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# Success Informs Success: Experiences of Persisting First-Generation College Males

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SUCCESS INFORMS SUCCESS:

EXPERIENCES OF PERSISTING FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE MALES

By

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This research focuses on the experiences of first-generation college males who have successfully persisted into their second year of college. The experiences of a first-generation student have been described as "a constant battle." The students in this study have overcome the many challenges ascribed to them as first-generation college students, and persisted into their second year of college. Exploring the experiences of these men through their eyes allowed the research to examine the challenges and supports that the men themselves identify as important to their first year experience. This information has implications for future practice involving first-generation students, with the goal of helping them persist toward degree completion.

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**Chapter 1**

If college exists as a single building, there are two distinct entrances for students. The first entrance is reserved for those in the know. These students come to college equipped with the confident knowledge and knowhow of what their collegiate life is going to be like. They've heard about the tests, and they've had the academic training to get them ready for it. Someone has explained to them the benefits of fraternity or sorority life, and wrote them a letter of recommendation to get in. The path is clear, and the path is smooth.

When these students in the know enter college, the door is held for them. Once inside, after someone has taken their coat, they enter a tastefully decorated main room of a giant castle. They are told that they can have anything they need, all they have to do is ask. If they have a question, they can ask any family member, or any one of the many family friends who are already in the castle.  The students who enter college through door number one never questioned that the castle was where they would be. It was simply the next comfortable step on a clear, smooth path, one they've known all along.

The second entrance to college is for those who can't find door number one. Nobody told these "other" students where the first door was, or even how they might find it. When these students find the second entrance, they must push it open. It is heavy, and they must do it alone. Once the door gives way, the second entrance leads into a small pathway, with other pathways jutting outward, and more pathways beyond the first. They have entered a literal and figurative maze.

With no one to guide them, and no map to look to, the students who enter college through the second entrance struggle to find their way. At each turn, a new foe steps out of the shadows: classes they weren't prepared for, study and time management skills they

don't have, social anxieties no one told them about, and ever-looming financial pressures attack from all angles, and the attackers don't wait their turn. These students have pushed the door to college open by themselves. These students have navigated the maze of college by themselves. These students have fought battle after battle with lofty enemies. Through all of these challenges, the students who access the second entrance of college are generally fighting their battles alone.

First-generation students are often those who are pushing through the second entrance of college, entering headlong into the maze and all its potential pitfalls. They encounter challenges and struggles that their classmates with college-going parents usually never have to think about. Something about these students, though, gets them to and through college. First-generation college students can be, and are, successful. It is with this knowledge that this study was launched: to find what stirs in the hearts and minds of these students. How do they push open the door, navigate the labyrinth, and slay the foes?

**Introduction**

As first-generation students enroll on campuses at higher rates than ever before (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012), their degree attainment still lags behind their non first-generation counterparts. Academic institutions are not well prepared to serve these students with multiple identities and backgrounds.

With little prior knowledge and limited support, the transition into college life for first-generation students can prove difficult. The data on college completion rates for first-generation students reflects this difficulty: Only 51% of first-generation students earned a bachelor's degree within six years (Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2011), compared to the over 71% six-year degree completion rate for those

students who were not identified as first-generation or low-income. It is clear that first-generation students need continuing support to work toward college completion. Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that even though these students are twice as likely to go on to college after high school as their low-income and first-generation predecessors from earlier decades, the degree attainment gap still prevails.

> It is no longer enough to be concerned only about *whether* low-income and first-generation students go to college. We also must be concerned about *where* and *how* they go to college – and the experiences they have once enrolled – to ensure that this population can stay there through the completion of a degree (p. 5)

There are studies detailing how and why first-generation students do not obtain a college degree. Utilizing qualitative interview methods, this study looked to let the voices of successfully persisting first-generation male college students be heard, providing some insight to how they managed and manage the myriad challenges of college. This study is an opportunity to view the experience of first-generation students through their eyes. The stories of these successful first-generation college males can let future first-generation students know that the journey is possible. These stories of success can show future first-generation students that the things they know and do contribute to their success, and that they are a valuable part of their collegiate campuses. These stories can expand the understanding and inspire both professionals and students who are part of this journey.

Why is the study of first-generation students important? As the numbers of first-generation college students continues to grow, it must be our goal as educators to serve them. If one wanted to argue the simple economics of retaining a student being cheaper than recruiting a student, they certainly could (Jehangir, 2010a). Yet, it goes beyond these reasons.

> We have in our classrooms and on our campus students who have demonstrated resilience, an ability to tolerate ambiguity in contexts of lived experience and identity, and a capacity to navigate multiple worlds. Their aptitude to successfully communicate in multilingual ways speaks not only to their often literal command of more than one language, but the ways in which their life experience[s] have prepared them to speak the languages of their many worlds. These skills are well-aligned with learning and developmental outcomes for all students. (Jehangir, 2010a, p. 27)

This study focused on first-generation male students. The gender gap in undergraduate education is increasing. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (2011) indicates a 14% gender difference in the overall undergraduate population in the United States. "The utter failure of the education system to address male needs on male terms is indeed a crisis" (Jaschik, 2008). Further intensifying the issues faced by male college students is the data indicating that men are less likely to seek help when presented with issues of mental, physical, or academic wellness (Wimer & Levant, 2011).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college males who have successfully persisted into the second year of college.  This study hopes to add to the increasing literature on first-generation students, hearing the voice of those students who are doing something right: persisting toward reaching their goals. This is a necessary part of the literature that currently focuses primarily on the shortcomings of first-generation students as well as "precollegiate factors, access to college, enrollment patterns, and financial aid" (Jehangir, 2010a, p. 1). Six one-on-one interviews were conducted to investigate the first-year experience of collegiate males, exploring the challenges they identified in their first year, and the ways in which they overcame those challenges.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of first-generation college males who have successfully persisted into the second year of college. This study sought to understand the first year experience of these students, and how they described the various resources that helped them persist into their second year of college. These students were selected from a predominately white, Midwest land-grant research institution, referred to as Downtown University. This study looked to examine, through semi-structured interviews, whether currently enrolled students align with theories on persistence, in addition to examining if any common experiences occurred for these successfully persisting students.

To understand the perspectives of first-generation college males, interviews were conducted utilizing a semi-structured protocol of open-ended questions. The central research question was: What experiences do first-generation male college students describe as influential to their persistence into their second year of college? Subquestions included:

- How do first-generation college males identify challenges they faced during their first year at college?

- Where do first-generation college males find support to help them work through their academic challenges?

- How do first-generation college males describe their decision to return to their second year of college?

**Definitions**

The following definitions are utilized in this research:

*First-generation student*: student whose parents (or guardians) have not obtained a bachelor's degree. This definition is the definition used by Federal TRIO programs. The definition of first-generation students is somewhat fluid, as some definitions of first-generation students exclude students whose parents have some college experience including associate's degrees. This study uses the Federal definition in order to keep the net for participant recruitment wide.

*Successfully persisting*: enrolling and attending same postsecondary institution for the second academic year. This definition was used to determine participant eligibility.

*Challenge*: any issue, be it physical, mental, academic, social, family related, etc., that created real or perceived stress for the student. The definition is largely fluid, and interpretations of the word by the participants in this study will be accepted at face value and will drive the conversation.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations were inherently part of this study, as the bounded case study methodology was utilized. All participants self-identified as first-generation college males who were enrolled in their second academic year at Downtown University. Participants were required to be at least 19 years of age or older. No other criteria restrictions were used to determine participants.

**Limitations**

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the findings and conclusions may not be generalizable to a larger population. As I will discuss in my data validation section, I have

attempted to use rich, thick description (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). This "highly descript, detailed presentation of the findings of the study…with adequate evidence" (p. 227) allows for the possibility of the results of this study to transfer to another setting.

Sampling was purposeful, as participants were either nominated by a faculty or staff member, or they were recruited through snowball recruiting. Because of the nomination process and snowball recruiting efforts, the participants may not be representative of the bounded group at Downtown University.

As the primary research instrument, I may have inserted some of my own bias into the findings of this research; I position myself accordingly below. Data validation techniques have been employed to curtail this as much as possible, but there is still the possibility that my biases will show up in the research.

**Researcher Experience/Bias**

As a white male with parents and older siblings who attended college, my position of privilege can be a point of limitation and bias. In this study, I have inserted my own biases into the study through the data analysis and discussion.

I strive to bring forth the voices of the participants, as it is their experience that is the valuable thing in this study. Working with first-generation students, it has often been my experience to witness the immense talents, knowledge and skill they can bring. Their intense drive and unending work toward obtaining their degree places them in high regard in my eyes. I have hopes for these participants, knowing the futures they want, and the difference they believe they are making for their families. The disconnect often lies with empowering these students to know and believe they have something to offer in the

collegiate environment. It is the obligation of higher education institutions to work hard for these students, to empower them to be successful.

**Conclusion**

The research indicates that first-generation students are persisting in college and attaining degrees at lower rates than their non-first-generation counterparts. In addition, men are less likely to attain their degree than women across all racial/ethnic groups (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, Tran, 2011) If colleges and universities are not more able to identify and assist these students effectively, the dreams of education and success for many students with huge potential could go unrealized.

Listening to my participants identify their biggest challenges, then talk through how they overcame those challenges provides an opportunity to view the struggles and successes of first-generation students through their eyes, rather than through the eyes of an administrator, practitioner, or researcher.

This study examines the personal experiences of six, Midwestern, first-generation, college sophomore men at a Midwestern research institution. The unique experiences of these men are shaped by their upbringing and life in the Midwest, and may not be generalizable to first-generation college men or first-generation college students in general.

The intricacies of these men's unique experiences give educators and professionals in higher education the chance to be more sensitive to the experiences of our first-generation students, helping them reach their goals of degree attainment (or otherwise!).

In chapter two, I will review the literature concerning first-generation students and their experiences on campus.  In chapter three, I will explain the methodology of this case study, including interview protocols and data validation techniques. The fourth chapter will

contain the themes that emerged from the interviews with my participants. These themes include elements of the challenges that my participants faced, as well as the people and resources that helped them through their first year of college. In chapter five, I will discuss the research findings and correlations to current literature and practice. Also included is a discussion of how this research can affect future practice in higher education.

**Chapter 2**

**Literature Review**

> First-generation students are by no means a homogenous group; rather, their educational journeys represent an intricate juncture of place, aspiration, and access to American higher education. These students have complex identities, making them hard to pigeonhole. They are more often than not students of color, immigrants, and they come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. They all do not have the same story, but aspects of their narratives weave together to form a pattern reflecting both the richness they bring to campuses and the obstacles they encounter in academia. (Jehangir, 2010a, p. 2)

**The Uphill Battle**

What does it mean to be a first-generation student on campus? What are the experiences they have? First-generation students face an uphill battle in college completion. "The isolation of first-generation college students is typified by a limited understanding of the collegiate environment and its expectations" (Bui, 2002, as cited in Jehangir, 2009, p. 39). This isolation results from the absence of parents, guardians, or other significant family members who can provide them with the support and knowledge that would be helpful to them in preparing for and getting through college. Simply put, First-generation students come to college campuses across the country with little knowledge of the college process and little support or understanding from parents or guardians.

**Parental Knowledge**

First-generation students are in "uncharted territory that no one in their family has experienced" (Reid & Moore III, 2008, p. 259). Reid and Moore III (2008) defined ways in which first-generations students are different than their peers who have college-attending parents. These differences leave first-generation students at a disadvantage. First, students wishing to attend college must apply to colleges without help from their parents, as their

parents do not know about the application process. Students whose parents have a firsthand knowledge of college can better inform and assist their children through the process. "On the other hand, parents of first-generation students are less likely to have the know-how to navigate their children through the complex processes of college applications and choice, and they may also have a limited understanding of how to acquire financial resources for college (Jehangir, 2010a, p. 22).

Due to this limited knowledge, some first-generation students report feeling less supported by their parents than their non-first generation counterparts. "This lack of support is primarily because first-generation parents know so little about college themselves, and that despite intentions to be supportive, these parents do not have the resources or insights about college to offer support that could be useful" (Jehangir, 2010a, p. 23).

The lack of insight certainly stems from parents of first-generation students not attending college, thus having limited understanding of the collegiate experience. This lack of understanding can sometimes be compounded by lack of access to other informational sources due to language barriers and limited resources (Engle, Bermeo, O'Brien, 2006).

**Academic Unpreparedness**

A difference between first-generation students and their counterparts with college-educated parents is that first-generation students and their parents may not comprehend the necessity of taking rigorous coursework in high school to prepare for the challenging work that lies ahead in college. Awareness notwithstanding, first-generation students are simply less likely to have access to the rigorous course work that could better prepare them for college: "The likelihood that first-generation students will take college-

preparatory courses is limited by a lack of availability of such courses, as well as a lack of encouragement, particularly from parents" (Engle, Bermeo, O'Brien, 20006, p. 15) This lack of content can manifest itself in anxiety about managing the academic challenges of college. "First-generation students, particularly students of color, often question whether they can manage the academic demands of college, and because of this, enter higher education filled with self-doubt" (Rendon, 1992, as cited in Jehangir, 2010a, p. 26). All told, first-generation students face an uphill battle when it comes to the academic challenges of college: "First-generation students come into college less academically prepared than their second-generation peers. They are also less practiced at time management and study skills" (p. 37).

