience for myself, because I mean I have friends who are going to these big universities and are just completely swamped with work, and don't have time for anything else, so I'm very grateful that I'm here, and that's not the case for me.

First-year students who are involved on campus may experience an easier or more complete integration to the campus community.



## Research Question 2

*How do OOP participants view their involvement on campus?*

*Being engaged and having fun.* The involvement in campus activities outside of the classroom is an integral component of the college experience. First-year students want to have fun in college. Extracurricular involvement allows first-year students to find new interests or develop existing passions as well as meet new people. When asked to describe the extracurricular activities he was involved in during his first year of college, Rick answered:

I was involved in climbing club and I was actually looking at becoming an officer, but at the beginning of it we did a couple day trips then it turned into all competition stuff where they're going down to Alabama every other week, and I was like I don't have time... It was a lot of fun, I met some good people with that...I've been going to a couple of outdoor adventure outings when I can spare the cash, because those are really fun, and I meet a lot of people through that. What else do I do, oh yeah Alpha Epsilon Delta. There are a lot of PHLLC people in that, and a lot of the officers are PHLLC, and they do a lot of service work, they wrote cards for elderly people in nursing homes and for veterans and the VA, and we hand-delivered them and we sewed blankets, the felt blankets where you tie them together. We did that for Christmas and we delivered those too...I go to a couple of religious organizations on campus - the Wesley house and the Crew, and I enjoyed those for the first few weeks that I started going and then I don't really know. The first time I went to the Wesley house really enjoyed it, I thought it was cool, and a lot of cool people, and then I don't know, I just felt awkward going there again. I don't know why actually, the message was good and wasn't too music intensive.

I went to the Well the first week. It's just a concert, I was sitting there for 45 minutes just listening to music that all sounded the same, I'm like, okay I get it, can we actually talk about something now. Those were two to really insightful worship groups, and so those were nice, and I think that's everything.

Students are willing to try new experiences, but they also want to make good use of their time and fit in, as Rick's statement shows. In the case of Calin, she discovered her passion for outdoor recreation through the Wilderness Experience program. She stated: "The outdoor leadership training program I participated in that because of Wilderness Experience actually... That's mostly why I chose to do it because I saw how much fun the leaders were having and I was like I want that, so I've been participating in that."

Student organizations on college campuses exist to engage students in areas of interest. When asked to describe extracurricular activities she has been involved in during her first year of college Kara stated "I'm with FMLA (Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance) we meet every Wednesday and what we do is we basically talk about feminist issues, things that are going on, queer issues, things of that sort because a lot of us are in the LGBT spectrum, so those things are really important to us." First-year student's time outside the classroom may be spent with involvement in academic related pursuits and physical activity. Zoe was asked what she most looks forward to on campus:

I am kind of a nerd so I love being in the laboratory a lot of the time. I go every Monday and Wednesday for like 2 hours and then running. Running is my stress reliever. I couldn't do without it, so either running or weight lifting is something I do 6 days a week and usually at the end of the day so that is something I have to look forward to.

As important as cocurricular involvement on campus is for many students, there are some who work or get involved off campus. Sandi stated:

The thing I have been consistent with is volunteering at the radio station downtown. I worked at a radio station in high school and the station manager at the one in Baltimore knew the station manager down here for one of the public radio stations and he sent me his way. I've been doing that once a week since I got here pretty much. I would say academics takes up most of my time and I'm kind of okay with that. I make friends with people my classes, and don't feel like I necessarily need the extra curricular support in terms of friendship or social stuff.

The need to generate an income to pay for college expenses may limit the time students have for activities outside of the classroom. Calin mentioned "I pay for my own school that would be something to note. I pay for my schooling and I pay for my housing, so I'm an 18 credit hours student and also a full-time waitress." Outcomes of becoming involved on campus are making connections and meaningful experiences.

*Establishing connections and having meaningful experiences.* Through various forms of involvement on campus first-year students are able to establish connections with peers, faculty, and staff, and often this leads to meaningful experiences. Charlie gave a candid account of the extracurricular activities he has been involved with this year:

The first semester was definitely my busiest. I had Quidditch, Intramural Sports, Inter-Varsity, and then of course class. Sadly the Intramural Sports they were fun, but they were not as fun as I was hoping. I guess what I was hoping for, was that I'd play, and then I would have new friends and create strong relationships, but it just didn't happen

because we just met once a week and I barely knew people's names... I had fun, but it was not the best experience for me. Inter-Varsity, that's definitely been the highlight. I usually do whatever they do. For example, the other day I was supposed to go to Quidditch practice, but I was at Barberitos and they were all there. I didn't expect for them to be there, but they're all there and they said we are going to go to a mountain today and they're expecting me to go, but I was like I have Quidditch practice. Eventually I said I'll go. I wasn't even dressed to go, I had cleats on and athletic shorts, I didn't have a coat. I wasn't prepared to go on top of the mountain, but it was so cool because we got to see the sunset and we took a great picture there and it was a lot of fun. With classes, I don't really have people that hang out with outside of class, because most people in class I don't really know. I feel like this semester is different, especially in my Spanish class, since it's so small. I really enjoy the people in there and Spanish class has just been so much fun for me.

Felicity was asked what advice she would give a high school senior or first-year student coming to college and she answered:

I would give them the advice that if their school does do something like the trip before your first year or even if it's not exercise, if it is just an early meet and greet with a bunch of other students who signed up - do it because it gives you that friend base. Even if you end up not liking anyone in that group, then at least you know the campus and you're familiar with some people who are there and the counselors that talk to you, and your dorm and everything like that. Just getting your feet wet beforehand is the best thing that I could tell them. Also, try and do some exercise classes if they have them because my

friend got me into the yoga here and I love it. I swear I was the most inflexible person before, but now I can touch my feet on command. I'm pretty proud about that.

Developing supportive friendships and creating bonds with peers can take time for first-year students and can occur at the unlikeliest of times as recounted by Charlie when asked who has been the best source of support from a mental, emotional, and moral standpoint:

A friend from Inter-Varsity. It's very special because he always drives me to church and I see him more than anyone. We've had some pretty emotional talks. He talked about his experience with alcohol and stuff, and I talked about my experience with previous encounters with that. We both have a pretty interesting experience. There was this homeless guy outside of Cookout and he was obviously drunk, and we were trying to make sure he was okay because he kept falling over and stuff, so we bonded through it and prayed for him, so that was our little experience. I don't know, I feel more connected to him because of that.

Participating in a comprehensive institutional program such as a Living Learning Community can impact a first-year student's integration as well provide support in an academic area of interest, and create opportunities to make connections. Rick discussed his support system and residential learning community:

Well I guess my initial support system would be my family because they've always really supported me with most of whatever decisions that I've made, and when I told them I wanted to go into Health they were ecstatic. They loved the idea. They showed me the PHLLC, they showed me which colleges are best for that, so I have that foundation where my options lie. My high school friends didn't really support me that much in my

future because we all have different visions. The PHLLC laid out everything, they made me make my four year plan, so that really helped. They made me write a whole bunch of really self-reflective essays to make sure that this is really want to do and this is who I am. That obviously weeded out a lot other people, but looking into what I like to do and how I operate it really helped me solidify my goals. Initially I wanted to be a Pediatrician because I like kids, I like working with kids, but I think a Chiropractor is much more laid-back, which is what I am too...my friend groups have similar goals when they see bad behavior, they are like well we can't do that because we have a future to look forward to, an image or reputation to really uphold so that keeps all of us in line and will support each other and our decisions there's not a lot of peer pressure, so it's really nice.

In a follow-up question regarding how his support system changed this year Rick replied:

I think it has remained constant throughout this year, but I'm really a little worried about sophomore year. I don't know why just because I think people change over the summer. For some reason, I'm not really sure, because the upperclassman I met this year have all said yeah that's how you guys act, it's how we acted last year, but now they've broken up into small clicks and I'm like I don't really see that happening with us, but even if it did there are certain people I would definitely stick with. They have my same goals and the kind of same world vision in a way, but yeah it's such a blessing to be with like-minded people in college right off the bat because some people don't find that until later, but I never really thought of it as a support group really...they have an influence as friends on who I am, so that's probably the biggest is the pre-health living learning community and the friends I've made.

