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# Social and Academic Factors that Contribute to Resiliency for At-Risk Students in Georgia Universities

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THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO RESILIENCY  
FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS IN GEORGIA UNIVERSITIES

by

KIMBERLY P. MULLEN

(Under the Direction of Meta Harris)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine resiliency factors in at-risk college students to provide insight and strategies for college administrators who have a genuine desire to attract and retain these students. The researcher focused on college students who were minority, low-income and first generation. This study included three seniors who attended three different universities, and were graduating at the end of the semester. The researcher explored social and academic factors, and the findings overwhelming concluded that students who are at-risk have a harder time obtaining a college degree than non-at-risk students. At-risk students face challenges such as lack of emotional and financial support from their family members, and they experience tremendous feelings of isolation, which they deem as an indication that they belong in college. The students in this research explain their personal burdens and the tools they used to jump the hurdles to success.

In-depth interviewing encouraged participants to speak openly about their challenges and they provide valuable life lessons for making it through college. The researcher found out how these students formed social networks, which they relied on for emotional support. Among the resources these students could have utilized to assist in

their achievements, they found power, strength and courage through the social networks they formed. Each student collectively agreed that they desired more mentoring from faculty and staff, but didn't feel this resource was an option as they were just *one* in the midst of many who needed the same attention. In the end, each student agreed that their social network was the single most important factor that kept them on the path to earning their college degree.

The researcher also found that these at-risk students' challenges throughout college were very similar both socially and academically. This study found that the students shared similar feelings including: lack of support, either from family or faculty members; lack of administrative guidance or mentoring; a strong sense of not belonging and financial burdens. Most importantly, the research provides valuable feedback for college administrators about what works and what doesn't work for at-risk students.

INDEX WORDS: Higher education, Student resiliency, At-risk college students, First-generation, Low-income, Minority university students

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FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS IN GEORGIA UNIVERSITIES

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to everyone who encouraged me throughout my educational journey. My inspiration for this topic comes from people who struggled to attain their college degree and successfully did so against all obstacles and odds. For this inspiration, I want to thank those who have overcome personal and academic challenges to complete their undergraduate degrees.

I would like to thank my best friend, Jodi Tofani, my daily “cup of Jo.” She is a daily inspiration to me. She is my true confidante and encourages me when I need it. She has been with me throughout the doctoral program and dissertation process. Her pure optimism is never lost on me. Jodi has a genuine desire for education, and her passion is contagious. Finally, Jodi is the funniest person I know. Everyone needs a “cup of Jo.”

Finally, I would also like to thank my family. My husband of 15 years, Sean, and my three loving daughters, Kaitlyn (7), Lauren (6) and Natalie (4) as they inspire me every day to be a better person. My husband, Sean, has been deployed to Iraq, fighting terrorism, for most of this process so the girls and I have endured the educational process alone. They patiently waited many times for me to finish a thought, a paragraph or a chapter. At an early age, my girls have learned what it’s like to work hard for something you really want. It is my desire that I am corrupting them with books and thoughts of education. I am in constant awe of my girls, they are my light. Obtaining my doctorate has been an integral part of our lives for a long time, and I could not have made it without them.

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I would like to thank Colleen Watts, my devoted sister-in-law who read through my pages and edited my work. Her advice was incredible, and she truly helped me put my work into a logical format.

Finally, I want to thank my chair, Dr. Meta Harris. She is a true student advocate and has a desire for growth and change. I was fortunate to have Dr. Harris in many of my classes prior to asking her to serve as my Chair for my dissertation. She is analytical, professional, thorough, and has high expectations. I knew I would have to work hard under her guidance, but I knew she would assist me. Dr. Harris is an inspiration to many students and this dissertation is a testament to her abilities to serve as an incredible dissertation Chair. I am forever grateful to her.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*A King once owned a large, beautiful, pure diamond of which he was justly proud, for it had no equal anywhere. One day, the diamond accidentally sustained a deep scratch. The king called in the most expert diamond cutters and offered them a great reward if they could remove the imperfection from his jewel. But none could remove the blemish. The king was sorely distressed. After some time, a gifted craftsman came to the king and promised to make the rare diamond even more beautiful than it had been before the mishap. The king was impressed by his confidence and entrusted the precious stone in his care. And the man kept his word. With superb artistry, he engraved a lovely rosebud around the imperfection, using the scratch to make the stem.*

*We can emulate the craftsman. When life bruises us and wounds us, we can use even the scratches to etch a portrait of beauty and charm.*

*(Zucker, 2004, p. 2).*

This story is about an object that is thought to be perfect; however, it becomes flawed without ever having the ability to return to its original state. From observation, the diamond's worth seems to have been diminished. In the end, the King realizes, it's the imperfection that brings about the diamond's true beauty and value.

The same can be said about education. In education, all students, even the brightest, have imperfections. Yet given the right motivators (curriculum, mentors and other tools) in such an environment, all students have the ability to make positive and dramatic changes in our world. Success is not solely determined by perfection or advantages, but the students who have more disadvantages face a greater struggle to complete their education.

It is clear that some students have clear advantages over others. Some students come from wealthy families while others are extremely poor. Some students have emotional and/or physical limitations while others are mentally and physically healthy

and capable. Some are extremely bright while others struggle daily to make sense of fundamental ideas. Those with limitations are defined as at-risk. The limitations have a greater influence as the level of education increases and a large percentage of students, without advantages or the right motivators, never make it beyond high school. However, some students defy the odds and not only get into college but graduate from it. This study focuses on the resiliency of at-risk students who have overcome social and academic factors to successfully earn their undergraduate degrees from four-year institutions.

The term at-risk student is utilized to define a student whose probability of dropping out of college is above average (Jones & Watson, 1990). Martin (1999) found that higher education institutions identify at-risk students by the following characteristics: racial and ethnic minorities; economically disadvantaged; persons with disabilities; first-generation to attend college; international students; women (in traditional male fields); non-traditional age students; athletes and transfer students. Martin's findings also suggested that while the numbers of students of all backgrounds who go to college is increasing, the patterns of those who succeed in completing their college education still mirror national inequities of race and social class. While there are many definitions and categories for at-risk, the term *at-risk* in this study refers to college students that are low-income, first-generation and minority. This study thoroughly explored at-risk students' backgrounds and challenges and combining these factors with the strategies they used to overcome the odds of earning undergraduate degrees. For this study, a traditional student is regarded as one that is Caucasian, has a parent who attended college, and has financial means to pay for college. This study does not discount the challenges a traditional student faces in college; however, the literature supports that while traditional and at-risk college

students are trying to obtain the same goals, there are clear differences among the students. For instance, at-risk students have similar academic hurdles to overcome, yet due to their background, personal circumstances, lack of support and individual deficiencies, their pressures are significantly greater (Mayberry, 2003; Henderson and Milistein, 2002).

### *Statement of the Problem*

The problem is that in a nation of prosperity and tremendous educational opportunities, at-risk students still represent 25 percent of all undergraduates (US Department of Education, 2002b). The researcher in this study specifically addresses college students who came from three at-risk categories; minority, low-income and first generation students. There are many factors that put students in at-risk categories, and per statistics in the literature these students do not normally do well in college settings. According to the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), “a number of variables related to a student's family or personal background appears to contribute to increasing the risk of failure in school” (2003, p. 1). Some of the most frequently-cited factors that contribute to being at-risk are “low socioeconomic status, minority group status, limited English proficiency, low educational attainment of parents, disabilities, psychosocial factors, and gender” (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2003, p.1).