**Reasons for Attending**

First-generation students may often choose colleges for reasons other than good fit, leading to the student's departure from college without obtaining a degree. The different personality traits of first-generation students, such as, "differences in self-esteem and social acceptance" (Reid & Moore III, 2008, p. 242), coupled with a first-generation student's tendency to live at home and work during school (therefore limiting the amount of time spent on campus) put first-generation students at a disadvantage when working toward degree completion. First-generation students who are in need of the co-curricular experiences that foster success in college are the students who "are least available to participate in these activities, given their competing life roles" (Jehangir, 2010a, p. 37).

It is important to note that these obstacles, be they academic, or cultural, or even financial, do not disappear once the first-generation student is admitted to campus and arrives for class (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012, p. 269)

**Experience on Campus**

Ishitani (2003) found that the risk for "departure in the first year was 71 percent higher for first-generation students" (p. 444).  To view it another way: 26 percent of first-generation college students do not persist into their second year, versus 7 percent of non-first generation students leaving college in the same time frame (Jehangir, 2010b) The successful transition into the second year of college is clearly an important step toward degree completion.

In comparison to other students, "first-generation college students express greater fear of failing in college, worry more about financial aid, and feel they have to put more time into studying" (Bui, 2002). First-generation college students can feel as if they do not fit on their college campus (Jehangir, 2010b).

This lack of fit can be influenced by many factors: in comparison with their peers, first-generation students took "fewer first-year credit hours, took fewer humanities and fine arts courses, studied fewer hours and worked more hours per week, were less likely to participate in an honors program" (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, Terenzini, 2004, p. 251) and had skeptical views of their faculty's concerns about students.

Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that first-generation and low-income students are at a higher risk of failing to graduate from college, even when taking demographics, enrollment characteristics, and academic preparation into consideration (p. 2). "This suggests that the problem is as much the result of the experiences these students have *during* college as it is attributable to the experiences they have *before* they enroll" (p. 2, emphasis in original). To this end, first-generation and low-income students are less likely to engage in those experiences that help create success in college: academic experiences

such as study groups, faculty and peer interaction, as well as social experiences through extracurricular activities.

First-generation students decide to put off involvement in such experiences until they have "their academic lives under control" (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, Jalomo, 1994, p. 64). This ultimately works against these students, as "first-generation students actually derive more benefit from their involvement in such activities" (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 21)

Financial concerns for students, oft cited in research as an important reason for departure from college (Seidman, 2012), can play a large part in first-generation students' college experience. "First-generation students who were also ethnic minorities expressed concern over financial pressures more often," (Jehangir, 2010a, p. 19) due in part to their higher likelihood of working full or part time during college.

**Socialization**

Students who contact and interact with faculty on campus have higher academic attainment across the board (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 417). In the scope of this study, persistence and degree attainment are the most relevant of these. The effect of these interactions on students has two areas:

> One is the socialization of students to the normative values and attitudes of the academy. The second is the bond between student and institution that appears to be facilitated and promoted by positive interaction with faculty members as well as with peers. (p. 417)

The discussion about the "normative" values of the academy is an interesting one that will be covered in the social reproduction framework area of this literature review. However, it is clear that interaction with faculty is important to student persistence.

In the same way, student interaction with peers is one of the big sources of influence, growth and development. In addition, peer interaction and influence is "a statistically significant and positive in students' persistence decisions" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 418).

First-generation students are less likely than their peers to benefit from the socialization opportunities on campus, as they are less likely to engage in them. "Due largely to a lack of resources, first-generation students are...more likely to live and work off campus and to take classes part-time while working full time, which limits the amount of time they spend on campus" (Engle, Bermeo, O'Brien, 2006, p. 17).

This limited time on campus out of necessity negatively affects the experience of first-generation students, as they are less likely to make good friends on campus and to get involved in clubs and organizations. Here again we see the isolation that is created for first-generation students in comparison to their peers: "Whereas finding a way to become acculturated into and mange the challenges of college is very important for first-generation students, acculturation tends to be a given for second-generation students" (Pike & Kuh, 2005, p. 2770)

In their study of first-generation students' experiences in comparison to second-generation college students (those students who had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree), Pike and Kuh (2005) suggested that first-generation students may be less engaged because they do not understand the importance of engagement and/or how to do get engaged on their campus. Because of their lack of knowledge about campus culture, and/or their lack of experience with what happens on campus or role models who can show them the importance and benefits of campus engagement, first-generation students do not

connect and engage on campus like second-generation students do. This issue brings forth, once again, the issues that arise from parents' lack of helpful knowledge about college.

**Social Reproduction**

The myriad challenges that first-generation students can encounter in their collegiate journey are real. To add to these issues, institutions of higher education are not always structured to help students of varying backgrounds (like first-generation students) succeed. "Our role, then, is to find ways to bring these facets of first-generation students into their awareness as strengths and to consider ways in which classrooms and campuses can draw on these strengths in the construction of knowledge and community" (Jehangir, 2010, p. 27).

Jehangir (2010a) argued that we must find those strengths of our first-generation students and find out how we can draw on them for the good of the student and the good of the institution.

In order to encapsulate the experience of first-generation students in a meaningful way, I will use Bourdieu's framework of social reproduction, an extension of his idea of cultural capital. The notion of cultural capital was developed by Bourdieu "as a partial explanation for the less tangible or less immediately visible inequalities" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 5) that result from having or not having "culturally relevant skills, abilities, tastes, preferences or norms" (p. 5).

A person could use this "capital," the knowledge, skills, abilities, tastes, and preferences they have for "social rewards such as acceptance, recognition, inclusion or even social mobility" (p. 5)

Cultural capital can be acquired through two channels, through one's family origins, and through education. The cultural capital by way of family origins helps perpetuate class and lifestyle through generations. Cultural capital can be acquired by formal education, but cultural capital solely by means of education is more difficult to acquire (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). So then, those with means to cultural capital via family *and* education stand to be privileged and retain such privilege.

Winkle-Wagner (2010) explains Bourdieu's cultural capital in step with notions of "field and habitus" (p. 7). The field is the space where particular cultural capital has value. Many fields can exist, and some capital may only function within one of many fields. "In educational settings, this argument implies that although all students may come in with 'cultural capital,' only certain students will be able to exchange this cultural capital for something of value (such as recognition of their abilities or grades)" (p.8)

Habitus is defined by Winkle-Wagner (2010) as "the series of dispositions that one has internalized and that one will employ" (p. 8). These are the dispositions that one recognizes as being useful in a certain social setting, or field.

So why do first-generation students fail to move on or complete college degrees in higher numbers than their counterparts? Bourdieu's framework of social reproduction explains to us that first-generation students have a " field (social context), cultural capital (culturally relevant skills, knowledge, abilities), and habitus (sets of dispositions, these lead to the actions people see as available)" (Winkle-Wagner, 2012, personal communication) that is not valued, or at least not perceived to be valued, by higher education. First-generation students may not necessarily have the "highbrow" cultural capital that non-first-generation students might. The interpretation of cultural capital as being synonymous

with highbrow cultural activities and tastes (property of those in the elite group of society) started with Dimaggio (1982) and was perpetuated through the 1980s and 1990s (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 35).

It is important to note that this "highbrow" definition of cultural capital within the social reproduction framework is not *the* definition of cultural capital, but rather one type. First-generation students have a level of cultural capital all their own. It is here where the gap exists. This cultural capital that first-generation students have gained in their life is not valued or communicated to be valued in a higher education setting. Tinto (1975) discussed how the academic system rewards students who have successfully integrated into said system. If students do not have the cultural capital of the dominant group, they may find themselves at a disadvantage: "If a student's values and objectives are different than that of the academic system where he finds himself, his learned behavior in the classroom may not be recognized as valuable and go unrewarded" (Irby, 2012, p. 31).

This study focused on those men who have persisted into their second year of college. These men, despite their "lack" of highbrow cultural capital (the cultural capital of the dominant class in higher education) have persisted into their second year. Using the social reproduction model as a framework, I hoped to examine what elements of their habitus, field, and cultural capital have helped them to continue work toward their undergraduate degree. This is Jehangir's (2010b) call, to bring the lived experience of first-generation students into the light so that higher education can not only value it, but learn how to benefit from it. Rather than forcing first-generation students to learn how to be a successful college student, the burden should be on the institution to be more adaptive to

students' ways of learning and being (Tierney, 1999, Winkle-Wagner, 2010). 'We

must…recognize that some of the best resources are within them" (Jehangir, 2010b, p. 550)

**Severing Ties**

Tinto's (1993) model of student persistence is an example of how educational

institutions can value cultural capital of the dominant group over the cultural capital of the

non-dominant groups (like first-generation students). Tinto "suggests that students who

integrate academically and socially into college are more likely to persist through to

graduation and that the ability to make the transition successfully is, in many ways,

predicated on their ability to separate themselves from prior relationships" (Winkle-

Wagner, 2009, p. 3). Tinto's theory is one of the most influential in higher education and is

a clear parallel to the social reproduction framework's point that institutions expect

students to adapt to them, rather than the other way around.

Critiques of and countering research against Tinto's theory suggests that student

persistence can actually be encouraged while remaining connected to their home cultures.

Some research suggests that persistence of "Asian, Asian Indian, Hispanic, and Black

students was…positively influenced by familial attachment" (Winkle-Wagner, 2009, p. 4)

Winkle-Wagner's (2009) study explored why African American women on campus

struggled with family relationships against their sense of campus community. The decision

for these students to sever ties or not was influenced by the support they felt from their

family and community groups, while simultaneously experiencing a "crushing pressure" (p.

21) from these same groups to perform at a high level in the collegiate setting. The

pressure was sometimes so much that students decided to sever ties as a means of self-

preservation.

Winkle-Wagner's (2009) study indicates that the success of students and the decision to sever ties with family or not is a complex issue, with equally well-developed bodies of literature on either side, showing that family ties can be an important element of student success at college, but can also be a challenge that students must overcome.

**Conclusion**

The literature on first-generation students is expanding. While the group itself is heterogeneous, there are factors that can multiply the challenge of the already uphill battle of higher education. Overall lack of preparedness can hinder first-generation students' chances of persisting through college and obtaining a degree.  Researchers have found this lack of preparedness can be attributed to the lack of knowledge first-generation students have about college and what it involves, stemming from the fact that the parents of first-generation students simply have not experienced college.

First-generation students can also enter college less academically prepared than their peers. They may not have taken (or could not take) the academically rigorous courses to prepare them for collegiate coursework. Their rationale for college choice and attendance can be affected by reasons other than good fit, and their experience on campus can be adversely affected by their need to work and/or live at home.

What is lacking in the research is firsthand accounts from first-generation students themselves. To date, there is little research that accurately captures the experience as described by the student. This study sought to address this gap by interviewing students and using their words to describe the first year as they experienced.

Utilizing the social reproduction framework of Bourdieu, this study examined the skills of a sample of such successful students, bringing their experience to light. This study

provided another opportunity to hear the experiences of successfully persistent first-generation college men in their own voice.

**Chapter 3**

**Methodology**

**Introduction**

The literature highlights the challenges that first-generation students face. They are many, and they can be significant for many students. These challenges are typified by characteristics of first-generation students and their preparation for college (or lack thereof). This research project aimed to let students themselves identify their challenges. Knowing the many "high-risk" attributes of first-generation students can be helpful to a point, and institutions can use such information for good in terms of programming and interventions. On the other hand, hearing from first-generation students who are currently living the experiences of college lets us know what first-generation students themselves think are the challenges they experience. In turn, we can use this information to provide first-generation students with the assistance and programming they want and need, rather than the assistance and programming we think they want or need.

**Research Questions**

The central research question in this study was: "What experiences do first-generation male college students describe as influential to their persistence into their second year of college?" Subquestions were used to get at issues on both sides of persistence, including the challenges and supports they encountered during their first year. Subquestions included:

- How do first-generation college males identify challenges they faced during your first year at college?

- Where do first-generation college males find support to help them work through their academic challenges?

- How do first-generation college males describe their decision to return to their second year of college?

**Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

The purpose of this study is to explore the many different facets of campus life, and life in general, that a first-generation male student finds valuable in helping them persist into their second year of college. Examples could include campus resources, friends, social groups, and many others. Size and scale of the choices and possible answers to this question make quantitative methodology difficult. To better understand the research question, I hoped to learn from and understand the participants' perspectives on why they persisted into their second year in college. As a researcher, I want to understand "*the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13, emphasis in original). This study, while theoretically based, will not set out to test or extend any theory. Rather, I am interested in "insight, discovery and interpretation," (p. 42) that will be influenced by the theoretical framework I am using. This insight will attempt to be "richly descriptive" (p. 16) to convey the challenges and successes of first-generation college males.