Involvement on campus may assist with first-year student's integration, and may create a connection to the institution or enhance institutional commitment.

### Research Question 3

*What factors do OOP participants indicate as advancing their levels of commitment or connection to the institution?*

*Environment and characteristics.* First-year students enter into a new living and learning environment which may impact institutional commitment and establish a connection to the institution. As high school students research potential colleges and universities to apply there are a lot of considerations that influence the decision making process. The campus environment, as well as the environment of the surrounding area, and institutional characteristics impact the choice of where to attend. Felicity was asked where UNCA was in her list of universities to attend, she replied:

It was definitely up there. I had some northern schools that I really wanted to go to because my sister and I both wanted to get as far away from home as possible, but I like that the school was small and we had visited it several times before...I liked the downtown, I liked the Biltmore, I liked the atmosphere, I liked the mountains, and it's a nice distance from Cary. So I liked all of that just the size mostly is what won me over because beauty and size and classes were definitely my top three ideas of what I wanted in a college.

Like Felicity, Calin considered distance from home and the surrounding environment in her college decision:

It was at the top of my list. There were three colleges I wanted to go to. I got accepted to three and I did the admitted students day tours. And this one at the time I didn't know my parents were going to be moving to Florida. This was the furthest from home which is a super super lame reason, but is one of the reasons why I picked here. It was a change of scenery. The other was UNC-Wilmington. I had a surf scholarship and I still have the surf scholarship, they were very upset that I did not pick UNC-Wilmington slightly, but as long as I promised to go home and keep participating in the competition they put on, I can still hold onto it. So that's just been pretty interesting, so I think that's why I chose it was the distance. I was excited to have a change of scenery in the mountains.

Institutional characteristics and programs offered may draw students to enroll. In response to where ETSU was in his choice of universities to attend Rick stated:

I think it was actually number one. I only applied to two schools and the other one was the University of South Carolina. The more think about it I don't really know why, one of my friends' brothers went there, and I went and visited because I was interested in the medical program and I got there and I was like oh this is a beautiful campus and I loved how far away it is and how warm it's going to be, and now I'm kind of glad I wasn't there because of the flooding in Columbia and everything. He ended up going there, my friend, and he got flooded out at a school for like two weeks, so I was like that's kind of bad. It is a lot more intense over there than it is over here, and it was the PHLLC was what really what brought me here, and this is also where my mom and my grandma went,



so I'm third generation, and it's probably the best decision that I didn't really even have to think about it that much, because I was like oh they have one of the best premed programs that I can actually afford, so it's a very easy decision.

High school students may have a college path planned with a number one choice of institutions to attend clearly in mind. As plans unfold obstacles may arise and students need to deviate from the desired path with an alternate route, which may impact institutional commitment. When asked what her plan was for college and where ETSU was in her choice of universities to attend, Zoe answered:

My plan was to be at Air Force Academy. I spent eight semesters, all 4 years in ROTC in high school - Air Force junior ROTC - and I had about every position possible position in that class, and I liked running, and I liked medical stuff, so I decided that I wanted to be a combat medic in the Air Force. I went through the application process. I was this close to getting a nomination, and then I went to my medical exam I didn't pass because they found asthma in my records. Even though I don't have it now. I had it when I was thirteen, if you are treated for it after the age of whatever you are completely disqualified from the military, so that wiped out my plans, and I guess I waited too late, not that I would have applied anywhere else, this was kind of my back-up plan, so that is why I came here.

Although not her first choice of institutions to attend, Zoe has established a connection to ETSU and developed institutional commitment in part due to the environment and characteristics of the institution. In reference to ETSU she said:

I like it because it is not huge like UT (the University of Tennessee). I visited UT's campus, but I feel like someone shook up a bunch of rocks in their hand and through it on a map of Knoxville and they are like this is going to be our campus. I like ETSU because it is condensed and we have our own little village here, but also it feels like home to me, maybe because it is so close to my home, I am not sure. I am very familiar with Johnson City because I grew up here, but yeah it feels good to be here because I know a lot of people now that I've been here for a year.

A first-year student's connection or commitment to the institution is impacted by institutional characteristics and the environment, as well as by the ability to overcome challenges and adapting to the independence of being a young adult and a college student.

*Overcoming challenges and independence.* There are numerous challenges facing first-year students, and independence may be viewed as a challenge even if it is desired. The independence of being in college and living away from home may not mean a complete severance from parents. College students may dependent on family for financial support; however, some may be financially independent. Finances and paying for school are significant challenges that college student's face. College students who do not receive financial assistance from family members have the added responsibility of paying tuition and fees, along with living and other expenses. Additionally, first-year students who live in on-campus residence halls are challenged with the process of adapting to sharing a room with another student, and someone who they may not have previously known. Calin describe the challenges she faced in the transition to college:

Probably the hardest thing I have to say would be living with another person, and well with like three other people (one roommate and two suitmates), and being entirely on your own. I pay for my own school that would be something to note. I pay for my schooling and I pay for my housing, so I'm an 18 credit hours student and also a full-time waitress. So that is something that is drastically changed. In high school I worked two jobs to start saving for college and I saved up enough for college to pay for my freshman year with some scholarships and also sophomore year with some scholarship help. That's good, but now I'm trying to keep up with all that on top of, it was kind of easier with the dorm life because I could take all the money that I've saved and it was just one payment, whereas with an apartment it's split up, it's cheaper technically doing all the math it's slightly cheaper, but not much cheaper, because housing here is expensive. Despite the fact that it's cheaper, it's going to be slightly harder because instead of one large lump payment that I just plan for it's a couple spread out ones.

When asked specifically about her current living arrangement Calin stated:

Currently my living arrangement is kind of weird. My roommate and I don't talk often. We just had a falling out, some kind of sketchier things happened from her end, and so all of my important belongings are now in my boyfriend's room or in my friends room, so they're not in my room anymore. So I really just go there to sleep and grab textbooks.

Navigating the challenges faced throughout the first year of college may impact commitment level. At the beginning of the interview with Skylark she went into detail when asked about what her college experience has been like thus far, and she mentioned several challenges that she faced:

My college experience has been for the most part really beneficial. I did have a very close knit group of friends in Nebraska and while there was some culture shock definitely, just coming to college in general, but also moving to roughly 1200 miles from Nebraska to Asheville. Also the environment, but the environment is a good thing. The environment is so different, but I love it so much. The transition was really big. I remember like the first night of staying in my room, I'm also an only child, so having a roommate for the first time is something different, and I remember we had some kind of stupid small disagreement and we just like had a difficult time getting each other's point across and I was being misunderstood, and when she finally understood me I remember breaking down into tears because it was so hard to have gotten to that point of being understood, and I was like why is it so hard...I called my mom I had to retreat to the bathroom and call my mom. That was funny, and I do call my mom a lot still, but I did make a lot of friends pretty quickly. I knew that I would. I came in to UNCA thinking okay I'm paying out-of-state to tuition, I made need to make the most of my money, so I came in with the ambition of being in the top 1% of the students here. A student that people would notice it was gone, if I'd left or if I couldn't do things the same way. I'm not really sure how much of that was realistic, especially for first year, but it was a good ambition to have, it also pushed me to keep making friends. I like making friends. I like people, but I think having that in the back of my mind that goal of focusing on creating a niche for myself really hard, really fast was something that helped...I also knew that I wanted to try new things in college, like basically I just wanted to see lifestyles and interact with people that maybe I wouldn't have because I was under my parents roof. My mother is very liberal, but I also didn't want to have to deal with having to juggle

parents while also doing what I want. Now that I was a legal adult I really could do what I wanted, no one can tell me no, well to certain extent. So that incorporated into the transition experience the idea of freedom, but also I consider myself a very sensible person and the school, they put a lot of emphasis on the fact that the first eight weeks are the most dangerous for freshman, so I was being wary about that. I never drank in friend groups, mostly because it just doesn't seem smart if you don't trust people or if you don't know people really well, don't drink. I did things within reason, but making friends was my main goal. Maybe loading my plate up so quickly was a decision that had a lot of negatives and a lot of positives, but it did help me towards that goal even though it might have been stressful, but I have dealt with a lot of stress before with International Baccalaureate in high school, a really rigorous course load, so I was used to stress. I think that I wasn't as used to stress without the close friend group, because in high school we all knew what everyone else was going through, we could hang out at each other's houses, and we can talk to each other about anything, and you don't have that kind a relationship that has grown over years when you move to somewhere completely new whether or not people are really nice, which everyone here is. Southern hospitality is the real thing. I was surprised. Whether or not people are really nice you simply don't have, you not going to start with two-year relationships in the first few months, but it's a beginning and everything needs a beginning. So it was a good wake-up call.