Educational disadvantages, inequities and disparities are not new issues. Our nation has suffered from these same educational disadvantages for centuries; however, the growing rate of college-age students labeled as at-risk is alarming (Billson, 1982). This is especially frightening in a nation where employers are expecting college degrees

in entry-level positions (Budney, 2003; McGuire, 2005; Immerwahr, 2002; Carter, 2006). At-risk college students face more challenges in academic settings than traditional students. For instance, they are “sensitive to failure, intimidated by faculty, unfamiliar with support systems, have undeveloped work ethic, little exposure to smarter students, and they may be immature” (Mayberry, 2003, p. 4-5).

Studies reveal that the drop-out rate increases as factors such as race, ethnicity, and low-income students are calculated (Finn, 2006). These students are commonly known as at-risk students with characteristics including: families in the lowest socio-economic quartile; single-parent homes; earned grades of C's or below from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade; held back a grade; changed school two or more times outside a normal progression; have an older sibling who dropped out of high school; minority student and coming from a home in which English is not the primary language (Braswell, Lutkus, Grigg, Santapau, Tay-Lim, Johnson, 2001; Grigg, Daane, Jin & Campbell, 2003; Kaufman & Bradbury, 1992; Kaugman, Alt and Chapman 2001; Persky, Daane, and Jin 2003). Horn and Chen (1998) concurred with these attributes and further indicated that students exhibiting two or more of these six characteristics put a student in an “at-risk-for-failing school category” (p. 8). The literature in this study closely examined at-risk students that fall into the following at-risk categories: low-income, first-generation and minority. The researcher further enhances the study by utilizing participants that fall into all three of these categories.

Furthermore, this study focused on the participants' academic and social challenges in a college setting and the resiliency factors that contributed to their overall success in a college environment. The literature documented in this study reflects our



nation's growing number of at-risk students who either do not go to college or the ones who go to college but drop out. In a nation where knowledge is power and a college degree is expected in the workforce according to Finn (2006), our at-risk students continue to struggle with educational disparities under our current educational system. Ultimately, our nation is leaving at-risk college students behind. The participants in this study have overcome the inequalities our nation faces despite their hardships; they achieved their goals against the odds. Horn and Chen (1998) suggest that it's hard to pinpoint a unique factor that led to college success among at-risk students. They further indicate that a successful college experience can be a collection of various attributes such as administrators, professors, counselors, peers, first-year experience programs or the social and academic regime of the institution (Horn and Chen, 1998).

Through in-depth interviews, this qualitative study provides the academic and social resources three at-risk Georgia college students utilized to guide them triumphantly towards achieving their undergraduate degrees. By understanding the circumstances around these triumphs, universities have the opportunity to recreate similar successes within their institutions. In addition, students who find themselves in similar situations can learn through the experiences of others to accomplish great things. According to Benard (2004), everyone has an inner-resilience which is part of their genetic make-up and it can unfold naturally in the presence of certain environmental attributes. In this instance, it has to be a college atmosphere fostering a college environment, which at-risk students thrive socially and intellectually. The researcher in this study incorporates the resiliency with the social and academic factors revealing what works and what doesn't.

The findings in this study will prove useful to administrators, professors, individuals in similar situations and to our community which these universities represent.

### *Significance of the Study*

The problem is that at-risk students do not attend or complete college at the same percentage that traditional students do. In addition, the at-risk college students who do attend college, experience a higher drop-out rate than traditional students. This is a national problem. The Government Accountability Office reports that students who are from low-income, minority and first-generation families face inequities that quickly turn into tremendous barriers for students in higher education (Government Accountability Office, 2002). This national report collects data sufficiently comparing and contrasting college graduate statistics between traditional and at-risk students. With the vast amount of information available to educators, it's evident that more focus needs to be given to strategies and programs that work to keep educationally disadvantaged college students in school within our nation. The researcher in this study focused on Georgia universities as she has seen and experienced first-hand the educational deficiencies in Georgia. Gaining insight on resiliency factors and the social and academic programs that encourage college achievement under adverse circumstances will provide substantial data to Georgia universities. Additionally, the researcher's desire is to inform at-risk students how others in the same situation accomplished their undergraduate degree against the odds.

The factors that make these students at-risk are not sufficiently tracked at the colleges within Georgia. For instance, the Georgia University applications are now governed by GAcollge411 and are generic per each university within the Georgia Board

of Regents (see Appendix E). In this application, the only question relevant to at-risk students is a description of race and heritage. The university upon gathering this data can determine if a student is a minority. Upon enrollment and within any given semester, universities accurately report the number of students who are minority and the ones who are receiving financial aid such as the Georgia Hope Scholarship, Pell Grant Federal Student Loans and other scholarship funding provided to the student. This information is important; however, when people become numbers, important humanized data is missed (American Psychological Association, 2003). Once a student completes an application, pays tuition and is enrolled in a university, the institution then becomes responsible for that individual, thus the institution has an obligation to assist students through graduation (Bean, 1985). This involves getting to know the students who encompass the university. Universities consistently use the buzz-word, *student-engagement* (Tinto, 2002).

It's a great concept and provides universities the opportunity to personally engage with all of their students, but specifically with at-risk students who need an engaging environment to help them be successful. In a student survey conducted in 2001 by the University System Board of Regents, the students expressed concerned about academic quality, academic convenience and in the business process of student-life (see Table 5 regarding Student Engagement). At-risk students who enroll in college come with their own individual strengths and weaknesses. The strengths are easily identifiable: high school GPA, extra-curricular activities and preparedness for college. It's the individual struggles such as the students' backgrounds and hardships that are not as easy to understand and control in an academic setting (Astin, 1982). In 2007, this study is critical for the college students who are being missed and left behind each year.

This study is important to our educational administrators because it examines success stories of at-risk students who experienced college and successfully achieved undergraduate degrees against odds stacked against them and the statistics which indicate these students had a lower chance of graduating; however, the evidence provided in this study show it can be done regardless of parental education, income level and race. The University Systems of Georgia conducted a Student Satisfaction survey in 2001 and the results of the respondents' parental educational attainment for Georgia are included in Table 3 of this study. This study provides a fresh perspective regarding degree attainment. Specifically, the insight is provided by educationally disadvantaged students who have made it through Georgia institutions. Although this study is comprised of students in the state of Georgia, the results can be generalized to all states in our nation. This qualitative study embarked upon the social and academic experiences at-risk students face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the college environment.

In an era where universities are charged with assessments and providing results with retention, graduation, programs and academic rates, educational administrators need to know what works when traditional and at-risk students experience their university settings. In addition, implementing some of the strategies and practices in this study will allow educational administrators to report a diverse student body that mirrors our population. Gaining insight from students who achieved their degree, against odds stacked against them, will provide valuable information on what is working and what is not working within the university environment. The at-risk participants chosen for this study have first-hand experience dealing with social and academic issues that plague many university administrators across the nation. The informative data presented in this

study will assist administrators in developing successful programs or enhancing current ones to meet the demands of a diverse student body. Administrators who want to know why students drop-out of school need to go beyond the numbers; this study will assist administrators in finding out what struggles at-risk students are facing in university settings.

Similarly, the Educational Leadership programs at various universities may use this information as a guide for programs and policy within their institutions. The Department of Education may take the findings of this study to initiate and promote programs which are proactive in developing and guiding all individuals, especially at-risk students, throughout their college experiences. Finally, individuals can have useful tools and resources that will advocate success from enrollment to graduation. This knowledge will be beneficial to the individual, the institution and to our society.