**Rationale for Case Study Research**

This study explores the experiences of persistent first-generation college males: those who have moved on from their freshman year into their sophomore year at the same institution. This group is a bounded group of people. The population from which the

participants were selected is a specific student group on Downtown University's campus with a limited number of students from which to select. The group is also bounded by their successful persistence. This study is a case of those first generation male college students who have persisted into their second year, an important step toward degree completion.

I am interested in finding out "how" and "why" first-generation college males persist from their first year into their second year. Case study research has a distinct advantage in answering these questions (Yin, 2008, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 44). The case study method is used as a "means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding" (p. 50). This explanation of case study research fits this study of first-generation college males quite well. We already know that first-generation students as a group can be very heterogeneous. Even with students from the same institution, the variables of what these students identified as challenges and supports on a singular campus were varied.

**Researcher Position**

As a third-generation college graduate, my experience will differ from the participants in the study. An important characteristic of qualitative research is that I am the primary research instrument for collecting data and for analyzing data (Merriam, 2009). My position as a person of privilege who had always assumed college attendance will present a challenge in both collecting and interpreting the data correctly. Using case study research will allow me to "get as close to the subject of interest as [he] possibly can" (Bromley, 1986, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 46), in order to understand the experiences of the participants.

**Epistemological Approach**

  I have approached this study through constructivist eyes. As stated previously, I want to understand the meanings that *others* have constructed. Interpretations and meanings collected from interviews with each participant vary in this study, as each construct them differently. I hope to develop themes as they emerge of "how" and "why" from these multiple realities.

**Participants**

  The participants from this study are first-generation male students who have persisted into the second year. Participants were nominated by faculty and staff at Downtown University. The participants are a purposeful sample, as they best "illuminate the questions under study" with their "information-rich" responses (Patton, 2002, p. 230). This sample also tended toward what Creswell (2013) called "purposeful maximal sampling" (p. 100) in that the sample showed different sides of the issue. Using the contact information provided by nominators, I sent recruitment emails to all males nominated.

  Downtown University does not keep data to track all students who are considered first-generation. Though students can self-identify for purposes such as Federal TRIO programs, this data is not university-wide. Utilizing the personal relationships that exist between faculty and staff and their students on campus will help overcome this lack of uniform data, and will hopefully present a greater reason for participants to agree to be a part of the study.

  Recruiting participants from a variety of areas on campus helps me present this case from diverse perspectives, fully describing the case from multiple viewpoints (Creswell, 2013).

As participants volunteered, snowball-recruiting (Patton, 2002, p. 237) efforts were encouraged for greater data collection. Using peers to recruit one another gives far more legitimacy to the study in the eyes of the participants than me sending out email after email (though I did that, as well).

**Research Site**

The research site for this study is Downtown University. Because the intended method of data collection is not affected by nor centered on a specific location within the institution, the institution as a whole will be considered the site. In addition, the experiences of the student include aspects of the entire institution, further justifying the entire institution as the research site.

Downtown University is a land-grant research institution in the Midwest with approximately 25,000 students, including both graduate and undergraduate students. Downtown University is made up of predominately (80%) white students. 2008 data of first time, full time students indicated the retention rate from the first to second year to be 83.9 percent. In 2010, this university had a six year graduation rate of 60.9 percent for its entire student body. Approximately one-third of Downtown University students identify as first-generation. Downtown University has three missions: teaching, research, and service.

To ensure that my participants are comfortable and willing to share their experiences, I let them select the interview site if they preferred. I encouraged them to select an area that was conducive to conversation, but, ultimately, the choice of site was each participant's to make.

**Data**

  Data collection was based primarily on individual interviews. DeMarrais (2004) defines an interview as a "process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study (p. 55, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 87). Interviewing was utilized because I want to understand the participants' feelings and their interpretation of the world around them (Merriam, 2009, p. 88).  The participants were asked to reflect upon their first year of college, explaining specific challenges they encountered, anyone or anything that helped them through these challenges, and their decision to come back to college. Because these events and experiences are past events, interviewing the participants was the only logical way to learn about these experiences. (p. 88).

  Nomination efforts and snowball-recruiting efforts yielded six participants. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to one hour, with four guiding research questions and many subquestions under each guiding question.

  I completed all participant interviews January of the student's second academic year. While I believe that earlier interviews may have captured more in-depth details about the first year, the timing of the interviews could also be viewed as advantageous. The time to reflect on the experience as a freshman, in conjunction with the ability to compare it to a sophomore experience, allowed the participants to provide thoughtful answers to my questions. Interviews were transcribed and returned to the participant to check for internal validity through member checks (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). Interviews, transcriptions, and accuracy checks were completed by February of 2013.

I followed a semi-structured protocol (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). As mentioned previously, I wanted to collect data about how the participants construct and describe their experience, a constructivist view. Using more open-ended questions allowed the participants to fully describe their experience. I intended to collect specific information as part of the interview, with the participant guiding the direction within that topic. The semi-structured protocol allowed me, as the researcher, to "respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 90).

**Peaks and Valleys Timeline**

Another form of data I collected was a "peaks and valleys" timeline. Prior to each interview, I asked the participants to draw, on a provided sheet, their first year in a linear fashion, with points of perceived success or positive general emotion being represented by the peaks of mountains and the points of perceived challenge and stress being represented by valleys between these mountains. This offered my participants another way to identify challenges that occurred in their first year of college. The visual for coming up out of valleys to reach the peaks was a visual to assist the participants in determining what helped them through and out of the valleys they encountered during their first year; a point that facilitated discussion within guiding question two of the interview protocol.

The simplicity of the technique allowed participants to highlight the most important highs and lows of their first academic year, and function as another form of data to assist me in validating my findings via triangulation.

The "peaks and valleys" timeline sent to participants prior to the interview took an estimated 30 to 60 minutes for the participants to complete. The full completion of this

document, while not necessary to complete the interview portion, was immensely helpful in discussion prompts.

Finally, in addition to transcribed interviews and the "peaks and valleys" timeline that each participant will complete, I took field notes when appropriate during the interviews, as well as after the interviews. These field notes helped me reflect on the interviews, giving me points of reference as I worked to analyze the data. I took notes during the interviews to record my reactions to what is being said, or to make note of something I find important (Merriam, 2009, p. 109). I also took few minutes after each interview to jot down some reflection notes. This process of memoing allowed me to "monitor the process of data collection as well as being to analyze the information itself" (p. 110). The field notes taken during and memos after the interviews were another way I employed data triangulation, to ensure validity of my findings.

**Interview Protocol**

The following questions constituted the semi-structured interview protocol, with three guiding questions and the subquestions under each guiding question.

1) What were your expectations of the first year of college?

   a. Describe a time when those expectations were met.

   b. Describe at time when those expectations were not met.

   c. What was the most surprising thing about your first year of college?

2) Tell me about a challenge you faced in your first year of college.

   a. What about this challenge stands out to you?

   b. Who did you look to for support?

   c. When did you know the challenge had been overcome?

3) Tell me about a typical afternoon and evening when you get done with class.

    a. Describe an instance you spent time with classmates.

    b. Describe an instance you spent time with friends.

    c. Describe an instance you spent time meeting with an advisor.

    d. Describe an instance you studied in a group setting.

    e. Describe a time you met with a tutor.

    f. Describe a time you visited a resource center like the Math Resource Center.

4) How did you know you were going to come back to college for your sophomore year?

**Data Analysis**

In order to understand the themes that emerged from the data, I had to code and categorize the data I collected, starting with the first interview transcript. Before commencing any analysis, I first read the transcript in its entirety. Using the note-taking feature of Microsoft word, I began to code the data using open coding. Open coding in the first round of data analysis was useful, as I was unsure of what the data could reveal, and I was "open to anything possible" (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). The codes from this analysis, word groupings of three to seven words, were added to a master list to be further categorized. I went go back over all the notes of the transcript and grouped the codes that go together, placing them within categories, which I have created based on the coded data. These categories are known as axial codes. "Axial coding was developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) specifically for grounded theory analysis but is now a technique sometimes employed with other qualitative approaches" (Babchuk, 2013, personal communication). Axial codes that I determined should meet certain criteria, according to Merriam (2009):

"Categories should be responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent" (pp. 185-6).

When this second stage of categorization into axial codes was completed for the first transcript, I drafted a memo to myself, concerning the initial axial codes I found. This concise memo helped remind me what axial codes are found in the transcript when I returned to it for further review.

After open coding the first, transcript, I moved on to the next transcript. After reading the transcript through, I again utilized open coding in order to pull out any information that may be useful in answering my research questions (Merriam, 2009, p. 176).

The three to seven word codes from this transcript were categorized into axial codes by what seems to fit together based on content of the codes. Following the open coding of the second transcript, I formulated a memo concerning the categories, as I did for the first interview transcript. Upon completion of this memo, I returned back to the first transcript, to revisit my open codes, and to see if any other data stood out. In the second review I searched for data that I may have overlooked in the first review, as well as data that could be coded in other ways.

While time consuming, I revisited each previous interview transcript after analyzing a new interview transcript, so I could view the data with a different perspective each time I reviewed it. This process was repeated until all transcripts were open coded and axial coded.

Following the open coding and axial coding of that data in each interview transcript, I began the process of compiling those axial codes that seem to be emerging "across more

than one interview" (Merriam, 2009, p. 182). At the direction of my graduate adviser, the

process of compiling axial codes from open codes was a very analog process. Including each

open code on a strip of paper (color-coded by interview), I began to compile those open

codes that fit logically together.  These codes that emerged across the data were the themes

of my data. I then "reduce[d] and combine[d] them into the five or six themes that I... use[d]

in the end to write my narrative" (Cresswell, 2007, p. 152, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p.

187).

After I reduced and combined my codes into themes for reporting, I viewed the

emerging data using the social reproduction framework as explained in the literature

review. The themes that applied to first-generation students' field, habitus, and cultural

capital fit well into the broader idea that the experiences of first-generation students are

valuable and should be brought into the fold of higher education.

So while the social reproduction framework did not affect the thematic elements

that emerged from the data, the themes were viewed in the light of the social reproduction

framework to see what themes, if any, fit within that scope.

**Data Validation**

In order to ensure the data I have collected is credible and trustworthy, I

implemented validation techniques throughout the research process.

The first validation technique was for internal validity. I wanted to ensure that my

findings were congruent with my participants' reality (Merriam, 2009, p. 211). Because I

am the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, I may have altered the data in

some way through my interpretation (Ratcliffe, 1983). Through member checks (Merriam,

2009, p. 217), I asked for feedback from participants on what themes I was seeing emerge

from the data. I provided the participants with the raw transcripts to verify the transcription was accurate. I requested that participants return the raw transcripts with any corrections within two weeks of their reception of the transcript. Minimal corrections and additions were made through participants checking the transcripts.

As analysis progressed, I have also involved "key informants" (Yin, 2009, p. 41) [selected from my participants] to review the analysis at stages within the data analysis. "This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 111).

Another validation technique I have used to ensure credibility of my analysis was peer examination (Merriam, 2009, p. 220). I asked a member of my graduate program cohort to open code selected samples from each of my raw interview transcripts, to see if the information I deemed important within the data was also what my peer would deem important. This graduate program cohort consists of master's students working toward their degrees in Educational Administration. Similar training in open coding styles allowed me to see if my peer agreed with me concerning what data emerged for them as "important".  I also employed an external auditor, a qualitative methodologist who was not a member of my thesis committee but provided input into the research design at various points throughout this entire research process.

As mentioned previously, I intended on collecting data until the data became saturated. This strategy promotes validity in that it indicates I have spent adequate time engaging in data collection (Merriam, 2009, p. 229).

To fully capture the experience of my participants in the study, I have attempted to use rich, thick description (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). This "highly descript, detailed presentation of the findings of the study…with adequate evidence" (p. 227) allows for greater understanding of the participants' points of view.

Because I collected multiple sources of data in my research through the "peaks and valleys" timeline and interviews with participants, I made use of triangulation (Merriam, 2009, p. 229). Yin (2009) calls this validation technique of using multiple sources of evidence "construct validity" (p. 41).

**Limitations**

Case study research has some implied limitations. The first is the idea of generalizability. "As a general rule, qualitative researchers are reluctant to generalize from one case to another because the contexts of the case differ" (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). While this is true, I feel the experience of these first-generation college men is important and can inform future discussions about first-generation college students. A big inspiration for this study was a colleague and friend who also found it necessary to study the personal strengths of her students. Her words resonate with me and with this study: "I did not want a generalized view…I wanted to know specifically what strengths helped my research participants succeed on their particular campus and how these strengths were realized and cultivated on their particular campus" (Irby, 2012, p. 48).