Challenges facing first-year students abound. Even with a challenging first year, the outlook a student has impacts their ability to move forward and stay committed to the institution and earning a degree. At the conclusion of the interview Kara was asked if there was anything she wanted to add regarding her first year of college, she replied:

Not really, but I wish it could have gone better, but things get in the way - my mental illness, my eating disorder. Things happen and you can't always expect things to go perfectly. I need to keep reminding myself that. Yes, some people have great freshman years, but not everyone does, and it is okay that you don't.

The ability for first-year students to overcome a myriad of challenges and the development of institutional commitment is critical for retention and persistence. A student's level of connection to the institution may be intertwined with their sense of belonging on campus.

#### Research Question 4

*How have OOP participants established a sense of belonging on campus?*

*Being oneself/carving own path.* As first-year students enter college many experience independence for the first time in their lives and are in the process of becoming young adults. College is an opportunity for self-exploration and creating one's own path in the world, while integration into the campus community. A sense of belonging for a first-year student may be established through various means and is different for each student. Additionally, it may not necessarily mean fitting in as Sandi uniquely surmised. When asked to describe any sense of belonging or sense of place that she may have at UNCA, she stated:

I think one of the things from me coming from high school where everyone is kind of the same, it was nice coming here and seeing everyone being totally different. So I don't really feel that I'm rooted here because I think that everyone is so different and diverse, and like I see so many different types of people and colors of people, and I kind of just

feel like, I kind of I don't really know how to explain it very well. I mean would I transfer, no, to answer your question. I am very comfortable here. I do feel a kind of connection to the campus and the location especially, but I don't say that I quote unquote "fit in". I don't think anyone really fits in. I don't think that is a concept that college campuses face just because of the variety of people. I don't think, you know in high school there's that need to be part of the crowd or fit in, but everyone really branches off from that here. So I don't feel the need to blend in or fit in.

The ability to be oneself around peers and close friends creates a sense of belonging for first-year students on campus. When asked to describe any sense of belonging that she may have at ETSU, Kara responded:

With my main group of friends right now they really make me feel like I belong because, back in high school, I identity as queer, and so there are not too many people who are, or at least were, openly out or anything. I had a couple friends, but not much exposure. Like I knew about everything, but just couldn't really relate with anybody about stuff and then when I came here I met such a big variety on the spectrum that really helped me feel like I belonged and everything and they are just really nice.

The concept of finding a group of friends to connect with and be themselves around was prevalent. Finding one's niche appeared to be a common theme for first-year students. Calin described her sense of belonging at UNCA:

I feel like this school is very welcoming to everyone. I feel like you can't go to the school and not feel like you belong, just because we have weird people, and we've got a mix of every kind of person, and I think that you can go and find your niche of group of

people. It's like high school in that there are clicks, but it's almost as if here all the clicks can mold into one, and you can hang out with whoever and I just think that's super great.

The ability to be oneself and create a path in life as a young adult may impact first-year student's sense of belonging on campus. Additionally, the ability to adjust to the campus environment plays a role establishing a sense of belonging.

*Adjusting to the new environment.* For many first-year students it takes time to make the transition and adjust to being a college student, and once they do a strong sense of belonging may develop. Charlie described his sense of belonging at ETSU:

It's definitely Inter-Varsity, it is crazy all the things that we do outside. There's people that just go to Inter-Varsity because they like the group, but there's certain people that are there every Monday and they help plan. Originally I didn't think I get that involved with it, but now I've gotten to the point where Lane is assigning me to do speeches, that is scaring me because she's made me talk in front of the largest crowd we had. I was so nervous. That is definitely the place I belong, because we do so much stuff outside. We had a surprise party for one of the members the other night and we had a blast telling jokes and playing games.

Students may find that they fit in to their new community right away or during the first-year of college, and this sense of belonging may be intertwined with institutional commitment. Rick described his sense of belonging at, and connection to, ETSU:

I'm definitely a Buc for life now. This is where I thrive, this is awesome. I definitely will have a bumper sticker that says ETSU alumni or something like that. It makes me smile every time I see my dad's bumper sticker that says ETSU Dad. In high school I



never really liked belonged to the spirit of the high school, I was just always ready to get out. We were the Wildcats and it's just the most generic name ever, but I feel really connected to ETSU because of my heritage, everybody's gone here, the music scene, Bluegrass, and everything. My friend group I obviously feel like I owe something to ETSU for bringing us together. I thought about joining the marching band, but I was like let's see what not being in a marching band is like, and now I love it, so it's a sense of not belonging to the marching band is what I enjoy.

First-year students who move away from home and either live on- or off-campus are faced with adjusting to their new physical living environment as well as roommates or suitemates. When asked to describe his current living arrangement and roommate, Charlie responded:

I live in L. C. Hall, it's small, it's definitely like the low in terms of what campus has to offer and I don't mind it. I have a pretty good spot because I'm right next to the vending machines and the bathrooms, so I feel like I have the luxury suite. And my roommate, he's fun. He's very loud, I feel like if he was paired with anyone else he might not get along with everyone, because he always invites his girlfriend over and they always spend the night and they're up till three in the morning sometimes, it's ridiculous, but I enjoy him. He's a lot of fun and we've had some crazy adventures, like things I wasn't even expecting.

When asked the same question Sandi replied:

I'm living in a suite style dorm, so I live with one other person and then we share a bathroom with two other girls. So it's four people sharing one bathroom with two sinks, a shower, and a toilet. I would say I'm living pretty comfortably...My roommate and I get

along very well. We picked each other. She's from my hometown which is really nice. We have that common connection, and she's probably like my best friend at school right now. And yeah, I was expecting a shoebox room like everyone makes it out to be, but I think it's a perfect amount of room for two people given that you don't have a plethora of stuff, which I don't. We are lucky that the people next to us, above us, and below us aren't noisy or anything.

First-year students may have an ideal living space and arrangement with their roommate that assists with the adjustment to college. However, there are living situations that are less than ideal for first-year students. Zoe described her living arrangement and roommate:

I live on-campus in S. Hall. It is really tight quarters. It is a suite style room so you have two people in one really small room and then two people in another one, and it is connected by a bathroom. And I guess being an only child it was hard for me living in such close quarters with Alice (roommate). It was a random assignment and we met each other in the summer, because I emailed her and we got along okay at first, and then I guess we had too many personal differences to live in that close of quarters. She didn't want to move out by herself, so she asked Martha (suite mate) to move out as well and they left together. So now Barb (suite mate) has her room and I have my room connected, and it just works a lot better I guess having your own privacy still, but having someone there when you need them.

Several variables factor into a student's sense of belonging on a college campus. A strong sense of belonging may be in part due to the student's support system.

## Research Question 5

*What support systems do OOP participants describe as important to their college experience?*

*Institution resources and supports.* Higher education institutions have wide-ranging resources and programs to enhance the student experience and increase student success. First-year programs may focus on assisting students with social integration. Participation in the UNCA Pre-Rendezblue Wilderness Experience helped Felicity prepare socially college, in reference to the program she stated:

It built up a friend base for me. And being introverted with the bedrock of friends that I already had, it was a lot easier to come to the college and say well, I don't have to freak out because I already have these people here. With those friends that I made from the Pre-Rendezblue I introduced them to the friends that I had from high school, they all got along because I'm friends with similar people. And they would introduce us to other friends...It was nice because it wasn't just the friends that I made in the Pre-Rendezblue experience, but their friends and their friends of friends, and it just sort of spread out like one of these concept maps.