#### *Autobiographical Roots of the Study*

To say that I have a deep passion for this topic is an understatement. I grew up in a middle-class family where alcoholism and dysfunction were rampant. My mother and father divorced when I was two years old. Since that day, my father has only been a small part of my life. Both of my parents held a high school diploma, and neither parent attended a college institution. My mother remarried twice while I was in school, my first step-father was a great role model in my life; however, he was killed in a car accident. My second step-father was a functioning alcoholic, and decided to pursue a college degree. Although he was pursuing his undergraduate degree, college was not something we (as children) were inspired to achieve.

College was not something that was discussed with my sister or me. High school grades and report cards were not a big deal in our home. I remember being a sophomore in high school when my Health teacher, also a football coach, talked about his college experiences. I knew there was a better way to life than overwhelming dysfunction and insecurities I felt at home. It was on this day that I began collecting information about college. I remember thinking that I had to attend college to make a different life for myself. I knew early on that I wanted more than my family had achieved both academically and socially. The first thing I wanted to accomplish was to obtain a degree.

Since my parents didn't attend college and my Mother's marriage was again on the rocks, I relied on gathering information on my own. I wasn't in the top ten percent of my graduating class, yet I was a fairly smart student. I had a passion for learning, yet never went above and beyond the requirements in high school. I was an A/B student without trying. I didn't prepare for college because I really didn't know I was supposed to. I remember walking in to take my SAT exams, not truly understanding why I was there. I didn't realize that the score I received that day would have a direct relation to the college that accepted me. A few of my closest friends were going to the College of Charleston, thus, I set my sights on that school. It never occurred to me to apply to different schools. Thankfully, I got accepted. Since my parents had no college experience, I didn't know what to expect once I got there and was clearly under prepared for a life that was larger than anything I had ever known. Early on, I struggled financially, socially and academically.

My college situation was not easy, but somewhere I had a resilience that I relied on to obtain a degree. Financially, I relied on Pell grants, scholarships and student loans

to assist with my tuition and living expenses. There were times I didn't know how I would financially make it from one week to the next. I began working three jobs, six and sometimes seven days a week to cover my living expenses. I taught the 6:00 a.m. aerobics at The Medical University of South Carolina, worked in a dental office after classes, and in a flower shop on the weekends. I had the goal of graduating and knew I had to endure the hardship. Academically, I didn't make the best grades, but I didn't make the worse either. I struggled with an intense work and collegiate schedule. After five years, I found myself the proud recipient of a college degree.

I didn't walk at graduation because I didn't have family members who would have wanted to participate. Looking back, this didn't bother me, I had a college degree and this was the biggest achievement I had ever received. I have accomplished a lot since that day; however, that piece of paper, my degree, gave me the foundation to do great things. In the end, it took me ten years to repay my student loans, but it was the best investment of my life.

I have an overwhelming need and desire to help others faced with my situation to achieve goals that are often thought of as unattainable. As a result of my positive and negative college experiences, I am intrigued with other students in my situation and how they define their success and resilience. I think they have a story to be told that can influence the way colleges do business in the future.

I have chosen to study individuals with similar backgrounds to determine resiliency factors within people that encourage and contribute to their success. This area is my passion, and I want to actively assist students who have the academic ability, the inner-desire and the fortitude to successfully graduate from college. It is my desire to

provide informative facts that individuals and institutions can utilize to develop programs and organizations to promote learning environments that foster a culture of success regardless of a student's past struggles. The factor I want to instill in our youth today is that everyone has the ability to go to college; the choice is ultimately up to them. They have to be ready to take responsibility for their own success. Most at-risk students are not told about the choices they have. They are products of their past and rely on what they currently know to survive. I want to find strategies to reach these students and educate them about their choices and how they can affect their end result through their actions. I hope this information is valuable to individuals, to our administrators in colleges and to our society.

#### *Background of the Study*

The researcher in this study explored the college experiences of three at-risk college students in three different Georgia universities to determine what factors led these students to successfully complete their undergraduate degrees. At-risk students are not a new phenomenon. Based on the availability of literature on the topic, the public is vastly aware that at-risk students exist and know the success and failure rates. While this study focuses on at-risk students, it also mentions traditional students periodically. These students are regarded as students who are Caucasian, have at least one parent who attended college, and have financial means to pay for college. The researcher in this study went beyond the numbers collected nationally, per state and by institutions. Specifically, the researcher gathered qualitative data to determine the social and academic factors, which contributed to three at-risk students reaching their goal of obtaining an undergraduate degree. This data was collected through intense interview sessions with the



participants. In addition to social and academic factors, the researcher gained fresh perspectives from the participants about their resilience. Lifton (1994) identifies resilience as the human capacity of all individuals to transform and change, no matter what their risks; it is “an innate self-righting mechanism” (Werner & Smith, 1992 , p. 202). This study provides a direct reflection of the participants going through transformational changes to achieve success.

An individual’s resiliency mechanism continues to develop over-time based on life experiences (Maston, 1994). Thus, the resiliency factors that contribute to an at-risk student’s ability to succeed throughout their formative school years may be very different from the attributes that gave them strength and motivation through college (Horn and Chen, 1998). Once enrolled and attending classes in a college, at-risk students may perform differently in their new environment. Students are often sheltered through their formative years of school (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). Their school schedule is the same, their friends and community members are the same, and usually their mentors (parents, teachers, pastors) are close at hand. These students understand their role in society, in their schools and in their homes. Although at-risk students are known for their hardships, they still have a sense of belonging and they know how to use their support system at any given time (Freeman, Tierra, Anderman, Lynley, Jensen, Jane, 2007). College is a different environment with more emphasis on personal responsibility. At-risk students and traditional students handle these environmental changes differently (Sandeem, 2003). For example, if a traditional student is having trouble with managing their college schedule, they can call home and discuss it with their family members as they have been through the college experience and can identify with

their child. If the same situation is presented to an at-risk student whose parents didn't go to college, they have to rely on others as their family support system is not intact. If they haven't formed another means of support and encouragement, this hurdle can be overwhelming. Ultimately, it's a new experience whether a student is at-risk or has the expectation of succeeding (McGuire, 2005).

According to Sandeen (2003), students transition from the expectations of family to owning their own future. This is extremely overwhelming for traditional and at-risk students. The college experience can be less threatening if colleges can successfully engage with the students on a personal level. This is specifically necessary for students who are already in at-risk categories for dropping out. In order for student engagement to occur, Jones and Watson (1990) suggest that institutions need to be proactive in obtaining complete data regarding student demographics and income levels. Universities need to ask the right questions to successfully engage with their students.

Educational administrators can make informed decisions about programs and policies for students if they collect appropriate student data, according to Jones and Watson (1990). In order to move forward, institutions need to implement assessments to show where they have been and where they plan to be in the future. This can only be done by creating a database and tracking progress. Jones and Watson suggest that universities are being held accountable for their programs, thus they need the ability to accurately assess the programs in place. Assessments require institutional tracking mechanisms and in many cases, universities are requesting resources and data bases to help them track data needed for instructional and student service programs (Sandeen, 2003). Individual public colleges and universities obtain enrollment figures, currently

divided according to factors such as majors, age, gender, race, working versus not working, full-time or part-time status and many additional attributes. Jones and Watson suggest that these reports are incomplete unless they go a step further by incorporating information such as socio-economic status and first-generation data. Since this information is not obtained, it is not tracked, analyzed or reported. Thus, colleges are keeping the status-quo and proactive programs for at-risk students cannot be developed or maintained without accurate reporting mechanisms.