The sample size of this research study could also be viewed as a limitation. My goal was to yield enough participants through recruiting efforts so that the data would be saturated or redundant (Merriam, 2009). In the findings chapter of this study, it is clear that some data did reach saturation. This, of course, implies, that some did not. In such

cases, the unique examples presented were important enough for the participants to bring them to light, so I feel the need to do the same.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the methods and rationale behind the methods used in this case study. The research participants and site were explained, as were the data collection, data analysis, and data validation methods. The peaks and valleys timeline discussed in this chapter will also receive some treatment in the subsequent chapters. In chapter four, the findings of this research are reported. Important themes were identified from the stories of first-generation male college student participants, as they discussed the challenges and supports of their first year of college.

**Chapter 4**

**Findings**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to understand the challenges that first-generation college males identify within their first year of college, and in turn, the supports that they used to navigate those challenges to persist in college. Through interviews lasting between 20 and 60 minutes, participants discussed their expectations of college, the challenges they faced, and their decision to return to college for their second year. This study hoped to add to the literature about first-generation students, knowing that first-generation students are a very heterogeneous group. This chapter discusses the themes and subthemes of the research that emerged from the interviews with the participants

**Participants**

The students interviewed for this study were first-generation college males who are currently in their second academic year at Downtown University. The students came from a variety of areas:

Anthony is a business major from a mid-sized city in Nebraska. His two older siblings attended college but did complete college. Anthony said his drive to succeed in college comes from his parents.

Trevor is a nutrition, health, and exercise science major from another mid-sized city in Nebraska. With two older siblings who went to college, Trevor had some idea of what college would have in store for him, but still found it challenging.

Otto is a supply chain management and human resources management double major from a mid-sized city in Minnesota. Otto has an older brother who graduated from

college. Otto reported that going through the college experience has helped him grow up and be his own self.

Aaron is a mechanical engineering major from a small town in western Nebraska. He has three older brothers who continue to influence him and his college experience. He and his brothers were raised by a single mother. Aaron identified his mother as a source of inspiration, and his brothers as big sources of support.

Ernesto is an accounting major from a small to mid-sized town in Nebraska. An only child, Ernesto found sources of support from his extended family and close family friends. His parents had high expectations of him, but without their own collegiate experience, could not necessarily give him the support he needed or sought.

Steven is a business administration major from a small town in northern Nebraska. Steven's academic potential led many to suggest he attend a four-year university, following in his sister's footsteps. The transition from small-town life to city life has been a challenge for him. He continues to find new areas of support as he hones in on his life direction.

**Research Themes and Subthemes**

After analyzing the interviews conducted with the six participants, five themes emerged. Within these five themes, twelve subthemes became clear. These themes and subthemes all revolve around the first year experience of these men. As first-generation college students, their experiences in the first year can and do differ from their non-first generation counterparts. The themes are summarized and divided in the table below.

## Table 1.1 Research Themes and Subthemes

***Theme 1: Challenges Faced on Campus***
The battle to meet the expectations of a successful college student are many, but participants focused on two significant subthemes.

*Subtheme: Challenges in the Academic Arena*
Participants described the academic challenges of the first year of college as stressful and eye-opening

*Subtheme: Uncertainty in Life and Direction*
The uncertainty that surrounded participants' first year created additional challenge for participants

***Theme 2: Utilizing Campus Resources***
Participants described many people and places that assisted them through their first year

*Subtheme: People on Campus*
Administrators and staff who cared about and invested in the participants were a huge help to participants through their first year

*Subtheme: Spaces on Campus*
In addition to invested individuals, spaces on campus were an influence on participants' persistence

***Theme 3: Keeping the Connection to Family and Home Life***
Participants had to negotiate the ties they kept with their family while in college

*Subtheme: Support from Family and Home Life*
Participants received positive support from many family members that influenced their persistence in college

*Subtheme: Challenge from Family and Home Life*
Lack of knowledge about the collegiate experience and/or conflicting advice presented a challenge to participants

***Theme 4: Shared Experience***
All participants highlighted both the stress and importance of the relationships they formed on campus

*Subtheme: Waiting for Shared Experience*
Participants were often worried about the social transition to campus, hoping that they would make connections, but were unsure of how to do so

*Subtheme: Positive Shared Experience*
Participants related the many positive relationships they developed in their first year. Many of these relationships were instrumental in their persistence.

***Theme 5: Attributes That Influence Persistence***
Participants regularly described their past life experiences as influential in making it to their second year of college

*Subtheme: Knowing how to overcome and learn from a challenge*
The upbringing and life experience before and during college showed these men how to deal with challenges they faced and how to learn from those challenges
*Subtheme: Self-Drive and Self-Determination*
Beyond all other sources of support, these men discussed their personal motivations about college, including how and why they persisted into their second year

**Theme 1:  Challenges faced on campus.**

The focus of this study was to examine the challenges that first-generation college men *themselves* identified as being a challenge during their first year. Every participant indicated the academic challenge of college as one of their leading challenges. In addition to the stresses of academia, participants also mentioned the uncertainty of their collegiate direction as a challenge throughout their first year.

***Subtheme: Challenges in the academic arena:*** Stress in anticipation of the challenge of school, as well as the eye-opening experience of just what it took to be academically successful in college were items of challenge that every participant brought forth.

Steven found the academic expectations of college to be challenging, even when he reported being warned about the challenges that academic in college would present: The

general education courses that he was required to take at Downtown University created

difficulties:

> Some classes I really wasn't interested in, it was hard to get good grades. When I
> registered for classes it was like the last, one of the last weeks to register for classes,
> and I got stuck in an anthropology class, which I had no interest in. I absolutely
> hated the teacher, and it was awful…

To add to Steven's difficulty, the chance to ask questions and find the answers posed

a problem, one he had not faced before in his small town:

> Like if you have questions about anything it's really hard to get in touch with
> anyone, everyone's busy, their office closes at four, you have to make an
> appointment, I get really frustrated with that. I don't know. It seems like where I
> come from, you just had everybody's number; you could just call them anytime and
> talk to them. You knew everyone, like where to go, who to talk to.

Anthony spoke of the eye-opening experience of the work that collegiate academics

required compared to the relatively little work he had to do in high school. Getting used to

spending time on studies and "how hard you actually have to study" was a "shocker" for

him. The low points, or valleys, of Anthony first year were predominantly times when he

was studying for midterm and final exams.

Trevor's experience in academia mirrored that of Anthony. Having to form better

study habits was a challenge for Trevor, as, like Anthony, he reported not studying very

much in high school. For Trevor, the overall load of classes surprised him; it was a "wake-

up call": "Even the easy classes you had to do at least some kind of work." Trevor's

challenge of developing better study habits was pushed by his experience in an

introductory level chemistry course:

> Just, like you learn how to study. Everyone is different, but putting in a little bit of
> time over… The teachers always recommend it and I never really followed it during
> CHEM 109, I always did the study the week of the test, and just cram. And did pretty
> crappy on some CHEM 109 tests, and then once I started kind of spacing it out and

tried to keep with the stuff every week I started doing a lot better in CHEM 109 later and following into CHEM 110 and all my other harder classes. Just studying over time I think is a lot more beneficial way than cramming.

Trevor also reported the low points of his semester were the stressful times of increased studying. "The weeks where you have so much stuff to do and you cram and you can't find time to have a ton of fun or hang out with your friends, those always suck." Trevor also expressed the worry of not knowing what his schedule is like at the beginning of each semester.

Otto's experience with academics was a bit different from the others. Coming to college was a big step for him, but his academic challenges in high school led him to be less than prepared for what collegiate academics had in store, as the classes he chose to take were "going to suck, cuz they were actually really hard." Otto reported that his courses were both challenging and time-consuming, and his challenge arose from balancing the fun part of college with the academic part of college:

> I guess the most surprising thing would be getting hit with actually scheduling yourself and finding your own time to do your work studying and still be able to go out and be with your friends, and all that...doing what you want, but really, I guess scheduling was the most surprising thing for me, cuz I mean it was really something I wasn't really used to.

Like many others, Otto indicated that the valleys of his first year surrounded the academic rigors of college. The time spent studying, as well as the grades he earned during the time he was trying to find a balance between academics and social life came as a true surprise.

Similarly, both Ernesto and Aaron reported the academic challenges of their first year as difficult points in the semester, with finals week being a highlighted area of challenge for both. Aaron talked about the large load of his second semester week of finals:

I had four cumulative finals and they were all engineering classes. Some were prereqs and everything, but I don't know. I didn't really know how to handle that because they were all going to be in the same week. All these tests, over the whole semester of what I've learned and that was the most information I've ever got in a semester and I was just really worried

Aaron spoke about the rigor of college academics versus high school academics. His brothers, both of whom began at community colleges, tried to prepare him for what college life would be like, but even their advice didn't convey the magnitude of what he was about to experience:

I guess it was a lot more intense here, and learning how to be a college student as opposed to a high school student, and to think at a…on a different level or at a different level was just, I mean, it totally kind of blew my mind when it happened.

***Subtheme: Uncertainty in life and direction*** In addition to the shock of the academic expectations in college, the participants spoke about the challenge of the uncertainty of many things during their first year. Some of this uncertainty was a result of their status as first-generation college students. Even with siblings who had attended and/or graduated from college, participants felt the pressure of uncertainty throughout their first year.

Anthony summed up the uncertainty of his first year at college: "I didn't really have any expectations coming in…since I'd be the first to actually go to a big college, I didn't really have anybody to talk to about it."

For Otto and Steven, the uncertainty of what was expected of them created a challenge: Otto explained one of his low points in his first semester came from the worry about his first big assignment:

I guess a valley would be going down to the first big college assignment. So I really didn't know what to expect, didn't know how like the college teachers graded anything, so that was a real worry for me, I guess.

Steven 's initial experience with his professors was much the same, with the uncertainty of their preferences being a concern for him:

> You go in and you don't know what to expect, like on your first paper it's really hard to know what they are looking for, or like, if they tell you to know something, like you need to know the professor. You don't know if that means we're going to go over that in class and you should have reviewed it, or like, when you walk into class I'm going to hand you a blank sheet of paper and you need to write that down.

Steven's first year had a few areas of uncertainty. Much like Anthony, Steven was unsure of what to expect in coming to college. The change from a small town to a large city created stress for him. Having only ever visited the city where Downtown University is located, Steven was uncertain about if he would enjoy his college experience. Adding to his uncertainty, the choice of major in college was something he struggled with until very recently. "I wasn't really sure if business administration is quite what I wanted to do." The uncertainty for Steven went even farther than major choice:

> September-October was like, "Is this really what I want to do?" like, "Is this going to get me where I want to be?" Cuz I knew where I wanted to be, I just didn't know if this was the best route to get there or not.

Trevor also experienced uncertainty through the decision of choosing a major. Trevor indicated he felt like there was a lot of pressure to decide the major he was pursuing, even though he was not totally sure of his direction. This pressure came from the desire to not waste money and take classes he did not need:

> I've always been nutrition health and exercise, but I never knew what I wanted to do with it specifically. I decided, I think, like this summer. I just kind of looked through nutrition majors, what people do from this major and saw all these options and kind of just clicked on all of them, and read what they do and all that kind of stuff, and kind of just chose one. I felt like I needed to decide.

Uncertainty in choosing a major was also a challenge that Aaron faced in his first year; he was trying to figure out if he was "doing the right thing" with his area of study. Because of the difficulty of his course work, Aaron was uncertain of his major. He thought about changing to a different major, which he indicated as a challenge: "The difficulty of that semester of classes, just like, 'If it's this hard now, how on earth am I going to get through it later?'"

The challenges that these first-generation males faced were many and varied, but all fit within the idea of challenges on campus, whether the challenges were in the classroom or in the lives of the participants. The important point to note (and the point of the study) is that all of these men found support to persist into their second year. In most cases during the discussion, the participants talked about the supports they found without prompt from me. Though my protocol included questions about resources and supports, these men often responded to questions about their challenges and then went right in to how they overcame these challenges. This self-awareness of the challenge versus the support is one of the biggest reasons these men were successful.

**Theme 2: Utilizing campus resources**

In identifying the challenges they faced, the participants in my study then opened the door for me to ask them questions about who and what helped them through their first year of college. Using campus resources emerged as a big reason for these students' success in their first year.

***Subtheme: People on campus*** The men in this study highlighted relationships they formed on campus that helped them persist. Aaron spoke very highly of one campus administrator who was always looking to help him.

I guess it wasn't all on my own, I mean, it felt that way! But (laughs) there were always people I'd reach out to… And, I mean, Dr. Nunez has always been really helpful. And just, people like that, that are interested in what you're doing and just want to help you.

Aaron's relationship with Dr. Nunez actually yielded him his first on-campus job opportunity, something he still enjoys. Aaron attributes Dr. Nunez's intention of wanting to help as influential in his first year of college and beyond, as the actions of Dr. Nunez have helped Aaron to reflect on how he wants to be in his own life:

He always wants to help someone along the path of what he's doing. And that's just kind of amazing, because most people, I mean, even I'm this way, like I'm sometimes selfish with what I'm doing. You know, I don't want to bother with them, to help them out, even though I could along the way. Like I could study with someone else knowing that I know a little bit more than them, and that would probably turn into me giving them, you know, I guess what I know about the topic, or I could study on my own and get a lot more done. But from Dr. Nunez's perspective, it seems like he would never choose that option. He would always go into like help other people learn, before he would try to teach himself

Ernesto also had a connection on campus that was very influential in his persistence in college. Kirby, an admissions professional at Downtown University, was instrumental in Kirby's collegiate success. Kirby helped Ernesto through the application process and in acquiring financial aid, a big reason for Ernesto being able to attend college. Even after Kirby left Downtown University, he was a " a huge help" and voice of support for Ernesto:

He's like, "Well, how are you doing?" and I was like, "well I have a 3. 97." He even got surprised, he's like, "Dude, you are killing it! That's what we need!" He's like, "Keep the brown community, you know, keep them proud. Keep them in your work."