Advice from the research participants to an incoming first-year student included several institutional programs. Zoe's advice included:

As cliché as it sounds I would tell them to get as involved as possible. BOA is a great way to do that, but also do Preview, also do anything else you can find. Sports teams are a great way to get to get to know people and develop that comradery or Intramurals if you don't want to be on an official team, or I know they have Group Fitness classes here,

which I really like, but if you are not into fitness or anything like that, I am sure there are plenty of clubs and organizations you can find from the ARC or wherever.

Charlie's advice to incoming first-year students covered several areas, in response to the question he stated:

I would say check out transition programs. I would definitely recommend a program like BOA because I think it's a lot of fun, to just do all these crazy outdoor activities, and sort of seeing what you can do. So then once you get to college you're already well-adjusted and you know the area and you've already experienced so much. I felt like I was already a college student when everyone else from Preview came. I was like I already know this place, I know what's here. I would say take AP classes. I feel so prepared after taking AP classes, because my AP teachers pushed me to the limit. My English teacher was absolutely insane, so was my History teacher. I made pretty decent scores on my AP tests, so I got the credit. I think it really helped out. Let's see, just get involved.

The Honors College played a significant role in Felicity's first year of college. The aforementioned support provided to her from the faculty leaders of the program provided her with adult mentorship. The Honors College, in addition to other organizations and programs, provides extracurricular opportunities for Felicity. When asked about her involvement in extracurricular activities during her first year of college, Felicity stated:

There is definitely the Honors College, which I don't know if that counts as extracurricular, but they've had a bunch of events and things that brought other first years or all the people in the Honors College together. They would have Honors College yoga on Wednesdays which is always fun... There's the She's the First club which is really

interesting because they do baked good sales to raise money for women's education. And they don't try to raise money where they give like five girls enough money for one year of schooling. They try to make enough money to give one girl enough money to go through her whole education, so if she wants to go to college, she can go to college. So I thought that was interesting and they're just one chapter, there's a whole network of She's the First clubs. It's interesting to note it's not just one club at Asheville doing one thing for one girl, it's a giant web that is sending money to help several people hopefully with their education. There's the Bee club.

Institutional resources, including OOPs, provide an opportunity for first-year students to meet new people and get involvement on-campus. This type of support impact the first-year experience. Having supportive individuals in their lives compliments institutional support.

*Personal supports.* Support and resources was a pattern variable established under research question one and is intertwined with the pattern variable of personal supports. Supportive relationships for first-year students, whether on-campus or off-campus, are integral to successful transition and integration to college. Personal support starts prior to college typically with family members. During the first year of college a student's support system may change. When asked about his support system when he started college, Charlie responded:

I guess my number one support was my dad, he's sort of the one that's like apply for scholarships. I always knew I was going to go to college, I was determined to go to college, so I just had the mindset to apply for scholarships and stuff. I didn't feel like I needed that much support, but obviously friends were encouraging, and like oh I'm so excited to go to this school, and just talking about our future. Yeah, I can't really think of

that much support, just from family saying I think you chose a good school, we know you'll do well, so I think family was the main support.

Charlie experienced a change in his support system during his first year of college, in describing it he stated:

I think it has changed. I think like my friend Brad from Inter-Varsity is like my support now, and so are Lane and Charles, the adult leaders for Inter-Varsity. They definitely provide support. My family not so much, because I always forget to call them and stuff. So it's like I know they are there, but they're just so far away that they just don't provide me support as much, but my dad will call me and say apply for scholarships and do all this.

However, from an academic standpoint students may rely on themselves for support and motivation. When asked who has been a big source of support academically Charlie replied: "I honestly don't know. I have always been the person that I just want to get good grades, that's a fun goal for me. I always try to work as hard as I can. If I get like a B, I'm like I don't like that, I need to do better." In response to the same question Felicity said: "Is it bad to say myself? I would have to say myself because at our high school it was chalk block full of overachievers."

Similarly, Sandi answered the question with this response:

It's kind of weird like myself maybe. I think that my high school prepared me very well for what my academic life will be. I have never not been on top of my work, I put that first before anything, before work and volunteering, and that's the deal I have my parents - we'll support you if you're getting amazing grades, and if I start slacking then the situation changes. I would consider myself a driven person, so I often don't need a lot of

academic support. I mean if I am struggling I will go to my professor or I will dedicate an immense amount of time to learning it myself. I would say in terms of academics I'm pretty self-sufficient.

In the academic pursuits section under research question 1 a quote from Rick reveals that his immediate friend group provides him with academic support.

From an academic standpoint students may not need support from others; however, they do need mental, emotional, and moral support from outside sources. As Sandi relies on herself for academic support, she gave the following statement as to her sources of support in other areas:

Aside from my mom because she's everything, honestly probably my boyfriend. As I mentioned it's just a nice disconnect to be able to hang out with him and not talk about classes and professors and my major, what I'm constantly surrounding myself with. Sometimes we'll just go hiking or go out to dinner. We went on a cruise over spring break. He's just like a nice third-party person in my life, which is really nice to have.

In dealing with a long distance relationship as she entered college Zoe found a source of support from her boyfriend's mother. She discussed her support system upon entering college:

When Greg (boyfriend) left for basic training I spent a lot of time with his mom...and she is just the best person ever, I love her so much. I spent most of the summer with her because she was coping with her son being gone, I was coping with him being gone, so we developed a special bond. She has been the best moral support that I could have asked for, and she works just down the road, so she comes and has lunch with me all the time. That's kind of how it was established, and moral support speaks more to me than

anything else, so I know I can always talk to her, and she can always help me with homework or really anything I need when it comes to school.

When asked if her support system changed in during her first year of college Zoe continued:

Not really, still mostly based on his mom and his dad, and spending so much time with them. They invited me to come to their church and I started going to that about twice a week and then I became a member of the church, so between my church family and his parents probably makes up the bulk of my support system.

Supportive adults and mentors in the lives of first-year students play a role in their transition and integrations experiences. Kara stated “Another adult supporter is my main therapist and psychiatrist, they have really have helped me through a lot of stuff, so that’s been really nice.”

When asked to describe any mentors that she has in her life Calin replied:

My mentor definitely is Professor Barnes on campus. He is actually not going to be teaching anymore after this semester, which is kind of unfortunate, because he did not have tenure, so he's not working next semester, but he was definitely my mentor first semester and very helpful. I took Media Ethics and this semester I was willing to take an 8 AM just so I could take his class and there were three other versions of the class offered. He is my go to, if I have a question I email him about any of my classes. He lives the lifestyle that I strive to live after I get out of school and he's just been there for me through everything, so he's definitely my mentor.

When asked to talk about the mentors in her life, Skylark mentioned both peers and adults:



I have one peer that I have in two of my classes. An Italian student, he's not an exchange student, he's just from Italy and goes here. He's awesome to exchange ideas with. He's really big in philosophy, so he's in one of my sociology classes and we talk about that. He's also in my honors computer science class, and he totally understands that more than I do, so I use him as kind of a mentor for that. Mentors...spiritually I have some friends who've been working with different ministries and working with their identities as Christians for years and they're kind of mentors in that way. I guess I do have some adult mentors, like the pastor's wife that I hang out with sometimes, I can consider her a mentor I think. Or professors like the religious studies professor that I mentioned...Then academic mentors, the writing center, I didn't expect to need to go to the writing center, but they're definitely mentors... Mentors and outdoor program, one of them at least was one of my trip leaders from Pre-Rendezblue and I'm still interacting with her. She's one of the leaders for the kayaking trip that I'm going on tomorrow. So mentors in that way, yeah lots of mentors, who have more experience than I do.