A critical factor of any student's success is the collegiality of the environment in which they choose to continue their education beyond high school (Perlman, 2000). Once enrolled in a higher education setting, colleges and universities track their students per semester and annually to report retention rates (Maguire, 1976). A key ingredient that is missing in retention tracking data is a clear picture of the actual student, the human-side of the equation (Braxton, 2000) instead of a mere number. If higher education institutions made it their business to identify at-risk students during initial enrollment, programs and organizations could be initiated to promote success (Bean, 1985). Student retention is a critical issue for institutions of higher learning, thus effective measures for obtaining and retaining qualified students are constantly being implemented (Lau, 2003). Retention is a proactive prescription for getting students to return (Bean, 2000); "just because a student gets into college, it does not guarantee that this student will graduate from that college" (Tinto, 2002, p. 4). Colleges spend a lot of time and money on programs specifically designed to retain and graduate students, thus when students leave prematurely, this loss of resources is experienced by the college, the students and society (Seidman, 2005). It is important to grasp the retention rates, but it's more critical to find out why students are

dropping out. In order for this to be achieved, students need to be asked and the information provided needs to be recorded and tracked. Once information has been received and tracked for a period of time, universities can utilize the information to develop proactive programs for at-risk students (Bean, 2000).

Acclaimed researcher Cuseo (1991) states that nearly 40% of all students leave college institutions without obtaining their degree. Tinto (1993) echoes this finding by stating that more students leave higher education settings than stay. A thorough study of enrollment strategies indicate that of the students that drop-out, about one-half of these students do so their freshman year (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). In addition to retention rates that are published, Lau (2003) adds that retention rates do not always provide accurate accounts of retention as it usually includes students who transferred to other colleges. In addition to the literature about retention rates, it is abundantly clear that at-risk students who drop-out of college are the first among the students to leave without completing their degree (Noel et al, 1985). Research suggests that building programs that promote a collegial learning environment encourages retention of students through graduation (Tinto, 2002). Specialized programs for at-risk college students can be developed and maintained to reduce the number of college drop-outs among these students. Programs such as TRIO and the Posse Foundation are dedicated to success of at-risk students. They have proactively incorporated programs that are geared toward at-risk students, and provided resources to retain them. These programs and their success rates are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

There are several reasons why college students do not return to college and complete their undergraduate degrees (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora,

1996). When transitioning from high school to college life, the literature provides social factors from prominent researchers that can affect student retention: Terenzini et al (1996) suggest that many students feel pure freedom and lack of authority once they get to college. This lack of authority can be misused without proper guidance from mentors, peers or parents. In addition, students have challenges with social integration and social identity issues. These issues coupled with diversity concerns are among the top of many reasons why students do not succeed, according to Terenzini et al (1996). First-year freshmen students leave the comfort of their homes, friends and surroundings to embark on a new exciting phase of their lives (Keisler, 2007). College can be a time when students test their wings and transform themselves into the person they really want to be, especially if a change needed to take place (Cantore, 2001). This newly found freedom and lack of authority can be a period of personal growth or a detriment to a freshman's academic success if the freedom is not embraced in the right manner (Budney and Paul, 2003). Budney and Paul (2003) further state that some of the personal decisions students make during their college experience can be critical and pivotal points to the outcome of their achievement.

Some of the crucial decisions college students make include the following: drinking, drugs, money, dating, attending classes, time management, intensity of schedule and making friends (Tinto, 1975). Students also decide how they integrate themselves into the college experience and the degree to which students integrated socially or academically became strong indicators of whether students returned or dropped out of college (Tinto, 1975). Tinto further suggested that social integration involves the amount of friends one has, personal contact with advisors and if the student is enjoying the

college life (Tinto, 1975; Horn and Chen, 1998; Finn, 2006). Another social factor addressed in the literature is the person's individual social identity and how their identity helps them understand other college students. Sheckley (1995) measured a student's social identity through barriers and deterrents, tolerance of diversity, college climate and classroom climate. Factors of ethnicity/race, gender, disabilities and socio-economic status can be overwhelming and add to complexity of college environment (Lau, 2003). It can be especially intimidating to at-risk students who tend to expect the campus culture to be alienating (Terenzini, et al, 1996).

Literature indicates that college students have a hard time adjusting to the academic milieu of higher education institutions (Budney and Paul, 2003; Tinto, 1975). College students are expected to take on the responsibility of their own learning. This encompasses attending class, keeping up with assignments and managing their time, which can be overwhelming for college students (Bean, 1982; Lau, 2003; Budney and Paul, 2003). Scholars tend to agree that "student involvement," which refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience by studying, participating in student organizations, and interacting frequently with faculty members will help students achieve their goal of completion (Astin, 1985; Astin, 1993; Horn and Chen, 1998; Finn, 2006; Terenzini & Wright 1987; Tinto, 1975).

More than a rigorous academic curriculum and schedule, many students enroll in college without being fully prepared to handle the rigors of higher education coursework (Adelman, 1999, Cabrera, LaNasa & Burkum, 2001). More than half of college instructors say this year's entering freshmen are not ready for college-level studies, (Zogby, J & Belliveau, M, 2006; Velarde, 2005). The Georgia Board of Regents

administered a Student Survey in 2001 and asked the students if they believed high school adequately prepared them for college. The respondents indicated that 45.6 percent agreed they were adequately prepared for college, 29.5 percent strongly agreed, 15.1 percent somewhat disagreed and 9.8 percent strongly disagreed (see Table 4 for more details).

Similarly, a study was conducted at San Francisco State University indicating that 3,200 first-time freshmen were entered in remedial classes (Esperanza, 2005). States are pushing colleges and K-12 programs to work together to improve students' readiness to enter college (Venezia, A., Callan, P., Finney, J., Kirst, M., Usdan, M. 2005). In agreement with these scholars, Tinto (2002) strongly encourages a coalition of groups from states, schools, communities, families and organizations to ensure all students acquire the academic skills they need to succeed in college.

Prominent theorist, Vincent Tinto (1987) proposed the Model of Institutional Departure, stating that the student retention process is dependent on the student's personal experience at the institution. Tinto suggested that the formal and informal social and academic systems within an institution play a significant role in a student's success. In addition to social and academic factors, external factors beyond an institution's control also lead to student attrition rate (Lau, 2003). Many scholars agree that the higher a student's level of integration into the social and academic systems of the college, the more positive the retention rate (Baumgart and Johnston, 1977; Terenzini, Lorang, and Pascarella, 1981; Pascarella, Smart, and Ethington, 1986).

There is an overwhelming abundance of literature on why students drop-out of college, why they stay. Congruently, there is also a tremendous amount of information on

at-risk students, the challenges students experience in college and ultimately the expenses and human resources institutions exhaust retaining them. Specific findings showed that the transition to college can be vastly different experiences for traditional and at-risk students. For traditional students, college was a familiar experience in their families and an expected step in their life passages. These students perceived social integration as the most prominent challenge in their transitions to college. For first-generation students, however, attending college represented a departure from their families' experiences and complicated, difficult blend of academic, social, and cultural challenges," (Terenzini et al., pp. 72-73). A growing number of researchers, however, have been examining the issue from the angle of successful students (Gandara, 1995; Hurtado, 1994; Rendon 1994), but much more is to be learned about what students do right that leads to graduation from college.