Ernesto also talked about a mentor he had through his scholarship program. This mentor introduced him to the Mexican American Student Association (MASA). Ernesto's introduction to MASA provided him with many connections that led to strong relationships. This area will be discussed in more detail in the theme of shared experience.

Trevor had many good things to say about his adviser. He related that he had an "awesome" relationship with his adviser. As mentioned in the previous section, Trevor did find challenge in his schedule at the beginning of each semester, as well as the pressure to decide his major. His adviser played a big part in easing those challenges:

> I always go in there and I just love talking to him, he was such a nice guy, and he always just made me feel so good. He's just like, "Oh no, you're doing great, you're on the right path, you got good grades, you got your credits done, you're…" Just like, basically, just boosted me up and telling me I'm doing a great job, just keeping doing what I'm doing. I always left there feeling so much better than when I went in.

An interesting side note for Trevor is that the adviser with which he had a strong relationship recently retired. He admitted the relationship with his new adviser is not as strong as it was with his first adviser. Even though he thought his new adviser was probably more knowledgeable in his area of study, she seemed busier and the connection is not a strong.

In response to academic challenges, Trevor also found support from his teaching assistant in chemistry, a course he mentioned specifically as challenging for him. Trevor's TA was like "a personal tutor" who also became a good friend, as Trevor went to office hours for chemistry.

**_Subtheme: Places on campus_** In addition to the office hours held by his Teaching Assistant, Trevor mentioned his use of the chemistry resource center, a place where he could get work done. Similarly, Steven mentioned the math resource center as a place of support for him in a course he found difficult, calculus. Steven mentioned gong to the math resource center "quite a bit".

Steven also talked about his introductory business course as being a helpful resource for him, helping him work through the challenge of not being able to find the answers and not being able to find people who could help him:

> I think that 101 class helped quite a bit. Just getting acquainted with the school and the business college... That class was like 15 people and you got to know some of them, and you got to meet an adviser, cuz I absolutely hated going to the advising office before.

As previously mentioned, Aaron's relationship with Dr. Nunez, a campus administrator, helped direct him to an on-campus job. This job involves helping students when they come in, a topic he then discussed as something he keeps in mind. This discussion bridges both the people on campus and the places on campus subthemes, as one led to the other, and vice versa.

**Theme 3: Keeping the connection to family and home life**

Each participant mentioned the influence of their family in their persistence to college. A large portion of the discussion revolved around how family members were supportive and helped the students persist. Interestingly, however, the participants each spoke to the difficulties that arose from family connections. Many times, the simple fact that their parents did not understand the magnitude and trials of college provided a challenge to the participants.

*__Subtheme: Challenge from family and home life__* Otto spoke to the difficulties that arise from being a first-generation college student. With his performance in high school, Otto's parents did not have extremely high expectations for him in college. They were happy that he was attending college, but without any college experience of their own, they could not provide the guidance that Otto thought other students were receiving:

> They weren't like, as supportive or anything. Cuz they really didn't know what to do, I guess, when it came down to that…It was a little, like I guess, disheartening a little, I guess cuz, like, the other kids I went to school with all had parents that ,like, graduated college and were really successful and all that. And then they're really getting support from the family and all that.

Ernesto had a similar experience with the support his parents could not offer him, as they had not attended college. He talked about it as a challenge during his first year:

> My parents not knowing, you know, what to do and stuff. Like, it was, I guess, pretty much me doing everything for myself. Like I felt that was kind of a challenge. Because, like I said, no idea, nobody could tell me… like kind of what to do…. like I would hear other kids, like you know, "Oh, my parents told me to do this," or you know, "Accommodate for this," or what not, for college. Like, I didn't have that.

His high performance in middle and high school gave his parents a skewed view of how important his high performance in college was:

> I'm not trying to say that they don't know, but they don't know the actual like, how like big, how important it is. They know it's important, cuz they, when they see that I'm in the newspaper, stuff like that, and people tell them about it, and they feel great, but they don't know like, exactly what it means, like what it means to me. Like how important it is…But like, coming in to college, they didn't know that it was that much harder than high school and middle school where I had done very well.

Aaron talked about the experience as a first-generation student versus those students who have parents with college degrees:

> The difference I think, between a first-generation student and a, you know, traditional student who their parents had degrees and everything, would probably be, um, I don't know. The knowledge of what things are going to be like ahead of time is really vague. I guess for me, I don't know if this is for everyone, but I kind of assume, if someone's not there who is from your immediate family, someone to give you advice, someone who you really value their opinion doesn't have advice on, you know, what it's going to be like… um, not having that, in total, would make it really hard to teach yourself how to deal with things

In addition to the "vague" knowledge of college, Aaron talked about his family's support. We will see in the next section that his family was, in fact, very important in his persistence into his second year of college. However, Aaron related how both his brothers

and his mother presented challenges when they thought they were being helpful. Aaron

was very thankful for his brothers being able to provide him with advice about college, but

as we saw in the first theme, he was still floored by the academic challenges that he

encountered in college. He said his experience was "a little bit different" from the advice

they gave him. Similarly, his mother tried to be helpful, but in Aaron's opinion, was not.

"My mom tells me, 'You know, if you don't like it down there, you can just come home, and

we'll still love you,' so that's not helpful"

Aaron spoke about how being so tied in to family life can make the adjustment to

college difficult:

> It just seems like students that come from a less-fortunate background, I don't know,
> maybe they just have a little more struggle to change the way they think and the
> way things are, and what they can accomplish.  Cuz maybe they're so tied into how
> it's always been that they don't know how to think in a different way.

Anthony feels pressure from his family and home life: "My parents put a lot of

pressure on me to finish school." His brothers' experiences in college also factor into the

pressure he feels: "That's one thing that drives me to do well in school… because they've

never had that from my two older siblings, where they maybe started, but they gave up,

and I don't want to be that person for them." Anthony also mentioned the feeling of

homesickness as a valley during his first semester. Similarly, Steven related the difficulty of

coming back to college after break: "Do we really gotta go with this 7 more times? It was

kind of discouraging."

Trevor mentioned in his peaks and valleys timeline experiencing some mixed

emotions when coming to college: "I had a lot of mixed feelings coming in I remember

driving myself down to Lincoln. And my parents didn't come down; I just drove myself. And it's kinda like, I don't know how to feel."

**Subtheme: Support from family and home life** In contrast to the challenges that family members presented during the first year of college, all the participants in the study also discussed the positive support they received from their family members and home life. Unwavering support and motivation were among some of the biggest influences to students' persistence.

Ernesto related positive experiences from his family and home life in relation to his persistence into his second year of college. He mentioned that even though they did not know everything about college and how important it was, his parents were supportive, no matter what:

> It makes me really happy that, I guess, my parents acknowledge and support me as much as they do, because they're like, they're what keeps me going cuz I mean, I don't have any brothers or sisters to rely on. I have a lot of family, but it's not... I don't think it's the same as like my parents, and how supportive and how they're always there, like no matter what.

Ernesto mentioned how his high performance in middle school and high school skewed his parents' perspective on his performance in college, but at the same time, they held him to high expectations. His father told him, "Keep it up if you can. We didn't do this, so...we're not expecting the world from you, but at the same time we are, because we know you can do it."

Others from Ernesto's family and home life supported him as well. His uncle, a college graduate, gave him constructive criticism about his stress levels that Ernesto says helped him mature. Ernesto also spoke at length about Kathy, a close family friend. Her college experience was instrumental in Ernesto's successful college application, and in her

ongoing support of Ernesto as a resource and as a cheerleader. Because Ernesto views

Kathy as a wise person and mentor, her words meant a great deal to him:

> Kathy, when she found out, cuz my mom told her mom that's our neighbor, so she called her up right away, so then she calls me, and she's like "Hey! I heard you got a 3.96" she's like "that's great! I never got that throughout college" And like, I see her as a very smart, wise person, you know? And she's like, "If you can keep it up," she's like, "You'll do really well." And like after that, like honestly, that was a turning point for me, honestly.

Anthony's family was a source of motivation. While the pressure from his family to succeed was interpreted by me as a challenge, Anthony always related it back to a positive, as he talked about the drive he has to do well comes from the want to change the cycle in the family to where collegiate completion becomes the norm. Anthony's mother was also a positive influence, as she would call on Sundays to talk and check up on his status.

Trevor discussed his family and home life in a positive light when going through the peaks and valleys timeline. Though most mentions of family were also tied in with friends, many peaks of his first year were those that involved being at home. Trevor also related that he had some expectations about what college would be like thanks to his brother and sister who had successfully completed college.

Similar to Trevor, Otto talked about the high points of being with family and friends during his first year. When Otto talked about being excited for his first year and being away from his home, he talked about his self-reflection and how he realized he actually depended on his parents. Otto also discussed his parents' lack of support due to their lack of knowledge about college. He did mention that he would receive a "pat on the back now and then."

Steven also had family members who supported him to and through his first year of college. His sister, a current Downtown University student, has been a constant supporter.

She encouraged Steven to attend a four-year university, and made him visit. In his challenging times like the academic challenges he mentioned during his first year, his sister offered support. Her experience let him know that he would get adjusted, and that college would get easier as he continued to adjust.

Steven's grandfather was also a source of support and motivation. Steven talked about how his grandfather encouraged him to attend college "to learn how to manage people." Steven's grandfather had problems in his business dealing with people management, so he encouraged Steven to go to college and gain those skills. Steven also talked about his family as a motivation for sticking with college: "I didn't want to let them down."

Aaron's family was extremely important in his first year collegiate journey. His three older brothers were mentioned very often as sources of support for Aaron. His brothers were a source of motivation and positive challenge who encouraged Aaron to pursue a more challenging path:

> I was just planning on becoming a certified welder and just do welding, and you know, get a degree in some kind of auto mechanic thing, and just kind of take that path. But my oldest brother kept telling me, he's like, you know, he kept telling me it's a waste of time, but he has a different perspective on that type of thing than I do, but he was kind of right in a way... in that he knew I could do something different and more challenging.

Because Aaron's brothers played a fatherly role in his life, they could offer him insight and constructive criticism that Aaron might not have received from anyone else. When Aaron considered changing his major because of the difficulties he was facing, his brothers told him to stay the course. He told a powerful story of his brother coming through in a time of severe perceived challenge:

Sometimes I really just don't want to continue, I don't have the motivation I don't, I mean, it just makes me want to break down you know? And they can just talk me through that sometimes. And sometimes, it's strange, my oldest brother called me one night when I was having one of those. I had three tests coming up this next week; this was last, last semester. And I was really worried and I was studying all day, but I didn't feel like I retained a lot of what I was doing and I was just, I don't know, I really didn't want to be doing what I was doing. And that night he just called me and was like, "Hey what are you doing?" I was like, "Oh not much." I was actually crying when he called me you know? (Laughs) and it was just such strange timing cuz he gave me the best talk, and then that week I got the best test grades I've ever gotten.

In addition to the fatherly perspective his older brothers could provide, Aaron spoke about his brother closest in age, a current college student in Texas. This brother could provide Aaron with a direct perspective about classes, as they share a major, mechanical engineering. This common ground allows them to interact in a different way. Their shared experience of their education allows them to be closer, but also provides for some healthy competition, like their holiday Battleship matches.

Aaron also talks about his family as a source of motivation. He knows his brothers and all the people who invested in him would be disappointed if he quit school. "Me stopping, I think, would let me down, but, in my mind, I think it would let all the people that care about me down."

He also spoke about wanting to be in a position to help his mother. Aaron talked about wanting to pay her back as motivation to continue and finish with his degree. Finally, he talked about the pride that stems from the success of he and his brothers, and how his brothers get to brag about him:

And all of a sudden these people think we're like a genius family or something, you know? And then they have this huge respect for my mom, cuz she was a single mom and struggled so much, and she never got a degree.

**Theme 4: Shared Experience**

When addressing my questions of challenge and support, all the research participants spoke to both the anxiety and importance of the shared experiences they had on campus. Each participant talked about the challenge they perceived in how difficult it might be to make friends in this new place, away from home and high school friends. On the flipside of that issue, each participant talked about the experiences they had with building very positive relationships, with some going as far tas to say the relationships they built were some of the most important reasons they decided to come back for their second year of college.

***Subtheme: Waiting for shared experience*** Coming from out of state, Otto described a challenge he faced was finding his own crowd. When he moved to Downtown University, he hoped he would meet new people, but was unsure of whether he would do so.