Likewise, Charlie recounted peer and adult mentors in his life:

Ned is my, I call him my Spanish mentor, he's my friend, but he's my Spanish mentor. He is a senior and is about to graduate with his major in Spanish. He always gives me advice about the language, common things you'll find. He'll talk about the best teachers, teachers he really enjoyed, so he's really helped. Then I think Lane and Charles with Inter-Varsity and Brad, they've been helping me grow, and I guess both in faith. And I don't know just be more outgoing, doing new things, because I didn't really attend a church conference until here and we went on a huge trip to St. Louis, and that was amazing. I think they're huge mentors.

Students can learn and benefit from adult and peer mentors. Developing a meaningful support system on-campus as a first-year student can be a challenge. As demonstrated in several sections of analysis, the ability to overcome challenges impacts the first-year experience and student transition and integration to college.

### Concept Map Analysis

Concept maps are unique to their creators and reflect personal experiences (Kinchin, Hay, & Adams, 2010). In each session with the research participants the principal investigator provided an overview of concept mapping and described the topic of each of the three concept maps. The research participants were given the concept mapping instructions (Appendix D) along with blank paper and a pen. At the completion of each concept map the principal investigator reviewed the map with the research participant and asked clarifying questions as needed. Three of the eight research participants had previous experience in concept mapping. The five research participants who did not have any previous experience were able to learn how to construct a concept map.

The subjects of the three concept maps that research participants were asked to create include:

- Concept Map A: Involvement and Activities
- Concept Map B: Support system and social network
- Concept Map C: Transition to college life and integration on campus

The concept maps were initially coded using the master list of codes (Appendix F) established during the coding of interview transcripts. A concept map was created from the data after initial coding was conducted with the research participants' three concept maps (Figure 1). The top three mentioned areas on the research participant concept maps include: friends, family, and organizations/clubs. Axial coding was used to analyze the concept maps in conjunction with the interview transcripts to bring the data back together and form connections between categories to explain the phenomenon (Charmez, 2006). The categories and axial codes are provided in Table 3. The master list of categories, subcategories, and codes is provided in Appendix F.

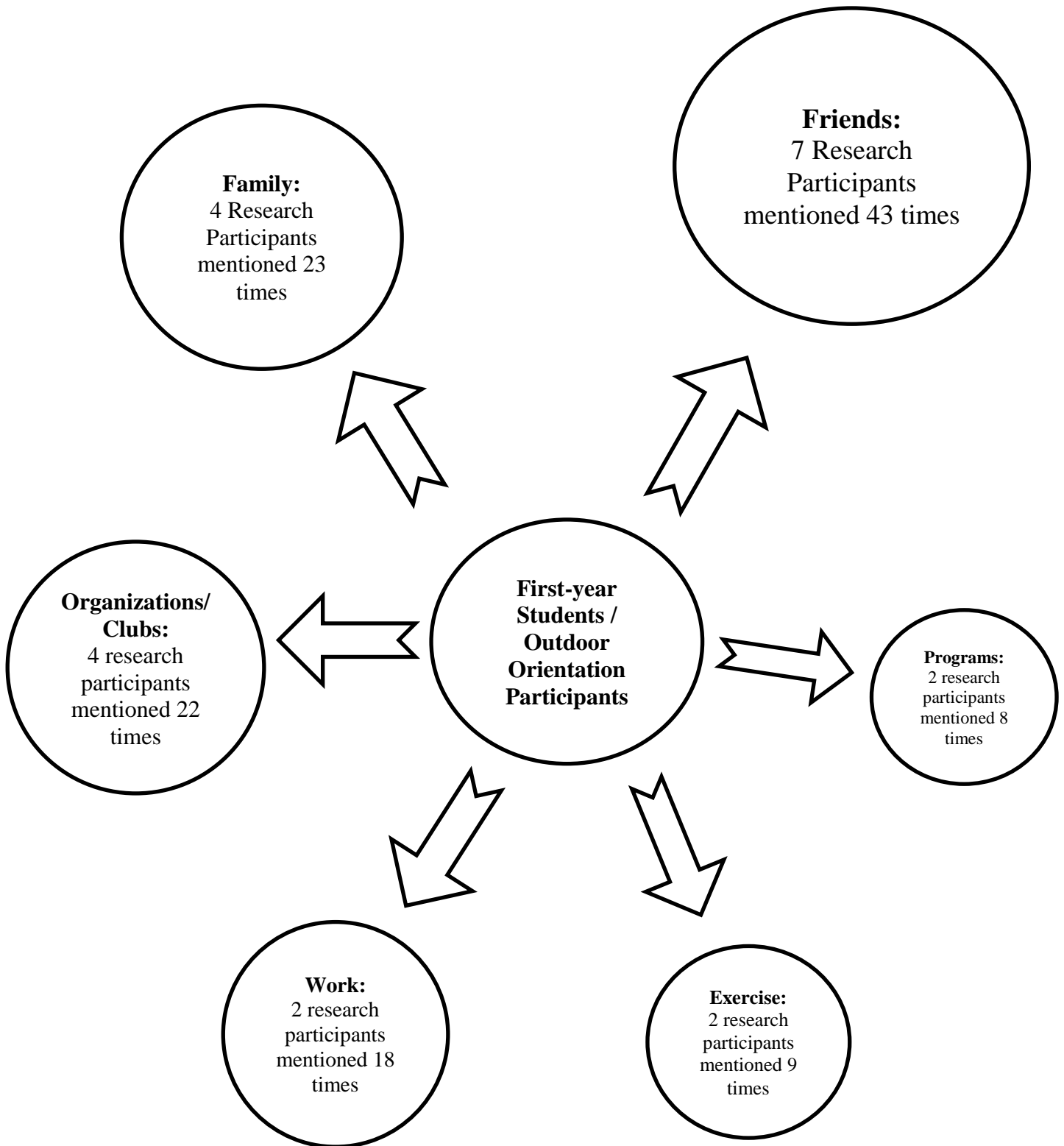


Figure 1

*Concept Map of Top Six Results from Initial Coding of Research Participants' Three Concept Maps*

Table 3

*Categories and Axial Codes*

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Axial Codes</u>
Precollege	Supports provide a connection to institution & sense of belonging
Support	Supports impacts involvement, and vice versa
Transition/FY Experience/ Integration	Pre-college activities and first-year involvement aid academic integration & student success
Involvement/Belonging	Academic integration impacts academic performance
Academics	Supports impact social, academic, & co-curricular integration
Environment	Environment impacts transition, mental outlook, & wellbeing
Challenges	Support (resources/people) are needed to overcome challenges
Wellbeing	

## Chapter Summary

The principal investigator transcribed each recorded interview and conducted member checks prior to commencing the coding process. The interview transcriptions are stored in a locked location and are available for review. The initial phase of the qualitative analytic process begins with assigning logically deduced codes to data followed by categorization of the codes (Charmez, 2006). Initial, first-round coding followed by second-round coding of the interview transcripts was conducted and the systematic process of constant comparative analysis used ensured a disciplined approach to data analysis. Emergent themes, patterns, and findings were identified during the iterative data analysis process.

The first iteration included the first round and second round coding process of the interview transcripts and concept maps while the principal investigator simultaneously recorded impressions and garnered an understanding of the passages. The second iteration involved highlighting key points and identifying emerging themes as well as conducting axial coding to bring the data back together and form connections between categories. The third iteration of the constant comparative analytic process involved code reduction and the application to the data set. Codes and categories were reviewed and grouped in a logical fashion; repetitious or spurious codes were eliminated. The third iteration concluded with the emergence of the significance of the findings: A comprehensive support system, the right environment, and engagement in fun campus activities are the cornerstones to successful transition and integration to college for first-year students.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

#### Summary

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 presented the researcher's introduction to the topic, the qualitative phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experiences of first-year students as they transitioned to college and integrated into their new community, the data production and collection methods, the review of literature, and the research methodology. Chapter 4 discussed the emergent themes associated with the research questions and provided interview and concept mapping results and analysis. The study's findings, implications, and conclusions as well as the recommendations for practice and further research are discussed in Chapter 5.