### *Research Questions*

The overarching question to be researched is "What are the social and academic factors that contribute to resilience for at-risk students attending Georgia Universities?"

The sub-questions are:

1. What social and academic needs do these students believe are necessary for success?
2. What are the barriers that at-risk students face throughout their college experience?
3. What personal factors or people, within or outside the university, does the student attribute their resiliency for persistence and success?



4. What programs, organizations or social activities would you recommend universities offer to assist the students in achieving their goals?

### *Research Design*

The design of this study is qualitative. Specifically, it is a descriptive analysis of the social and academic experiences of three at-risk students in the last semester of their senior year from universities in Georgia. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews of three students from different universities that were in good academic standing. The students were comprised of three at-risk categories: minority, first-generation and low-income. A semi-structured interview technique utilizing guided questions (see Appendix F) to gain accurate and in-depth perspectives of the participants' educational experiences through college. According to Glesne (2006), "Respondents answer questions in the context of dispositions (motives, values, concerns, needs) that researchers need to unravel in order to makes sense out of the words that their questions generate" (p. 79). Furthermore, participants may reveal unexpected abilities, strengths, and coping strategies when their performances are viewed in natural settings and authentic situations (Anzul, Evans, King & Tellier-Robinson, 2001).

The researcher utilized an ethnographic approach to successfully answer the research questions. Ethnography provides an up-close means of identifying significant categories of human experience and enriches the inquiry (Moll and Greenberg, 1990). The participants' personal account of their college experiences and the resources they employed to achieve undergraduate degrees, provided the researcher and audience a translucent record of the institution's strengths and weaknesses in developing and retaining at-risk students. Employing this approach, the researcher used the participants'

background and culture as the theoretical framework to interpret the students' constructions of reality and identify patterns in their perspectives and behaviors (Glesne, 2006). Through the interview process, this study engaged in ethnographic techniques that provided new perspectives and validated the culture from which the participants originated prior to their college experience. According to Agar (1996), ethnography provides a foundation for new concepts, new patterns and once these are obtained, the researcher can make a valid case.

### *Procedure*

The researcher developed a set of guided questions that directly correlated to the overarching questions and sub-questions in this study (see Appendix F for Guided Questions). These questions were used to guide the participants in sharing their background and college experiences. The information obtained in the interview sessions will be utilized to gain information from the participants about their social and academic experiences in college. In-depth interviews with the participants were conducted. During the interview sessions, the researcher encouraged the participants to share their feelings and viewpoints on their background and the struggles in the college environment.

### *Participants*

This study focused on three college students in the last semester of their college year. These students were in good academic standing and were from the following three categories: low-income households, first-generation to attend higher education and minority students. The researcher consulted with colleagues from Kilkenny University, Killeen University and Belfast State University to appropriately identify a student from

their institution that would be willing to participate in this study. The researcher was able to obtain candidates from each of the universities to voluntarily participate in this study.

During this study, the process of selecting the right participants was critical in obtaining a thorough understanding of at-risk students and their experiences. The end result of selection needs to “produce information-rich cases” that educators, individuals and society can “learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Glesne (2006) indicates that network sampling is engaged when researchers obtain knowledge about potential cases from people who know people who meet research interests. Clark (1999) suggests that homogeneous sampling is utilized when researchers select all similar cases in order to describe some subgroup in depth.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that interviews are widely used in qualitative research and usually begin with the researcher’s autobiographical-oriented narrative that is connected to the research problem (see researcher’s *Autobiographical Roots of Study* in Chapter 1). The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before contacting colleagues and participants (see Appendix B for IRB Approval). Once the participant was identified by the university colleague, the researcher sent the candidate a formal letter thoroughly explaining the details of the study (see Appendix C for letter). Once the candidates received and read the letter from the researcher, they were contacted by telephone to introduce the researcher to the participant and to explain the scope of the study and answer any questions the participant may have had. It was at this time that the researcher made an appointment with the participant for the interview session.

Prior to each interview, the researcher went over the Informed Consent Letter with the participants (see Appendix D for Informed Consent Letter). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews by utilizing guided questions to collect the data (see Appendix F for Guided Questions). The data was recorded on a tape recorder to ensure that the notes convey participants' experiences accurately.

### *Data Analysis*

The data collected from the interview sessions was transcribed by the researcher. Each participant was given a copy of their transcription to clarify their personal information. The researcher organized the data in a logical format which allowed the responses to be analyzed. The findings were strategically categorized into recurring themes and similarities and differences presented by the participants' responses. The findings are clearly presented in Chapter 4 of this study.

### *Summary*

This study was conducted to further understand persistence and resilience in at-risk students who successfully attained undergraduate degrees in three Georgia Universities. The researcher's participants used three at-risk students from different university settings within Georgia to accurately personify the social and academic experiences of these students. The students were properly identified based on professional consulting with professors teaching within Killeen University, Kilkenny University and Belfast State University. The study identified strengths and weaknesses within the institutions and individuals, along with the challenges the participants throughout their college social and academic experiences. The students have a common thread of being labeled at-risk because of their backgrounds, yet their stories and

information they provided in the interview process will be beneficial to other at-risk students and to other students enrolled across the nation.

The qualitative findings from the interviews conducted in this study provided further insight on what works and what organizations or policies need improvement to retain students in at-risk categories. The researcher utilized current literature in the fundamental portion of the interview process; yet, each individual's cultural college experience determined the findings, conclusions and recommendations in this complex study. The researcher's ethnographic method of qualitative research allowed the participants to reveal in-depth information about their experiences. This information will aid administrators in their short and long term goals of planning for retention and improving current programs for at-risk students.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Educational inequities are not a new topic which is why the literature is saturated with statistics revealing that our nation is clearly behind. Over the last few decades, public and educational discourse has converged on "children and families at-risk" (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995, p.1). Professionals and educational scholars have searched for generalized strategies and techniques to retain students, but since these studies have not examined the specific needs of individual students, their needs and experiences are lost and go undetected (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Low-income, minority and first-generation college students face inequities that quickly turn into barriers and struggles as they seek higher education. Government Accounting Office (2002) reported that low-income, black and Hispanic students enroll in college at lower rates than their peers. Research clearly indicates that factors such as family income and parents' educational attainment influence students' expectations about college. For instance, low-income students and students from families in which neither parent earned a bachelor's degree were less likely to expect to finish college and ultimately enrolled at lower rates than other students (Government Accounting Office, 2003).

According to Levin (1986), at-risk students do not have community resources enabling them to be successful in conventional educational environments due to low-income levels, racial/ethnic distinctions and language skills. Levin (1986) indicates further that at-risk students consistently show low academic achievement and/or drop-out of the educational pipeline at high rates and early stages.

A step in right direction was The U.S. Supreme Court ruling that addressed the legality of race-based affirmative action in Universities in 2003 (Niemann & Maruyana, 2005).

While this legislation provided hope of equality, Niemann and Maruyana (2005) go on to state that these legal decisions did little to resolve the conflicts and disparities in educational outcomes between whites and ethnic/racial minorities. Furthermore, the Supreme Court ruling didn't address first-generation students or low-income students; ultimately leaving these students behind. Across the nation, universities and colleges have homogeneous environments which extreme cultural gaps exist between minority students and the university (Enger, 2006). For instance, across the nation, our universities and colleges are predominantly made up of white students. Universities are becoming more diverse; however, the student bodies of these institutions are not a direct reflection of our nation's current demographic status. This presents minority students with feelings of not feeling as if they belong or as if they don't fit in with the majority of the other students. Enger (2006) refers to Tinto's theory which addresses the issue of isolation and that if students don't feel connected and comfortable in their college environment, this is one of the reasons they may drop out.