Aaron and Ernesto experienced similar challenges: coming from a smaller school into a much larger campus community. Ernesto vocalized the immensity of the change and how that challenged him: "When I came up here, like, I saw like the first faces of like thousands and thousands of kids I was like, 'What if I don't have anything in common with any of these kids?"

Trevor's challenge came from not the "if" of making new connections, but rather with the "how" of meeting new friends, especially right away: "You don't really know how to introduce yourself, or whatever, to meet and ton of people, and you want to…a challenges was trying to go out of your way and meet friends."

Anthony had previously voiced his concern about not knowing anyone on campus, and so he was excited by the prospect of meeting new friends, but was also surprised by "all the new kinds of people".

***Subtheme: Positive shared experience*** Research participants all countered their stories of challenge about waiting for shared experience with stories of relationships that were a good influence within their first year of college. Many constructive occurrences on campus came from the participants' shared experiences with students of similar major, similar interest, or similar background. These connections that participants built with other students came from involvement in many facets of campus, and were mentioned by the participants often as being sources of support when encountering challenges on campus and in life.

Otto talked about his decision to join the Business Learning Community (BLC) as a good decision, one that yielded him connections both in the classroom: "But a lot of the people in my class were also in the BLC so I mean, it was easy, like, communicating with them, just to get groups together to study and all that" and out of the classroom: "A lot of my friends were in the BLC; two of my roommates this year were in it, so, I mean, that really showed." Otto described the importance of his friendships from his first year: "A lot of my friends I had here turned out to be like some of my best friends, I guess. So It was worth coming back for."

Ernesto also found support through his shared experiences. When his scholarship program mentor introduced him to MASA, he immediately began making friends through playing soccer:

So like, first of all, I just went for the soccer, like I didn't really know what I was going into. So I go, and I was like, "Wow! There's all these brown faces." It was pretty cool. So I made like friends right off the bat. Like, especially through soccer.

Ernesto surprised even himself with the relationships he formed: "I didn't think I'd make that many friend, either, as I did. And that was huge."

Joining a fraternity also played a large factor in his development and persistence. He credits his fraternity for helping build his self-esteem and confidence, traits that translated back into the classroom for Ernesto. Alumni members and active members also acknowledged his potential for leadership. Hearing this from successful members of the Latino community gave Ernesto confidence as well.

Anthony also credits his involvement on campus as a reason for staying on campus. From his previous experiences, he knew that getting involved would help him overcome the challenges he described above, including not knowing anyone. He found support in his floor mates who were going through the same experiences:

The guys on my floor… Obviously, they were going through the same stuff. I was going through with tests and stuff, so you hang out with them and you kind of talk with them, maybe play some video games, and have some stress relievers with them.

These same floor mates influenced Anthony to find another source for shared experience, his fraternity. He listed joining the fraternity as a peak of his first year and calls it "something that's going to change my college experience, I think, and really help me out." By getting involved and meeting as many people as he could, Anthony gave himself a reason to come back to college, versus those students he witnessed not persisting:

I think the people that don't get involved just kind of get bored of just studying and doing the same thing continuous, and they don't want to come back and do it, obviously. They just have nothing to come back for.

Aaron talked about the shared experience he had with a friend from his scholarship program who turned out to have the same major. Aaron valued and trusted his friend's input because Aaron knew he was experiencing the same things: "We both know we've kind of experienced the same things, we know what struggle feels like academically, so when we give each other ideas, we're really open to what we have to say."

Both Trevor and Steven talked about using their existing social groups to find and make new friends. These times of meeting new friends were highlighted as peaks for both of these participants. Trevor's floor dinners provided him with an opportunity to meet new people; Steven admitted that his college experience would have been much more difficult without the help from the upperclassmen he knew on campus.

The shared experiences that participants had were a direct result of the relationships they built in their first year. These relationships were a clear area of support that the participants in this study relied on.

**Theme 5: Attributes that influence persistence**

Throughout this findings section, I have reported the many challenges that the first-generation college men in my study identified as important to them and their college experience. In contrast, I have tried to provide examples of the support that was utilized by these men to overcome the challenges they faced. The last theme that emerged in the research findings were the significant attributes and experiences that the participants have and had that helped them through their first year of college and into their second year.

All college students face many challenges in their first year. For first-generation college students, the list of challenges can be even longer. In the face of these challenges, however, the participants in my study managed the challenges. One reason that emerged

was these students' ability to overcome and learn from their challenges. This ability

sometimes came from past experience, and sometimes came from high self-awareness.

Finally, the self-drive and self-determination of the participants in this study was

very evident. They shared with me the decisions that influenced their return to college for

the second year, and self-drive and self-determination were among the most cited reasons.

***Subtheme: Knowing how to overcome and learn from a challenge*** Taking on the

challenges of college is no easy task. Having the ability to overcome and learn from

challenges is one attribute of the research participants that emerged from our discussions.

Otto talked about his educational path, and how he learned to push himself after he

was headed down a path he did not want to be on:

> I was actually moved into the special ed program. And when I was sitting in the
> classroom, it just like hit me. Like, everyone around me was just like, I don't know,
> dropouts, or like druggies, I guess, and stuff like that. And I just sat there and I was
> like, "I don't really want to be a part of this crowd and all that," So…it just hit me one
> day and I set my own goals…to get into college.

Otto also talked about how his experience as a first-generation college student made

him mature as a person. In the challenges from family theme, Otto talked about the

difference he noticed in the support he was getting in college versus those students whose

parents had gone to college. While that was a challenge for him, he overcame and learned

from that challenge: "It really taught me how to like, go through some adversity and like,

really grow up and, I don't know, be my own self and really open my eyes."

Learning from mistakes was one of the biggest reasons Aaron was able to make it

through his first year. He told me a story of building the car he still drives to this day. It's

value to him goes far beyond the transportation to and from school. Building that car

taught him a lesson that he applies in his collegiate life: Sometime mistakes (like putting

the engine in the car only to have to take it right out again) can cost time and money, but going through the work to redo it and get it right will pay off:

> Taking my perspective of, I don't know, doing something until I get it and not giving up on that, just kind of using it with school, you know, to solve problems, I guess it's really how that mindset got fine-tuned for both academics and life in general.

Aaron went as far as to say that mistakes could be "the best thing that happened to you." When he described the challenges he faced academically, he always made the challenges into positives:

> Every time I would have something that was slightly challenging, you know in my mind, whether it be a problem that I couldn't solve, or a situation that I'd never been in before, I kind of take little things from it and the mistakes I would make along the way.

Ernesto's experiences have also helped him gain valuable skills in overcoming and learning from challenges. Ernesto felt like he has always had the ability to cope with stress in a mature way. He said the ability to cope with stress comes from his life situation, which he views as being different from everyone who was around him, especially his friends in the white community.

"I was here illegally. I haven't told many people, but, cuz like, that was one thing I felt like brought a lot of stress into my life" Dealing with the stress of not being able to work, to have the thought in the back of his mind at all times that he may not be able to work, or that he could even be deported was a large source of stress for Ernesto, but one that he used to learn from. His experience gave him valuable perspective on stress and how to manage it.

**Subtheme: Self-drive and self-determination** Throughout the course of my discussions with the research participants, and even before I began to analyze the data, one thing became clear: these men were very self-motivated individuals. They know that a

college degree is going to get them to the places in life they want to be. This subtheme will highlight examples of the participants' self-drive and self-determination. When appropriate, I will again refer back to challenges that the participants identified and then overcame with the help of their self-drive and self-determination.

Many participants also spoke about the decision to come back to college for their second year through the lens of self-motivation, so that will be addressed when appropriate, as well.

In discussing the challenges of his first year, Otto talked about the challenges he faced academically, and through the lack of support he felt he was getting from his family. Because of this, he found himself growing up and making school a priority:

> Since there's no one really around you to drive you to do something, it's pretty much like all you. And you actually have to find yourself growing up and planning around what you have to do, and pushing stuff aside for your school and all that.

Low marks in his first semester also forced him to mature. The "slap in the face" of low marks helped him refocus and manage his time better, which resulted in better grades. He attributes his success to that refocusing process:

> Getting the grades back and realizing I'm an out of state student so, I mean, I'm gonna be in a lot of debt when I graduate. And really, it's not worth retaking classes or I guess, like, slacking off in classes to like, only fail college or anything. So that was a little fear I had, was failing college, which is something I didn't really want to do. So I guess, getting hit, waking up with those grades that I got back first semester, getting the 2.1 or 2.2 or whatever it was, really scared me, so I guess that made me grow up a little bit and reset my priorities straight.

Steven's first year had many times of challenge. To this end, he questioned whether Downtown University was right for him. He made the decision to stay, with the perspective that he had already invested in the education, and he did not want to throw that money away. He also used those around him as motivation: "I seen some of the other people that

went to college, and I thought to myself, 'Well if they can, I probably can, too.'" He also

observed those who did not complete college: "I kind of knew some other kids that had

dropped out and what they were doing. And I was like, 'I don't really want to be there.'"

While Steven experienced some difficulty with the general courses he had to take in

his first year, his self-determination to complete his degree helped him get through. By

knowing his end goal, he realized that some courses were necessary, even if he was not

very excited to take them: "I just figured I better fight through these ones and get to that,"

the classes he was interested in.

Anthony's self-determination was voiced in his decision to come back for college for

his sophomore year: It's just kind of my own expectation, where I'm going to come, and I'm

going to finish no matter what." He has powerful motivators, as he believe he can be the

person in his family who changes their direction: "I want to be the person that maybe

changes that cycle in my family's life where we do, on a regular basis, go to college and

finish."

In response to the challenges that he faced, like academic difficulties and the initial

challenge how to meet people, Trevor stepped up to the challenge. He "buckled down" and

learned how to study over time. Finding his direction within his major helped him feel good

about his collegiate life so far, and he knows he needs the degree to get where he wants to

be:

> I didn't even question it. Not even. I knew I was coming back. Education is very
> important and it's becoming more important I think. You can't do…a lot of things
> you want to do in life require a four year degree or a two year degree or even
> further on. So much, so many things do now, and I know with the path I'm on, and
> what I want to be now, I need a degree. I basically just knew I needed to come back
> to have the future that I want to have. I need the degree. I like college, too, and I
> wanted to come back. It's a good experience and it really wasn't even a question for
> me. I was doing all right in school, there was no reason not to.

The benefits of a college education and staying in his major have led Aaron's already strong self-drive and self-determination to grow: "I like myself better this way than I ever did before I started. So I like the way I think and how I look at things." Aaron is aware of the investment that the university and individuals have put into his education, which drives him to take advantage of his education, and learn things that will stretch his mind:

> All the money that goes into this, like I have a lot of scholarships and I don't really pay the money, like, directly out of my pocket, so you know, so I don't see the loss in my bank account you know all the time, but I know that someone is investing in me so that I can, you know, succeed. So that's huge, and that's like, I'm not gonna blow that opportunity and I'm definitely not going to come out knowing the same stuff I knew when I started.

His determination to finish college also stems from the personal investments that people have put into his experience. He said he did not want to let them down. "I would not stand for that."

When describing his decision to come back to college for his second year, Aaron cites his curiosity for what his future semesters will be like, as well as the benefits he will receive: "Just knowing I can do this…this is my challenge and this is what I want to accomplish." Aaron also made it clear that staying and finishing college would give him the opportunity to be in a position to help others like his mentor, Dr. Nunez: "I want to end up, you know, like that. In the position to where, you know, I can help people and I can be of importance to others in a way that helps them."

Ernesto's self-drive and self-motivation allowed him to exceed even his own expectations. The good grades he received his first semester were "a turning point" that pushed him to continue on the path of success. "If I can do it now, I can keep doing it, you know?"

Knowing he had a knack for college, Ernesto, like some of the other participants, did not even question his return to college for his second year: "Honestly, that question never crossed my mind ever. Like I never thought like, 'Oh, I'm not gonna come back,' like, even though I saw my friends dropping out or just doing bad and stuff. That never crossed my mind." Coming back to college was not a choice for Ernesto, he knew that for his future, he had to stay and complete college: "It was my thing."

**Chapter 5**

**Discussion**

**Introduction**

The previous chapter reported the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews with six participants, all first-generation college males who had persisted into their second year of college. The heterogeneous nature of first-generation students as a whole indicates that the experiences of the participants are not necessarily representative of the group as a whole, but their unique stories help us understand the challenges and supports that first-generation men themselves identify. The challenges that the literature points out for first-generation college students did apply to these men, to be certain. The people, places, and attributes they relied on to persist in college were the focus of my questions, and the themes that emerged revealed much about those three things.

**Summary of Findings**

The guiding research question for this study was: What experiences do first-generation male college students describe as influential to their persistence into their second year of college? To explore the many potential answers to my research question, I used subquestions that allowed for further depth and breadth of answers:

- How do first-generation college males identify challenges they faced during their first year at college?

- Where do first-generation college males find support to help them work through their academic challenges?

- How do first-generation college males describe their decision to return to their second year of college?