Student retention and persistence to graduation is a focal point of research and institution initiatives in higher education. First-year experience programs began and have evolved over time to increase student retention and persistence. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the transition and integration experiences of first-year students who participated in an outdoor orientation program at two public higher education institutions in the Southeastern United States. Informing this study's findings are the rich and detailed description of the lived experiences of eight research participants who were in their second semester of college at the time of data collection. The results provide a framework for understanding transition and integration experiences of first-year students.

## Conclusions

A central question on the phenomenon under investigation and five research questions guided this qualitative inquiry. The principal investigator extracted meaning from interview transcripts, research participant concept maps, and researcher memos to understand the lived experiences of first-year college students. Data triangulation occurred among the two types of data collected: concept maps and interviews. The experiences and individuals listed on research participant concept maps corroborated their answers to interview questions. The study's credibility and dependability were enhanced by the use of multiple data sources as well by establishing an audit trail and conducting member checks.

Transition theory provides a framework for understanding change and adapting to transition with three factors that influence adaptation: the perception and characteristics of the transition, the characteristics of the environment surrounding the transition, and the characteristics of the individual (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). The successful transition for a first-year student not only depends on the environment and characteristics, it is reliant on becoming involved academically and socially. Student involvement theory refers to the physical and psychological energy a student spends on academic courses or extracurricular activities; the more energy devoted by the student the more they will learn, develop, and persist to graduate (Astin, 1984). To understand student retention and departure, along with transition and student involvement theories, the theory of student departure claims student attrition is predominantly due to academic problems, failure to socially and intellectually integrate, or a low level of commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1988). First-year experience programs including outdoor or wilderness-based orientation programs incorporate goals that address components of the three



aforementioned theories to increase student retention and persistence. The ensuing sections delineate the data analysis findings correlated with the five research questions.

### Research Question 1

*How do OOP participants describe their social, academic, and co-curricular integration to college?*

First-year transition and integration to college does not come without preconceived notions and challenges. Social and cocurricular integration are intertwined. Programs such as outdoor or wilderness based orientation programs provide new students an opportunity to meet peers and begin to develop supportive relationships and a social network on campus. A successful transition requires interpersonal support systems and social support networks (Schlossberg, 1981). First-year orientation programs acclimate new students to campus and foster social integration (Braxton & McClendon, 2001) as well as initiate integration into the higher education academic community (Pascarella et al., 1986). Participation in an OOP impacts first-year students in ways that traditional orientation programs do not, such as the development of meaningful relationships and a social support network on campus (Bell, 2005; Gass et al., 2003).

The underpinning of academic integration to higher education begins in secondary school. Research indicates that high school students who take AP courses and pass AP exams demonstrate the ability to successfully complete college level coursework, which increases the probability of earning a college degree (Dougherty et al., 2006). A fit between the student and the academic environment of the institution provides students with interesting and challenging

instruction and course work applicable to life and future career. An ideal fit where a student is appropriately challenged academically and has been able to develop a support system increases the likelihood of degree completion.

## Research Question 2

*How do OOP participants view their involvement on campus?*

Educationally purposeful activities and campus life programs allow for students to become engaged in the campus community, impacting social and academic integration. First-year programs generally support prosocial goals, positive peer group development, and having fun (Galloway, 2000). Participation in an OOP is a form of early involvement in a first-year program by new students. Early involvement and exposure to the campus as well as to peers may encourage students to participate in subsequent programs and join student organizations. There were research participants from ETSU and UNCA who through contact with peers and upperclassman during the OOP experience became involved on campus in ways that they might not have been if they did not participate in the OOP.

First-year students generally want to make the most out of the college experience and pursue personal interests. Opportunities to self-explore, try new things, meet new people, and establish a connection to the institution impact sense of belonging. Research found a positive relationship between involvements on campus and school belonging (Norris & Mounts, 2010). Research questions 2 and 4 are closely linked: involvement and sense of belong on campus. There is a predominant theme of student involvement within student departure and student involvement theories, and it is identified as a key to retention and persistence (Astin, 1984;

Tinto, 1993). Conversely, noninvolvement increases the probability of student departure (Tinto, 1993).

### Research Question 3

*What factors do OOP participants indicate as advancing their levels of commitment or connection to the institution?*

Positive and integrative experiences for first-year students increase the connection, or institutional commitment, to the institution (Tinto, 1993). The research participants reflected on their participation in the ETSU BOA and UNCA Pre-Rendezblue Wilderness Experience. The overwhelming consensus was that they met new people, made friends, tried new experiences, and had fun while preparing to transition to college – integral aspects of establishing a strong connection to the institution for first-year students. Charlie’s thoughts about the BOA experience support this premise: “I thought they really prepared us for what’s to come, and that was really cool about that. I just really enjoyed, I don’t think there’s anything bad about it, I enjoyed every single thing about it.”

Institutional characteristics and physical location of the institution attracts students to apply, and once enrolled if the environment is a good fit for the student the likelihood of retention and persistence increases (Tinto, 1993). A majority of the research participants mentioned the surrounding environment, the natural beauty of the lakes, rivers, and scenic mountains of East Tennessee and Western North Carolina during the interview. Several of research participants mentioned the distance from home and that attending college close to home was not desirable and factored into the choice of college decision. Additionally, the preference for the smaller size of the institution along with the feeling of familiarity in the case of UNCA

and the medium sized institution in the case of ETSU were factors enhancing institutional commitment.

#### Research Question 4

*How have OOP participants established a sense of belonging on campus?*

As previously mentioned, student involvement on campus impacts sense of belonging. Through various avenues do first-year students establish a sense of belonging or sense of place at an institution. For first-year students adjusting to the new environment and establishing a support system will positively impact their sense of belonging. Participation in an OOP provides experiences and opportunities that influence first-year students' sense of place, (Austin et al., 2009), largely by exposing students to the campus and the surrounding areas prior to the start of school. A welcoming environment, comfortable living space, and being on good terms with roommates have an influence on adjusting to college and developing a sense of place. Additionally, first-year students want to be themselves and be accepted as such, finding a niche on campus, which fosters a strong sense of belonging.

#### Research Question 5

*What support systems do OOP participants describe as important to their college experience?*

The four identified components that assist individuals with adapting to a transition include: situation, self, supports, and strategies (Schlossberg, 1989). Essential to the first-year experience, students need support from institutional resources, including faculty and staff, as

well as programs and services, to assist with transition and integration to college. Supportive relationships may be pre-existing with family members and friendships developed prior to college. Pre-existing relationships may remain important in the lives of first-year students; however, there is generally a need to develop new supportive relationships on campus. As recounted by Charlie, Felicity, and Sandi, first-year students often rely on themselves for academic support, using self-motivation to increase academic performance.

Interaction with faculty in and out of the classroom impacts student success. Faculty are integral in the improvement of student retention and persistence as they can identify and assist at-risk students (Seidman, 2005). Class discussions have been shown to have a direct, positive effect on student persistence and a statistically reliable indirect effect on institutional commitment and intent to persist (Braxton et al., 2000). Regarding faculty interaction outside of the classroom the principal investigator observed a noticeable difference between the research participants from ETSU versus UNCA. When asked to describe what their interactions were like with their professors outside of class the majority of ETSU students responded that they generally do not interact with their professors outside of class, nor do they go to office hours that professors advertise. When asked the same question all four UNCA students recounted interactions with their professors outside of class and recounted situations when the professors were extremely helpful, and Calin mentioned that she considered one of her professors a mentor and best source of academic support. The size and culture of UNCA, along with the liberal arts-based curriculum, may account for a portion of the disparity in the responses to interaction with faculty.

### Implications for Policy and Practice

First-year programs, namely outdoor and wilderness orientation programs, positively impact the transition and integration of first-year students. The positive impact resulting from these experiences increase the likelihood of student retention and persistence. The recommendations for higher education leaders stemming from this qualitative study include:

- Student engagement: Get students involved early - prior to and during the first year of college;
- Expand extended orientation programming: Offer various types of extended orientation programs beyond outdoor and wilderness-based to accommodate first-year students who have interests in other areas;
- Institutional commitment: Provide avenues for first-year students to establish a connection to the institution;
- Support system and social network: First-year students need support in the form of institutional resources and supportive relationships on campus;
- Intentional programming: First-year experiences should be planned and implemented with intention to meet desired goals and outcomes;
- Heuristic learning: Provide first-year students with innovative programs and opportunities to use experience to learn and develop.