At-risk students, also known as educationally disadvantaged, are characterized and labeled through various terms and phrases. However, most researchers similarly conclude on the themes that categorize these students. Scholars and other educational researchers struggle with the right words and definitions to label at-risk students; however, one congruent theme is that at-risk students are used to define those students whose probability of dropping out of college is above average (Jones & Watson, 1990). Educators and medical professionals are notorious for labeling and categorizing people

and students. Meaning, if it has a name or a condition, it can be taught, treated and/or fixed. According to Pallas (1992), untreated education problems can be as serious as untreated medical problems (p. 22). However, applying medical terminology to an educational context can be misleading. The untreated medical problems mentioned by Pallas reside within the patient; the untreated education problems, however, involve a complex interaction of personal, social and educational variables. The danger is that school personnel and others will focus primarily or solely on the personal variables and characteristics, viewing the at-risk student as deficient because he/she does not fit the system rather than viewing the situation from a broader, more systemic perspective. In other words, the system has severe deficiencies because it does not meet the educational needs of all of its students (Pallas, 1992).

The common demographic characteristics targeted as at-risk by higher education institutions and scholars include, but are not limited to the following: racial and ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged, persons with disabilities, first-generation to attend college, international students, women (in traditional male fields), non-traditional age students, athletes, and transfer students (Martin, 1999).

Additional themes are further documented by The National Center for Education Statistics in a report titled “Characteristics of At-Risk Students” (Kaufman, Bradbury, 1992). The characteristics include these traits: families in the lowest socio-economic quartile, single-parent homes, earned grades of C’s or below from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, held back a grade, changed school two or more times outside a normal progression, or have an older sibling who dropped out of high school. Horn and Chen (1998) concurred with these attributes and further indicated that students exhibiting two or more of these



six characteristics put a student in an at-risk for failing school category. Additional at-risk factors include being a minority student and coming from a home in which English is not the primary language (Braswell et al. 2001; Grigg et al. 2003; Kaugman, Alt and Chapman 2001; Persky, Daane, and Jin 2003).

Students can be considered at-risk for achieving academic success in higher education for a vast number of reasons. For instance, this diverse group of students' skills, knowledge, motivation and/or academic ability fall significantly below those of the students who are not considered at-risk in college or curriculum in which they are enrolled (Walsh, 2003). If these students lack academically and socially upon entering college, academic advisors need specific skills in guiding their success in college. For example, Jones and Becker (2002) identify the need for programs that teach decision-making skills, promote self-advocacy, provide curriculum intensive advising, and provide services to support students during their first year. Ender and Wilkie (2000) include remedial courses for basic reading, writing and math skills in their programming suggestions. These progressive and proactive programs are designed to encourage at-risk students by providing resources that are useful to the students.

As the literature has indicated, at-risk students come in many fashions; there isn't one attribute that can describe the individuals who are disadvantaged in life and in education. The characteristics of students at-risk are known through predicative factors gathered from pertinent data that is explained utilizing statistical means. For example, The American Council of Education's report stated that whites are still more likely to enroll in college than minorities: 46 percent of whites attend college, 40 percent of African Americans and 34 percent of Hispanics enroll (Garland, 2004). These differences

are credited to a lack of early educational opportunities and options in low-income neighborhoods where many minorities reside (Salmen, 2003). While the numbers of students of all backgrounds who go to college is going up, the patterns of who's *making it* in college still mirror national inequities of race and social class (Martin, 1999). Educational attainment has not kept up the pace with demographic changes (Cubeta, J; Traverers, N & Sheckley, B, 1999). For example, as of 1997, African-Americans represented 13 percent and Hispanics 11 percent of the U.S. population yet they earned only 7 percent and 55 percent of Bachelor Degrees awarded (National Center Educational Statistics, 1997). Research states that only 36 percent of low socio-economic families enrolled while the vast majority of postsecondary students were in the highest socio-economic quartiles (Horn and Chen 1998). According to Finn (2006), at-risk students by virtue of poor socioeconomic status exhibited considerable variability in high school and post high school outcomes. For instance, a large percentage progressed to postsecondary education and experienced success in the workplace. In addition, nearly two-thirds of 1988 at-risk 8<sup>th</sup> graders enrolled in some form of postsecondary education within two years of completing high school (Sanderson et al. 1996).

The Department of Education (2002) produced similar results on graduation rates for at-risk college students. Being black or a first-generation college student was associated with lower completion rates. Students with either of those characteristics were a third less likely to complete college as students without these characteristics. The Government Accounting Office (2003) indicates that the completion rate for black students was 38 percent as opposed to the 55 percent for both white and Asian. This report also states that with first-generation students, 43 percent were likely to graduate

college compared to the 59 percent of students with at least one parent holding a bachelor's degree. Being a first generation student affected completion regardless of race. For example, first-generation white students were no more likely to complete college than first-generation black students (Government Accounting Office, 2003).

The characteristics and statistics of at-risk students are provided and available through many scholarly publications. For more than a decade public and educational discourse has focused on children and families at risk (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995, p.1). The public is aware these students exist and know the success and failure rates; however, it has also been proven that at-risk students can and do rise above and succeed in life against all odds. Lifton (1994 ) identifies resilience as the human capacity of all individuals to transform and change, no matter what their risks; it is an innate "self-righting mechanism" (Werner & Smith, 1992 , p.202). Chen and Kaufman's (1997) study explains that resilient students have more positive attitudes about school, more cohesive families, parental support of school, and peers engaged in the school. Additional research concurs that an at-risk student's success can be indicative of the characteristics of teachers and schools, families, organizations, and communities that successfully motivate and engage youth from high-risk environments, including urban poverty that truly makes a significant difference (Ianni, 1989; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Meier, 1995 ; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979 ). Horn (1997) further suggests that the following five junctures in a "pipeline" that transitions students successfully from high school to college: having a bachelor's degree goal, being prepared academically for college, taking entrance exams, applying to college and enrolling into college. The

research clearly indicates that resilient students benefit greatly from an engaging society approach.

Challenges make it significantly harder for students categorized as at-risk to overcome the social and academic hurdles necessary to pursue and obtain a postsecondary education. These results are transparent when considering that American students at-risk for failing school range from 10 percent to 25 percent (National Center Educational Statistics, 1992). Institutional graduation rates vary based upon such factors as the mission, selectivity, and type of institution. For instance, institutions that focus on providing education to disadvantaged/at-risk students may have lower graduation rates than institutions that do not serve many disadvantaged students (Government Accounting Office, 2003).

As the literature indicates, scholars have identified several commonalities relating to at-risk students and their pursuit to postsecondary education: the characteristics that identify at-risk students, the statistics that explain how many exist with predictions of success and failure rates, and that a resiliency is present in some students that motivates them to succeed and beat the odds. Once enrolled in postsecondary education, Horn and Chen (1998) explain that student, parent and peer engagement variables significantly increase the odds of an at-risk student's chances for enrolling into postsecondary education immediately after high school.