To find out the answers to these research questions, one-on-one interviews were conducted with first-generation college men who were enrolled in their second academic year of college. The interviews were conducted by me, the primary researcher. As an academic adviser, my hope was that the research participants would highlight resource after resource they found helpful to their first year. The participants did bring some examples of campus resources, but they also highlighted family ties and strong self-drive and motivation as influential to their persistence. The ability to overcome challenges proved to be invaluable to these first-generation college men, as they took their previous life experiences and used them in their new context, college life. This chapter will first address how the themes and subthemes from the data answer the research questions and how the themes and subthemes connect to the literature.

Secondly, this chapter will discuss the implications from the study for those professionals in student affairs looking to improve the experience and retention of first-generation college students, men in particular. Finally, this chapter will suggest directions for future research in the area of first-generation college students.

**Summary of Themes and Links to Literature**

There were five themes and ten subthemes that emerged from the data. These revealed the challenges that these college identified as important to their experience and the resources and supports they used to overcome these challenges. Topics included the academic and social challenges of entering college as a first-generation student, the importance of family connections and campus resources, as well as the attributes that these successful first-generation college men share: the attributes that helped them persist into their second year of college. Major findings in this study included:

1. The academic challenges of college were a wake-up call for all the participants in this study. While some of the participants received warnings about what academics in college would be like, the challenge of meeting the academic expectations of college was real for these men. In addition to the academic stresses of college life, the uncertainty that came with being a first-generation college student was a challenge

2. These first-generation men made connections on campus that were influential to their persistence. These included relationships with professionals at Downtown University, as well as with fellow students.

3. The connection to family and home life was very important for these students. By maintaining this connection, students were able to receive much-needed support through their first year. This connection to family also brought about challenges for these men.

4. Men in this study were all highly self-motivated individuals. While all described their external motivations to succeed, each participant described his path to success through the lens of their *personal* will to succeed in college.

**Academic challenges**

The difficulties that surround a first-generation college student in their journey through college are many. The isolation that occurs by the limited understanding of the collegiate environment and its expectations was a real challenge for each one of the participants. Even with advice from older brothers and sisters, family friends, and high school teachers, the shock of academic life in college was enormous.

The lack of rigorous coursework or the missed opportunity of taking rigorous coursework also presented itself in the data. This lack of rigor in high school translated to a difficult transition for the participants. Otto, even after pushing himself to take AP courses in high school, still struggled with the academic side of college.

With academics demanding more time of each of these men, the necessity of better study habits and time management skills became apparent. The literature tells us that first-generation males are at a disadvantage when it comes to study habits and time management, and the experience of these participants aligns with that data. The motivation of the participants and the enhanced habits they develop as a result is a clear contrast to this initial challenge of academics, time management, and study skills.

**Campus Resources**

One reason that first-generation students struggle to persist in the collegiate environment is the lower likelihood for them to engage in experiences that help create success in college. This delay in engagement can come from necessity of work hours, the want to focus on academics, or other reasons. Engle and Tinto (2008) showed that first-generation students would be the students who could benefit most from engaging on campus.

One element of the success of the participants in this study was their engagement in experiences that Engle and Tinto are talking about. The connections that participants built with staff members on campus was extremely influential. These relationships helped the students feel more confident in their areas of study, helped the students feel more confident about coming to college, and helped the students feel more comfortable in their own skin. While Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) talk about student relationships with

faculty as a key environmental factor toward facilitating a student's development, the same components of a positive relationship apply to these student relationships with staff: accessibility, authenticity, knowledge about students, and the ability to communicate with students. The relationships that the participants discussed hit on all of the mentioned points.

**Shared Experience**

In the same way, the shared experiences that these first-generation college men had with their peers was highlighted as extremely influential to their persistence as Engle and Tinto (2008) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggest. The decision to join a fraternity was highlighted by both Anthony and Ernesto, helping them develop their leadership, confidence, and self-esteem. These men reported their respective fraternal organizations as some of the highest moments of the college life so far. They both also mentioned the fraternity in terms of their future, saying how they were motivated to do well because of it, and knew that good things would come to them and good things would happen in their development because of it.

For Otto, the decision to become a member of a learning community on campus was a highlight. Having classmates who were going through the same things provided him with active peer resources. His relationships with learning community members helped Otto along the path of better study habits, something he struggled with his first semester of college.. He still lives with friends he made in the first year learning community. The connections Otto made with his peers in his first year were so strong, he mentioned them as a deciding factor in his decision to return to school.

Trevor's experience parallel's that of Otto. He was nervous about the prospect of having to meet new people and how to go about it. Because he built connections with other men on his floor, Trevor was able to branch out and make many new friends, an experience he mentioned as one of the high points of his first year.

Aaron's stories of shared experience helped him in one of his greatest areas of first year challenge: the academic side of college. Having a classmate that was in the same scholarship program and major allowed the two of them to form a quick relationship; each of the men knew what the other was going through. This shared experience allowed the men to be sounding boards for one another, and give mutual support through the difficulties of their first year academics.

**Family Connections**

The literature surrounding first-generation college students focuses on the challenges that stem from the very definition of being first-generation. The collegiate experience for first-generation students is very different from their non-first-generation counterparts. At its most basic level, the challenge comes because parents of first-generation college students simply cannot offer the support to and through college that parents who have college degrees can offer because *they just don't know.*

All of the participants in this research study talked about the difficulty of coming to college without many expectations or perceived support. At times, participants mentioned being discouraged, as they saw and heard their peers receiving advice and support from their college graduate parents, but they were not receiving that advice or support. Ernesto sums it up: "I'm not trying to say they don't know, but they don't know…how important it is."

In addition to the challenges that these first-generation college males faced by having perceived low levels of support, elements of other challenge emerged from the data. As in Winkle-Wagner's (2009) study of African-American women, participants described the expectations of their parents with the word "pressure," which was not always accompanied by the word "support". Differing from Winkle-Wagner's study, however, none of the men in this research opted to sever ties with their family, even under circumstances of extreme pressure. HERE IS WHERE YOU DO THE SOC REP

Tinto's well-known theory of retention postulates that in order to be most successful in college (by integrating academically and socially into dominant college culture) students must separate themselves from their prior relationships, including family ties. The data in this study follows the body of literature that critiques and counters Tinto's theory. The persistence of all six of these first-generation college males was influenced by the family and home life relationships they maintained throughout their first year of college.

Rather than sever ties, these men amalgamated the skills and expectations from two very different and very powerful worlds together in a way that created success for them at Downtown University. These men each created a distinctive culture of their own development that utilizes elements of campus culture and elements of their family culture. Through the lens of social reproduction, this distinctive culture becomes a place (field) where habitus and cultural capital from their multiple other fields are available in helping them navigate the challenges they face. This is a powerful solution.

Ernesto did talk about his parents' lack of knowledge about college. However, he also mentioned their unwavering support of him in his pursuit of his college degree.

Extended family members, like his uncle, were also valuable. The constructive criticism he got from his uncle may not have affected him had it come from another source. The family friend that Ernesto mentioned in his interviews was included in the home life area of the findings, as Ernesto lived with Kathy's family for a time, and she was discussed in relation to the rest of his family. She, too, was influential in helping Ernesto persist into his second year, as she both supported him with words of support through his first year, but also supported him through the application process and the stressful time of working through his illegal status in the United States.

Aaron's family was extremely involved in his life during his first year of college. By pushing him and holding him to high expectations, Aaron's brothers were a big motivating factor for him to not only do well in college, but to stay in his original major, mechanical engineering. Aaron's brothers knew he could do well in college. Their role as father figures in his life allowed Aaron's brothers to give Aaron feedback about college and his possible major change. The feedback they were able to give was more forthcoming than anyone else could give him.

Aaron's closest brother is also a current college student in the same major, mechanical engineering. His perspective was valuable to Aaron, as they could discuss courses and strategies that helped them through the academic challenges of their engineering major.

Aaron's desire to be successful was and is clearly influenced by the motivation to provide for his mother in the future. Staying in college to get his degree was important to Aaron, so he could pay his mother back for the life she lived as she raised her sons.

Whether through unwavering support, useful and pertinent criticism, or wisdom about college life and life in general, each of the participants in this study reported a positive relationship with their family and home life. The benefits that these first-generation college males received from a maintained relationship with family and home life were clear in this study. Despite the challenges that families of these first-generation men could create, the participants in this study described their family as being a positive influence to their persistence into the second year of college.

The experiences of these first-generation college men with their families suggests that though the issue in a complex one, the connection to home culture can and does positively effect persistence in college.

**Self-drive and self-determination**

The attribute that all of these men had that contributed to their success was their high levels of self-drive and self-determination. Even without the foreknowledge of what college would be like, these first-generation college men had already gone over a big hurdle: the first year, and had moved on to the next challenge, ready to jump the next hurdle.

In response to the question I asked about returning to college, I heard many times, "It wasn't even a choice." The participants in this study were all able to "buckle down" and overcome the challenges they faced in their first year, whether that challenge was taking and passing necessary courses, learning how to manage time and develop better study skills, or learning from mistakes.

The ability to overcome and learn from challenges is another element of this self-determination. The experiences of these first-generation college men all relayed, in some

way, that they knew how to deal with adversity. This skill translated to college quite well and underscores the participants' extraordinary ability to overcome some fairly intense challenges.

It is this skill that makes these first-generation students stand out. Even if first-generation college students lack the "highbrow" cultural capital that non-first-generation students have, they have their own elements of cultural capital that are important to their success. This is a clear example of how Bourdieu's (1979) idea of cultural capital does not only apply to the elite. College students with varying backgrounds can all bring with them actions that create success. In the implications section of this chapter, I will discuss how higher education practice should work to highlight those actions that create success, and in the case of this research, persistence.

**Peaks and valleys timeline**

The peaks and valleys timeline utilized in the interviews was a prototype of a qualitative research technique that captures participants' feelings about past events through visual indication. The intention was for the timeline to create discussion prompts within the interviews, allowing me to ask questions about the peaks and valleys that participants indicated. In addition, because the interviews about the participants' first year took place a significant amount of time after the first year, the timeline prototype was a tool that helped refresh the participants' minds about the first year of college.

Throughout the interviews, participants referred to the timeline when expressing a story or feeling they were discussing with me. This occurred without any prompts from me about the timeline. Further on in each interview, I did ask the participants to give a cursory rundown of their timeline, but not before many of them had already alluded to the form.

If one were to look at the raw interviews, the times in which participants were explaining their peaks and valleys timeline is one of the largest streams of consciousness that each participant had within the interview. This may stem from the fact that they were condensing the events of a whole year into one section of discussion. I also believe the ability to reference something visually within the discussion was helpful for the participants. Entering a one-on-one interview situation can be intimidating for anyone. A man asking personal questions can be uncomfortable, especially for another young man. The ability to look at the timeline and reflect on the year was a help for the participants, and it yielded a lot of good data for me to use within the study.

**Implications of the Current Study for Student Affairs Practice**

The themes and subthemes that emerged from this study and how they connect to the literature have implications for how higher education and student affairs work with first-generation students. These are my recommendations, based on the themes of the data, as well as the process of collecting the data.

1. The relationship between first-generation students and their institutions of higher education can and should be mutually beneficial.  Institutions can benefit from first-generation students with the unique cultural capital they bring; first-generation students can benefit greatly from the support systems that exist at a place of higher education. For this to happen, however, institutions of higher education must be able to identify the first-generation college students on their campus.  While I was able to recruit students through my network of professionals, Downtown University has no uniform way of identifying first-generation college students. We cannot assist them along their journey if we do not know who they are.

2. By knowing who our first-generation students are on campus, we can offer them services and suggestions for their collegiate journey. A tricky element of the college experience is the relationship with home life. The data from this study suggests that these particular first-generation students all benefitted from their continued family relationship. In that spirit, I suggest focused efforts by admissions offices or advising offices to connect and inform those family stakeholders of first-generation students. Some parents or family members may choose not to participate at all, but as students maintain that family relationship, colleges and universities should take advantage of the opportunity they have to create well-informed supporters of their student population.

3. Additionally, with the knowledge of who our first-generation students are on campus, student affairs practitioners can suggest and foster those meaningful relationships on campus. As we've seen, the relationships can be with staff members as support and mentors. Relationships can also be beneficial through shared experience with peers. Knowing that our first-generation students can potentially benefit more from these relationships than other college students, we should make it our mission to connect these students to those who we know can help them persist through college and obtain their degree. Powerful examples from this literature include administrators who care, as well as student associations and living learning communities.