### Implications for Future Research

The focus of this study included two public higher education institutions in the Southeastern United States. The sample was limited to first-year students who participated in an

OOP prior to their first year of college. The findings may not be generalizable to other higher education institutions. Qualitative studies similar in nature are encouraged at different types of institutions or involving a different sample.

Participation in an outdoor orientation or wilderness-based program is generally not a requirement for first-year students, and the research participants in this study self-selected to participate. Replicating a similar qualitative study with first-year students who did not participate in an OOP, who were required to participate in an OOP, or who participated in a different kind of extended orientation program would provide a broader perspective and additional insight on first-year transition and integration experiences.

Outdoor orientation programs are generally not for college credit; however, some institutions offer the experience as a first-year course for credit. Future inquiry comparing and contrasting the differences and similarities in transition and integration experiences of students in an academic credit course versus a noncredit program will provide additional insight as to the influence of each type of program.

Students who self-select to participate in an OOP may be highly active and involved regardless of the impact of the program. Future research investigating the direct impact of involvement in campus activities and student organizations as a result in OOP participation will potentially benefit First-Year Programs.

The two institutions that were chosen to be a part of the study are delimitations. Institutional practices including orientation programs implemented to enhance the first-year experience are unique to an institution (Barefoot, 2005). Supplemental quantitative and qualitative studies on first-year and transfer student transition and integration experiences will

drive institutional initiatives to enhance first-year and transfer student programs and services that in turn will have a positive impact student retention and persistence. Recommendations for additional future research include:

- An investigation of the planning, implementation, and assessment of various types of extended orientation programs;
- Longitudinal research on the impact of first-year experience programs have on academic performance and student success;
- Student development in transferable skills, decision-making, and problem solving;
- Outdoor and wilderness based orientation program student trip leader training development, implementation, assessment, and benefits;
- Barriers to starting, maintaining, or expanding an OOP;
- Examination of the similarities and differences of academic-based, for credit OOP and noncredit OOPs at institutions with and without Outdoor Education academic departments, and the role of an Outdoor Education academic department in program planning and implementation;
- Investigation of extended orientation programs for adult and transfer students;
- Assessment of student learning outcomes in OOPs;
- Examination of the first-year program and OOP partnerships or collaborations; and



- Additional longitudinal studies across various types of institutions examining the long-term impact of OOP participation on student retention, persistence, and alumni engagement.

The principal investigator recommends quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research designs for practitioners to understand the identified phenomenon and garner a complete understanding of the college student experiences under investigation.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Participant Interview Questions (Original)

##### Introduction/Demographics

1. What has your first year of college been like so far? Tell me about your experience.
2. What do you most look forward to on campus and why?
3. Please describe the OOP experience that you participated in prior to starting college.  
What was that like for you and what impact did the program have on you?
4. Did you go to a local high school or did you come to college from out of town?
5. Do you live in a residence hall on campus? If so, tell me what that experience is like for you. If not, please describe what your living arrangement off-campus is like.
6. How do you perceive your new college environment at (name institution)?

##### Transition

7. What has been your biggest challenge in the transition to college life? Do you feel like you have successfully overcome that challenge? If not, what are the barriers to overcoming the challenge?
8. How did participating in the OOP impact your transition to college?

##### Support System/Social Integration

9. Thinking back to the start of your college career, tell me about the social support network that you had at college? What helped to form it?
10. If you did not have a social support network when you began college, do you feel that you have one now? Describe how it was established.



### Co-curricular Integration/Involvement

11. Are you or have you been involved with any extracurricular activities in college, such as clubs and student organizations? If so, did participating in the OOP play a role in your involvement?
12. How do you think participating in the OOP aided in your academic and personal development in your first year of college?
13. Are you currently friends with any of the students that you met in the OOP?

### Academic Integration

14. Describe what your interactions are like with your professors outside of class.
15. Do you meet with an advisor or mentor at the university? If so, please describe your interactions with him or her.
16. Tell me about any university sponsored events, such as concerts or athletic games, that you attend.
17. Are your parents supportive and helpful with any challenges you have at in your first year of college?
18. Describe any mentors that you have in your life and what interactions do you have with them.

### Sense of Belonging

19. Do you feel that you have been able to establish a sense of belonging or a sense of place at your university? If so, please describe this sense. If not, why do you think this has not happened?
20. How has your adjustment to college life been like for you?

21. Describe your motivation when it comes to college? What motivates you? What demotivates you?

#### Academic Integration

22. Are you satisfied with your current grades and GPA?

23. Did participating in the OOP help you prepare for college? If so, in what way(s)?

24. Have you declared a major? If so, do you feel secure in your decision after more than one complete semester of college or do you have any doubts or ideas about another possible major?

## APPENDIX B

### Participant Interview Questions (Final)

#### Introduction/Demographics

1. Please tell me about what your college experience has been like so far during first year.
2. What do you most look forward to on campus and why?
3. Please describe the (name of outdoor orientation program) experience that you participated in prior to starting college.

Probe: What impact did the program have on you? What was most important to you about your (name of outdoor orientation program) experience?

4. Did you go to a local high school or did you come to college from out of town or from another state or country?

#### Institution Commitment/Connection

5. Where was (name of institution) in your choice of universities to attend?
6. Tell me about your current living arrangement.

Probe: What is the experience like for you?

#### Transition

7. Describe any challenges that you have faced in transitioning to college.

Probe: How do you feel about overcoming the challenge(s) or what barriers are there in overcoming the challenge(s)?

8. What advice would you give a first-year student coming to college?

#### Support System/Social Integration

9. Tell me about your support system that you had when you started college.

Probe: How was it established?

10. How has your support system changed, if at all, in your first year of college?
11. Describe any adults in your life that have been supportive or helpful to you leading up to college or during your first year?
12. Tell me about any friendships that you may have developed as a result of participating in (name of outdoor orientation program).

#### Academic Integration

13. Describe what your interactions are like with your professors outside of class.
14. Tell me about your interactions with any advisors that that you have met with in college.
15. Describe any mentors that you have in your life.

Probe: What are your interactions like with your mentor(s)?

#### Co-curricular Integration/Involvement

16. Describe any extracurricular activities you have been, or are, involved in during your first year of college.

Probe: How did you get involved in those activities?

17. Describe any programs or activities that helped you prepare academically for college.
18. Describe any programs or activities that helped you prepare socially for college.
19. Tell me about any university sponsored events, such as concerts or athletic games, that you attend.

#### Sense of Belonging

20. Describe any sense of belonging or sense of place that you may have at (name of institution)?

Probe: (If no sense developed) What's your reaction to not having developed a sense of belonging or a sense of place at (name of institution)?

21. Describe your motivation when it comes to college.

Probe: Tell me about any motivators or de-motivators you are experiencing in college.

#### Academic Integration

22. How do you feel about your academic performance in college?

23. Talk about what major you have declared, if you have done so.

Probe: How do you feel about your decision of a major?

Probe: (If major has not been declared) What issues are you facing in declaring a major?