There is a growing need for support services for at-risk students in postsecondary education. Furthermore, college students identified as being at-risk for academic failure also have skill deficits in a number of key process areas critical to college success (Eberling, 1998; Houck et al., 1989; Ferez, 1998). The most prevalent of these include

time management, note-taking, goal setting and motivation, information processing, and basic study skills (Bragg, 1992; Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996). One meta-analysis supported findings that at-risk students arrive at post-secondary institutions with low academic skills (e.g., study habits and study skills approaches) and a lack of knowledge concerning the amount of preparation needed for the academic work required (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001). The lack of preparation is another strong contributor to students failing to complete degree requirements (Eberling, 1998).

Researchers further suggest that subtle characteristics such as not fitting in or perceptions that professors have low expectations of them, may hinder the progress of today's nonwhite students more than blatant discrimination does (Fries-Britt, 2007). Fries-Britt (2002) further states that some high-achieving black students hide their enrollment in challenging classes from lower-achieving peers. Steele (2004) addresses a larger issue in our society, which is deemed stereo-type threat. Steele (2004) maintains that a person's social identity – defined as a group of membership in categories such as age, race, gender religion and ethnicity has significance when rooted in concrete situations. This researcher goes on to indicate that if individuals can overcome stereo-type threat and achieve integration in our society, they will flourish in integrated settings (Steele, 2004).

### *Educational Resilience*

Resilience is not a new phenomenon. While it has been in existence since the beginning of man, its traits and characteristics have changed over the centuries. According to the American Psychological Association (2003), resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. If this is true, it is common for people to demonstrate an inner-resilience

that allows them to bounce back from adversity. Spielman (2005) agrees with these views by indicating that in the face of adversity, most people adapt well over time to even life-altering situations. Spielman (2005) suggests that resiliency does not mean that a person doesn't experience difficulty or distress. Spielman (2005) further indicates that emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives. In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress. Resilience involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone (Spielman, 2005).

We are all born with innate resiliency, with the capacity to develop the traits commonly found in resilient survivors: social competence (responsiveness, cultural flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor); problem-solving (planning, help-seeking, critical and creative thinking); autonomy (sense of identity, self-efficacy, self-awareness, task-mastery, and adaptive distancing from negative messages and conditions); and a sense of purpose and belief in a bright future (goal direction, educational aspirations, optimism, faith, and spiritual connectedness); (Benard, 1991). The concept of resilience is based on the theory that particular traits or protective factors such as caring and relationships help strengthen people's resolve, enabling them to persist during adversity (RMC, 2004). There are many factors that contribute to an individual's resilience. Research reveals that one of the major factors in individuals who possess resilience is having caring and supportive primary relationships within and outside the family (McMillan and Reed, 1994; RMC, 2004; APA, 2003). A person's resilience can only be enhanced by engaging in meaningful relationships that create love and trust, provide role models, and offer encouragement, reassurance and

hope. Furthermore, a person's inner-resilience can be enhanced by having a positive outlook on one's future and making realistic plans to make personal and professional goals happen (Gordon & Song, 1994; Masten, Best & Garnezy, 1990; APA, 2003).

One of the most compelling priorities on the national educational agenda is to close the achievement gap between those students who are academically successful and those who are at risk of failure. The study of resiliency is critical to education because gives in-depth knowledge on why some students succeed in school despite the presence of adverse conditions (Waxman, Gray and Padron, 2003). The resiliency concept needs to be better understood contextually before practical implications can be drawn about building resiliency in our schools (Liddle, 1994). It has been argued that skills, opportunities, and relationships which promote resiliency can be provided in schools (Storer, Cychosz, & Licklider, 1995), however, only a few studies have actually examined resiliency in schools (Waxman, Gray and Padron, 2003). The majority of the research has been compiled based on resilient and non-resilient students.

In conjunction with the vast amount of research available on resilient students, most of the current information on educational resiliency has focused predominantly on minority students from low-income families (Waxman, Gray and Padron, 2003). Waxman, Gray and Padron (2003) suggest that typical findings show that learning environment, classroom instruction and motivational aspects are evident in the differences between resilient and non-resilient students. Findings also indicate that a resilient student will have a more positive outlook on their learning and classroom environment and non-resilient students generate a more negative attitude with far less enthusiasm. Researchers overwhelmingly found that resilient students have specific

characteristics such as an individual's personal motivation and their future aspirations (Waxman, Gray and Padron, 2003).

Since the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* Case ended racial segregation in U.S. schools, yet, students in 2007 still have to find an inner-resilience that encourages their resilience to a society that remains racial. *Brown vs. Board of Education* was not just about children and education. The laws and policies created by this court decision were the end result of human tendencies to prejudge, discriminate against, and stereotype other people by their ethnic, religious, physical, or cultural characteristics. (Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence and Research, 2004). The goal of this court decision was to end this behavior. The legal act was just the beginning of social and ideological implications, which continue to be felt throughout our country today. The *Brown* decision inspired and galvanized human rights struggles across the country and around the world. (Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence and Research, 2004).

Like the trees whose branches bended and sway in a storm rather than crack under pressure, we have the power to remain flexible and strong amid life's challenges... to be resilient.  
(<http://www.universityoftexasatAustin.org>, 2007)

*Brown vs. Board of Education* didn't create resiliency factors since resiliency is a part of how people overcome inequities and inhumane treatment of others. What *Board vs. Board of Education* did do was to create an acute awareness that our society was committing monumental wrongdoings against others. The analogy of the trees whose branches bend and sway in a storm is a great parallel to what resiliency is like for humans. Resiliency has been defined utilizing many synonymous terms such as hardy, invulnerable, and invincible (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). These researchers also deemed the



term *resilient* was adopted in lieu of the previous definitions since it incorporated the recognition of the struggle involved in process of becoming resilient. It has also been said that resiliency is the capacity for individuals to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social and academic competence despite exposure to severe stress (Henderson & Milistein, ). Students at risk of academic failure often face a complexity of problems caused by poverty, health, and other social conditions that have made it difficult for them to succeed in school (Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003). Waxman, Gray and Padron found that while a student's success and failure are dependent upon a number of influential determinants, it is apparent that instructional practices and the learning environments were contributing factors (Travis, 1995; Waxman 1992; Waxman and Huang 1997).

Rutter (1987) suggests there are four significant factors that can be altered to facilitate resiliency among at-risk students. First, Rutter (1987) indicates that school systems should reduce the risk impacts students' face and change their exposure to risks. Secondly, promoting resilience means proactively reducing negative chain reactions that often follow exposure to risks. Third, if schools can facilitate an environment that improves students' self-efficacy or self-esteem, their ability to succeed increases. Lastly, schools have the ability to motivate and encourage students by opening up or creating new opportunities for students. Bernard (1991) suggests specific ways that schools can provide opportunities for students to develop internal assets for resiliency. One of the first issues Bernard (1991) addresses is teaching students strong problem-solving skills. Having these skills will allow resilient students to handle adverse situations as they arise. Independently working through adverse situations provides students with a strong sense

of autonomy, which is essential to becoming productive and successful in life. Bernard (1991) also indicates that teaching students effective communication skills provides personal and professional opportunities that will enhance their quality of life and career. Finally, Bernard (1991) focuses on building meaningful, positive relationships that provide inner-growth and peace, which ultimately leads to constructive and optimistic outlooks on the future.

McMillan and Reed (1994) describe four similar factors that are directly related to resilient students. Just as researchers Bernard and Rutter, McMillan and Reed (1994) suggest that personal attributes such as motivation and goal orientation enhance the student's abilities to be resilient to adverse situations. As with any goal, individuals must utilize their time in a wise and positive manner such as completing homework in a timely manner and participating in extra-curricular activities. McMillan and Reed further state resilient students have a stable family life in the form of support that encourages success in these students. Students can be afforded these opportunities in a school setting that promotes resiliency to all students. This means, according to McMillan and Reed (1994), providing an optimal school and classroom learning environment with appropriate facilities, exposure to technology, leadership, and an overall climate that fosters learning.