4. We have seen that first-generation students benefit from shared experience. To take that benefit one step further, student affairs practitioners should be carefully considering the benefits of living learning communities that focus on first-

generation students. With the knowledge that many of our first-generation students carried anxiety about if and how they would make new friends, this type of community would assist them in that direction. We know that relationships with those who had similar experiences were powerful for the research participants in this study, so building a community around the shared experience of being a first-generation college student could be very beneficial. This idea is directly from Jehangir's (2010b) multicultural learning community. The benefits of this program are far reaching, with the goal of bringing the cultural capital of the first-generation student into the higher education forum:

> One way to enrich their journey and similarly enrich the academy is to draw on their cultural capital, bring their stories and lived experiences into the learning process, and allow them to voice and author their selves. Bringing the lived experience into the classroom is messy and imperfect, but its authenticity allows students to be coteachers and participants in knowledge construction. In doing so, we build the necessary bridges to sustain students who have been marginalized and silenced. These bridges can serve many purposes: a conduit between the home and school world of first-generation students, a link between their inner and outer faculties as learner, a connecter with peers with similar and different experiences, and an opportunity to allow students and their communities to inform the academy. (p. 559)

5. We must help first-generation students bring the cultural capital they have to college, and we must help first-generation students know that the cultural capital they bring is both important and valuable. Whether through learning communities or peer groups or parental education, it should be the mission of student affairs professionals to help first-generation students know that the cultural capital they have acquired in their lifetime can also apply in new fields. That is, they can bring the experience of learning from their mistakes early in life and apply that to their studies, to their work, to their collegiate life! Colleges can benefit from the different

kind of wisdom that first-generation college students possess. It is up to us as

student affairs practitioners to help first-generation students realize the value of

their cultural capital in the collegiate setting.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this research study reveal areas where more research can be done to

further understand the experiences of first-generation college men, and first-generation

college students in general. This study was conducted with six participants. Studies with

larger sample sizes should be conducted to examine whether the themes and subthemes of

this research are found in larger populations. A majority of he participants in this study

came from cities and towns with smaller populations. A study that focused only on first-

generation students from smaller cities and towns could reveal more about the experience

transitioning to and through the first year of college for those students.

Viewing the experience of first-generation college men through the lens of the social

reproduction framework was applicable in this study. It was applied after the "categories,

themes, and claims" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 104) Emerged. A similar study, with lines of

questioning and coding schemes that directly addressed the social reproduction

framework could further inform student affairs about the experience of first-generation

students.

The peaks and valleys timeline as a research tool is in its infancy. Further

development of this qualitative research technique will be valuable to qualitative

researchers. Its simplicity and ease for participants makes it a valuable tool of inquiry of

validation. Studies that implement the peaks and valleys timeline over a series of shorter

experiences could allow the technique to bring our more nuanced information, whereas

this research study found the reporting within the peaks and valleys timeline as very broad strokes to cover a full year's worth of experiences. This macro view of a year does force participants to boil down their experience to those very important items, but does not necessarily allow for detail. It holds promise as a useful tool for qualitative researchers in the future.

A longitudinal study that examines the experiences of first-generation college men over time could also inform the transition period into college life over time. A longitudinal study could help explain the ebb and flow of the many fields through which first-generation men view their collegiate experience, and which of these fields gain and lose prominence throughout their college life. Better understanding where and when challenges take place in a longitudinal study could help student affairs professionals also be more aware of the timing of certain challenges and how to better approach them to help first-generation students most effectively.

**Conclusion**

First-generation college students are a heterogeneous group with backstories that run the gamut of experience. The literature that exists identifies the many issues and challenges that arise from being a student whose parents did not obtain a college degree. There are additions continually being made to the literature about how to bring the experience of these students into the forum of college. In this study, I explored the challenges that first-generation college men themselves identify as important in their first year of college. Conversely, I also explored the methods of support that first-generation college men identified as influential to their persistence into their second year of college. The results of this study can be applied to faculty and student affairs professionals in

higher education whose aim is to encourage the success of first-generation college men, and first-generation students in general.

Implications of this study can be used to motivate first-generation students, informing them that persisting in college can be done. Helping students find the resources, make the connections, and use their own talents to succeed is the necessity of our profession when working with first-generation students, as well as all students.

Areas for future research can continue to build this necessary field of research. By examining the views and experiences of successfully persisting first-generation men, student affairs professionals have a different viewpoint by which to view these students. For both first-generation students and student affairs professionals: success informs success.

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Dear Colleague:

Hello! My name is Taylor Weichman, and I am conducting a study of first-generation male college students

I am asking faculty and staff members at UNL to nominate candidates for this research.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of first-generation college males who have persisted into the second year of college. The study will seek to understand the first year experience of these students, and how they describe the various resources that helped them persist into their second year of college. Participants in this study will benefit because of the opportunity inform future decisions to better serve first-generation students. Participants will also be offered a meal to be paid for by the researcher in appreciation of participation. .

 If neither the father nor the mother of a student has completed a postsecondary degree, they are a male age 19 or older, and they are a second year student, they may participate in this research. Participation in this study will require approximately no more than two hours. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

You may ask any questions concerning this research at any time by contacting Taylor Weichman at tweichman@gmail.com. If you would like to speak to someone else, please call the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6926 or irb@unl.edu.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

If you have any student you think meets the requirements for this research, please send me a message indicating the student and their contact information. If you would like to discuss the research with me prior to nominating a student, please contact me so we can set up a time.

I hope you will consider nominating students for this study!

Thank you for your time,

Taylor

Taylor Weichman

tweichman@gmail.com

Dear <student>,

Hello! My name is Taylor Weichman, and I am conducting a study of first-generation male college students. If neither your father nor your mother completed a postsecondary degree, you are a male age 19 or older, and you are a second year student, you may participate in this research.

You have been nominated by a faculty or staff member at UNL as a candidate for this research. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of first-generation college males who have persisted into the second year of college. The study will seek to understand the first year experience of these students, and how they describe the various resources that helped them persist into their second year of college. Participants in this study will benefit because of the opportunity inform future decisions to better serve first-generation students. Participants will also be offered a meal to be paid for by the researcher in appreciation of participation.

Participation in this study will require approximately no more than two hours. You will be asked to fill out a form prior to the interview, taking no more than 30 minutes. You will then be asked to participate in an interview that will last no longer than one hour. The interview will take place on or near campus (participant's choice) and the interview will be recorded. Following the interview, you will be asked to review your interview transcript electronically for accuracy. We anticipate that you will be able to review your transcript in less than thirty minutes.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

Your interview responses will be kept confidential. Your interview file will be saved in a password protected file, and you will be assigned a pseudonym to keep your information confidential.

Please email one of the researchers by <date> if you are willing to participate in this research. Please include your name and your phone number in your email. I hope you will consider participating in this study!

Thank you for your time,

Taylor

Taylor Weichman

tweichman@gmail.com

Dear <student>,

Thank you for indicating your willingness to participate in my research project.

We will meet at <Date, time> at <location chosen by participant>.

Prior to our meeting, please complete the attached Peaks and Valleys timeline. If you have questions about the Peaks and Valleys timeline, please contact me at tweichman@gmail.com

Thank you, I look forward to speaking with you.

TW

This is a study of first-generation male college students. If neither your father nor your mother completed a postsecondary degree, you are a male age 19 or older, and you are a second year student, you may participate in this research.

You have been nominated by a faculty or staff member at UNL as a candidate for this research. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of first-generation college males who have persisted into the second year of college. The study will seek to understand the first year experience of these students, and how they describe the various resources that helped them persist into their second year of college. Participants in this study will benefit because of the opportunity inform future decisions to better serve first-generation students. Participants will also be offered a meal to be paid for by the researcher in appreciation of participation.

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Following the interview, you will be asked to review your interview transcript electronically for accuracy. Any changes or areas of clarification can be communicated to the researcher via email. I anticipate that you will be able to review your transcript in less than thirty minutes.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

Your interview responses will be kept confidential. Your interview file will be saved in a password protected file, and you will be assigned a pseudonym to keep your information confidential.

If you select, the researcher will purchase a meal of your choosing out of appreciation for your time.

You may ask any questions concerning this research at any time by contacting Taylor Weichman at tweichman@gmail.com. If you would like to speak to someone else, please call the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6926 or irb@unl.edu.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Please indicate you have read and understand the above statement by signing below:


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Name

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Date

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June       July      August      September      October      November      December      January      February      March      April      May

External Audit Attestation
Wayne A. Babchuk, Ph.D.

Audit Attestation

Taylor Weichman requested that I complete a methodological audit of his qualitative case study titled "Success Informs Success: Experiences of First-Generation College Males." The audit was conducted primarily in April 2013. The audit was part of the validation strategies used in establishing the trustworthiness and accuracy of the research. External validity was achieved through the audit where I provided input on aspects of research design and implementation with special attention devoted to data collection and analysis procedures and findings.

I was given two drafts of Taylor's entire M.A. thesis for review and provided suggestions throughout all of the manuscript on the first draft. As expected, I focused most of my attention on the methodological components in Chapter 1 (Introduction), Chapter 3 (Methodology) and Chapter 4 (Findings). I reviewed and provided comments regarding key methodological components including the purpose statement and central and sub-questions, rationale for a qualitative design and choice of case study as an approach, researcher positioning, data collection and analysis, emergent codes, themes, and subthemes, participant quotes to support the themes, and validation strategies. In reading the subsequent draft of the manuscript, I checked that my suggestions/corrections had been addressed.

Audit Procedure
This audit procedure consisted of the following steps:

1. Initial meeting to invite me to serve as an auditor for his thesis research and discuss my role and our mutual responsibilities in this process (February 2013)
2. Overall multi-stage review of the research design, purpose statement, and central and sub-questions
3. Review of emerging codes and themes and subthemes and use of participant quotes that informed these codes, themes, and subthemes
4. Review of other aspects of the thesis including discussion, limitations, recommendations for future research, and overall narrative style and quality of the manuscript
5. Read initial and subsequent drafts of thesis chapters and provided input as the project progressed with a particular focus on consistency in purpose and fit between purpose statement, research questions, sample selection, data collection and analysis, use of literature, and conclusions
6. Submitted audit attestation draft for Taylor's review and input
7. Signed and submitted audit attestation to Taylor

*Initial Meeting*
Taylor was a student in a qualitative methods course I taught—*EDPS 900K: Qualitative Approaches to Educational Research*—in the Fall 2013 semester. In this course, he further refined and articulated his research interests and ideas in the required course research mini-project and class presentation and these assignments served as building blocks for some of the central aspects or foundations of his thesis. I was therefore "on board" through much of the planning and development stages and provided input and suggestions early on which simplified

this audit attestation considerably as I had already weighed in on much of it before this process began. His EDPS 900K paper was titled the same as his thesis, "Success Informs Success: Experiences of First-Generation College Males." Following this course, Taylor asked me to serve as an external auditor for his thesis research he was undertaking for a MA in Educational Administration. I agreed and we began to correspond in late February of 2013 to discuss our roles and proceed with the final stages of the research and the external audit.

*Research Design and Formulation of the Research Question and Sub-Questions*
Beginning in the Fall Semester, 2012, and finalized in the spring of 2013, Taylor and I continued our discussion of aspects regarding his research design. Beginning in the EDPS 900K course, we discussed his identification of a research problem, literature review, formulation of the purpose statement, central questions, sub-questions, purposive sampling techniques, selection of research methodology and its appropriateness to answer the research question(s), strategies of data collection and analysis, findings, validation strategies, and the writing of the manuscript.

*Data Collection and Analysis*
Taylor provided me with a copy of his initial research design in the Fall Semester of 2013 and then officially (for this audit) in April 2013. I reviewed his data collection and analysis procedures focusing on the consistency between his purpose statement, central research question and sub-questions, emergent themes and subthemes, use of participant quotes, and validation strategies.

*Thesis Manuscript*
As mentioned, I reviewed the first and subsequent versions of the manuscript to ensure that Taylor remained consistent with the purpose statement and central and sub-questions of the thesis through data collection and analysis, and that his work was supported by participant statements and existing literature on this topic. The thesis was consistent throughout and appropriate documentation of this consistency was provided by him. He employed multiple validation strategies and appropriate use of qualitative methodology throughout.

Conclusion

Having reviewed the material outlined in this audit, I submit the following conclusions:

The process of this study was consistent with its research design and the assumptions inherent in qualitative research practices. Taylor was fully transparent in describing all aspects of the research process and systematically developed and implemented a research plan that allowed him to effectively explore his purpose statement and research questions and extend the literature in this area. His data collection and analysis and emergent themes and subthemes, conclusions, etc. are consistent with the assumptions of the qualitative paradigm. He employed several validation strategies including member checking, use of key informants who provided feedback at various stages of data analysis, researcher positioning, peer review, a "peaks and valleys" timeline or checklist, and an external auditor. Simply stated, this thesis was of the highest possible quality in terms of the methodological design and implementation and could be used to model case study research for future students employing a case study approach. Little input was needed on my part to execute this design at the highest possible level.

Upon review of the final draft of this manuscript, I conclude that the goals of the researcher were met, the research design and its implementation was carefully constructed, consistent, and effective in addressing the purpose statement, and the trustworthiness of the study can be established. There is support from the participant data for the emerging themes and his conclusions are consistent with them and augment the literature in this area.

Attested to by Wayne A. Babchuk this 8$^{th}$ day of April, 2013.

Wayne A. Babchuk, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Psychology
University of Nebraska-Lincoln