## APPENDIX C

### Research Blueprint

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Data Collection Sources</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
RQ1: How do OOP participants describe their social, academic, and co-curricular integration to college?	<b>Concept Maps</b> CM B: Support System/Social Network; CM C: Transition/Integration	1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23
RQ2: How do OOP participants view their involvement on campus?	CM A: Involvement	2, 3, 7, 16, 19
RQ3: What factors do OOP participants indicate as advancing their levels of commitment or connection to the institution?	CM A: Involvement; CM C: Transition/Integration	4, 5, 8, 16, 19, 21, 23
RQ4: How have OOP participants established a sense of belonging on campus?	CM A: Involvement; CM B: Support System/Social Network	2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12, 16, 19, 20, 23
RQ5: What support systems do OOP participants describe as important to their college experience?	CM B: Support System/Social Network	2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18

## APPENDIX D

### Concept Mapping – Participant Instructions

#### Concept Map A: Involvement and Activities

Start your map by drawing a circle in the middle of the page to represent yourself. From there draw other circles representing your involvement on campus and what activities you spend time doing while in college. Use larger circles for activities that you spend more time doing and smaller circles that take less of your time. You may use arrows or labeled lines to make connections or link circles. For example, you may have a big circle with the word “student government” in it and a smaller circle with the word “intramurals” in it. A labeled line from “student government” linking “intramurals” could have the words “plays Co-Rec Softball”.

#### Concept Map B: Support system and social network

Start your map by drawing a circle in the middle of the page to represent yourself. From there draw other circles representing your support system and social network doing while in college. Use larger circles for individuals or groups of people that you spend more time with and provide more support, and smaller circles for those that you spend less time with and provide less support. You may use arrows or labeled lines to make connections or link circles. For example, you may have a big circle with the word “roommates” in it and smaller circles with the words “classmates” and “mentor” in them. A labeled line from “roommates” linking “classmates” could have the words “do not interact with”.

#### Concept Map C: Transition to college life and integration on campus

Start your map by drawing a circle in the middle of the page to represent yourself. From there draw other circles representing your transition to college life and integration on campus. Use larger circles for things that had more of an impact on your adjustment to college, and smaller circles for things that had less of an impact. You may use arrows or labeled lines to make connections or link circles. For example, you may have different sized circles with the words “orientation leader” and “Climbing Club”. A labeled line from “orientation leader” to “Climbing club” could have the words “helped me to get involved in the”.

## APPENDIX E

### Institutional Review Board Approval



EAST TENNESSEE STATE  
UNIVERSITY

Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects • Box 70565 • Johnson City, Tennessee 37614-1707  
Phone: (423) 439-6053 Fax: (423) 439-6060

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#### **IRB APPROVAL – Initial Expedited Review**

March 9, 2016

Lynn Nester

**Re:** Transition and Integration Experiences of First-Year Students: A Phenomenological Inquiry Into the Lives of Participants in Outdoor Orientation Programs

**IRB#:** c0216.24s

**ORSPA #:**

The following items were reviewed and approved by an expedited process:

- new protocol submission xForm,

On **March 9, 2016**, a final approval was granted for a period not to exceed 12 months and will expire on **March 8, 2017**. The expedited approval of the study will be reported to the convened board on the next agenda.

The following **enclosed stamped, approved Informed Consent Documents** have been stamped with the approval and expiration date and these documents must be copied and provided to each participant prior to participant enrollment:

- Informed consent document (ver 2-21-16 stamped approved 3-9-16); Recruitment email ETSU (stamped approved 3-9-16); Recruitment email UNCA (stamped approved 3-9-16)

Federal regulations require that the original copy of the participant's consent be maintained in the principal investigator's files and that a copy is given to the subject at the time of consent.

**Projects involving Mountain States Health Alliance must also be approved by MSHA following IRB approval prior to initiating the study.**

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others must be reported to the IRB (and VA R&D if applicable) within 10 working days.

Proposed changes in approved research cannot be initiated without IRB review and approval. The only exception to this rule is that a change can be made prior to IRB approval when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the research subjects [21 CFR 56.108 (a)(4)]. In such a case, the IRB must be promptly informed of the change following its implementation (within 10



*Accredited Since December 2005*



working days) on Form 109 ([www.etsu.edu/irb](http://www.etsu.edu/irb)). The IRB will review the change to determine that it is consistent with ensuring the subject's continued welfare.

Sincerely,  
Stacey Williams, Chair  
ETSU Campus IRB

cc: Bethany H Flora, Ph.D.

## APPENDIX F

### Master List of Categories, Subcategories, & Codes

#### 1. Category: Pre-college

Subcategory: Support

Codes:

Friend

Teachers

Family

Counselors

Peers

Subcategory: Courses/College Preparation

Codes:

AP courses

Honors classes

International Baccalaureate

Dual enrollment

College fair

College tours

College preparation

Subcategory: Experience/Involvement

Codes:

Work

High school

Leadership

Programs

Code:

Environment

#### 2. Category: Supports/Support System

Codes:

Encouragement

Relationship development

Subcategory: personal relationships

Codes:

Friends

Family

Significant other

Advisers

Peer mentors  
Adult mentors  
Counselors/therapist  
Roommate  
Church members  
Supervisor  
Professor  
Self

Subcategory: Resources

Codes:

Writing Center  
Counseling  
Honors College  
Seeking help  
Library

Subcategory: Type of support

Codes:

Moral  
Academic  
Personal  
Emotional

3. Category: Transition/FY Experiences/Integration

Subcategory: Transition

Codes:

Time to adjust  
Integration  
Impact  
Decision-making  
Preconceptions  
Familiarity  
Determination  
Ready to leave  
Emotional  
Opportunities  
Life changing experience  
Extended orientation

Subcategory: FY Experiences

Codes:

New experience  
Independence

Life-changing  
Diversity  
Smooth  
Great first year  
Not a great first year  
Leisure time  
Development  
Beneficial  
Big transition  
Hard  
Departure

Subcategory: Integration

Codes:

Social interaction  
Preparation  
College plan  
Being lonely  
Extroversion  
Introversion

#### 4. Category: Involvement/Belonging

Subcategory: Involvement

Code:

Getting involved  
Organization/clubs  
Activities  
Events  
Programs  
Service projects  
Volunteering  
Having fun  
Meeting new people  
School trip  
Small group  
Engagement  
Leadership  
Try new things  
Work

Subcategory: Belonging

Codes:

Fit  
Niche

Connection  
Legacy  
Institutional commitment  
Love of institution/campus  
Love of area

5. Category: Academics

Subcategory: Courses

Codes:

Engage

Attending classes

Lab

Studying

Course load

Application of material

Academic rigor

First-year course

Preparation

Subcategory: Programs

Codes:

Honors College

Living learning community

Internship

Study abroad

Subcategory: Future

Codes:

Career

College path

Major

Codes:

Interests

Competition

Goals

Learning

Faculty interaction

Faculty communication

Preparation

Degree commitment

Academic achievement

Academic performance

Skill development

6. Category: Environment

Subcategory: Campus

Codes:

Institution type

Institution size

Study space

Low stress

Relaxing

Welcoming

Campus

Subcategory: Local area

Codes:

Mountains

Natural beauty

Downtown

Subcategory: Living

Codes:

Residence hall

Roommates

Suitemates

Living space/quarters

Random assignment

Subcategory: Sustainability

Codes:

The environment

Nature

Outdoors

Codes:

Distance from home

New city

New environment

7. Category: Challenges

Codes:

Finances

Being lonely

Romantic relationship

Deadlines

Time management

Course load  
Classes  
Moving to the city  
Being pushed  
Meeting new people  
Personal differences  
Comfort level  
Commitment  
Stress  
Frustrations  
Fears  
Lack of focus  
Conflicts  
Expectation  
Sadness  
Priority  
Detached  
Difficulties/difficult  
Danger  
Give self credit/break  
Doubts  
Struggling  
Intimidated  
Paying for school  
In-state residency

8. Category: Wellbeing

Subcategory: Social

Codes:

Friends

Clubs/organizations

Events

Healthy relationships

Social well-being

Subcategory: Physical

Codes:

Exercise

Physical exertion

Physical challenge

Health

Sleep

Food

Eating disorder

Subcategory: Self

Codes:

Self-care

Self-identification

Self-exploration

Content

Motivation/self-motivation

Natural ability/talent

Subcategory: Spiritual

Codes:

Faith

Religion

Spirituality

Cathartic

Subcategory: Financial

Codes:

Scholarships

Income

Paying for school

In-state residency

Subcategory: Mental health

Codes:

Positive outlook

Open mind

Confidence

Mental illness



## VITA

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- Education:                    Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2016
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