Along with studying student resilience, school environments should be examined ensuring this arena is designed to promote and develop protective factors associated with individual resilience. (Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003).

One of the most widely used definitions of educational resilience is “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions and experiences”

(Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1994, p. 46). Siebert (2005) suggests that resiliency is adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences. Siebert goes on to state that resilient people recover from traumatic experiences stronger, better and wiser. Wolin and Wolin found that over time the capacity to rise above adversity occurred when individuals developed long-lasting strengths and skills or specific aspects of the survivor's self. For instance, Wolin and Wolin found six characteristics throughout their research: *Sight*, *Independence*, *Relationships*, *Initiative*, *Creativity* and *Morality*. *Insight* was the habit of asking tough questions and giving honest answers. *Independence* was drawing boundaries between yourself and troubled parents; keeping emotional and physical distance while satisfying the demands of your conscience. *Relationships* were the intimate and fulfilling ties to other people that balance a mature regard for your own needs with empathy and the capacity to give to someone else. *Initiative* meant taking charge of problems; exerting control; a taste for stretching and testing yourself in demanding tasks. *Creativity* was imposing order, beauty and purpose on the chaos of your troubling experiences and painful feelings. Finally, *morality* was an informed conscience that extends your wish for a good personal life to all of humankind.

Nettles (1991) suggests that resilience is focusing on the positive instead of the negative life situations. It is the ability of disadvantaged children to succeed against all odds that shapes the concept of resilience and moves education toward protective mechanisms that operate at turning points in students' lives to help encourage their resilient factors (Nettles, 1991). Furthermore, Nettles (1991) states that the critical issues for policy and instruction center on identifying the protective processes and mechanisms in schools, families, and communities that reduce risk and foster resilience.

John Governale (2005) wrote this sonnet about resilience:

When I was a child, I discovered in our yard  
 By accident, a colony of large red ants.  
 I sat down to play, unaware till flesh was marred  
 That a host of the minions had boldly invaded my pants.  
 Full wail, I ran, clothes crawling with unwanted guests,  
 To my mother, who with unaccountable smiles,  
 Stripped me down and hosed off the offending pests.

With hateful wrath I bombed the ants with stones.  
 I stomped their nest, their formic acid spilt.  
 I ground into dust what I thought must be their bones.  
 After each attack the ants rebuilt.

It was their resilience that filled me with dismay  
 And made me find a different place to play (p. 1).

### *First-Generation*

The college environment presents new academic and social challenges to many first-time students, but these challenges are significantly more arduous for first-generation students (London, 1989). Billson and Terry (1982) defined first-generation college students as those students whose parents have had no college or university experience, thus these students become the first ones in their family to obtain an undergraduate degree. Another scholarly definition of first-generation college students is being from blue-collar backgrounds and containing lower levels of formal education (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Evidence supports that first-generation students are at a distinct disadvantage in gaining access to postsecondary education (Chen X. , 2005). Even more disappointing are the studies that reflect students who do enroll into postsecondary education and have significant difficulties remaining enrolled and obtaining a degree (Horn & Nunez, 2000). In the Georgia Board of Regents Student Survey which was conducted in 2001, students were asked for the highest level of education attained by

their mothers and fathers. The respondents indicated that 35.3 percent of mothers and 33.7 percent of fathers have not pursued any education beyond high school. In addition, 34.6 percent of mothers and 37.8 percent of fathers had completed a college degree and/or a graduate/professional degree (See Table 3 for additional details).

The experiences and challenges first-generation students endure throughout the time they spend in college are reflected in many social and academic factors of postsecondary success (Choy, 2001). Bean and Metzner (1985) go on to state that the main difference between traditional students and first-generation students is that first-generation students have more challenges with their external environment than by the variables affecting traditional student. First-generation students have lower GPAs and SATs (Riehl, 1994) and have not been part of the honors programs (Terenzini et al., 1996), but they are typically aware of their academic problems. Hellman (1996) suggests that first-generation students have a lower sense of self-efficacy and lower self-esteem (McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis & Becker, 1991). First-generation students do not have the same sources of support as second-generation do throughout their education (Billison and Terry, 1982; Terenzini et al, 1996; York-Anderson and Bowman, 1991). Research heavily suggests that students whose parents did not attend college are less likely to be academically prepared college, have less knowledge of how to apply for college and for financial assistance, and to have more difficulty acclimating themselves to college once they enroll (Tym, McMillion, Barone & Webster, 2004). Research results suggests that growing up in a household in which neither parent has gone to college may have long-term consequences on students' success in postsecondary

education (Horn and Nunez, 2000; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton, Bugarin, Nunez 2001).

Chen (2005) stated they completed fewer credits, took fewer academic classes, earned lower grades, needed more remedial assistance, and were more likely to withdraw from or repeat classes they attempted. As a result, the likelihood of attaining a bachelor's degree was lower for first-generation students compared to their peers whose parents attended college. Padron eloquently describes first-generation students and the hurdles they must face in their communities, families and at college:

While going to college may be seen as a rite of passage for any student, it marks a significant separation from the past for those who are the first in their families to do so. Parents, siblings, and friends who have no experience of college or its rewards may be non-supportive or even obstructionist. This is particularly a problem for traditional-age students who still live at home -- they may not have or be able to create a designated place or time to study at home, and may be criticized for devoting time to school rather than family responsibilities (p. 73)

First-generation students, who may be recent immigrants, members of ethnic minority, working-class families or adults finally going back to school to get the degree they always wanted, are going back to school more than ever before (Hsiao, 1992). Hsiao (1992) states that in order for this high-risk group to succeed in their academic endeavors, colleges must provide a range of programs and services to counteract the weaknesses many of them bring to higher education and to help them overcome the obstacles they face once they enroll.

#### *Low-Income College Students*

It is estimated that of the poor in America, "40 percent are children" (Davis & McCaul, 1991, p. 21). In 2005, 37 million people, approximately 13 percent of the total

population lived below the poverty line as defined by the Census Bureau (Census Bureau, 2005). In addition, approximately 7.6 million school-age children, more than 17 percent of the total student population, live in poverty (General Accounting Office, 1993). Much of the professional literature indicts poverty as a primary factor placing students at high risk of not graduating from high school ( McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci, & Davis, 1992; Sherman, 1992; Presseisen, 1991; Pallas, 1990). Furthermore, "Students from low-income families are three times as likely to drop out of school as those from more affluent homes" (*Kids Count Data Book*, 1993, p. 11). Additionally, female students who come from families in the lowest SES quartile drop out of school at five times the rate of females from the highest quartile. Male students in the lowest quartile drop out at two and a half times the rate of those in the highest quartile (Earle & Roach, 1987). Consequently, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 identifies poverty and economic disadvantage as significant at-risk factors.

In a report by the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), states and institutions are encouraged to develop initiatives to improve the access and success of low-income students. Many more students are channeling through the higher education system including a greater number of low income students. The U.S. Department of Education predicts a 25 percent increase in the number of college students over the 1995-2013 time period. A more profound statistic is that over 80 percent of these students will be minorities from low income families (U.S. Department of Education). The federal government's Advisory Committee on Financial Assistance indicates each year nearly 400,000 academically qualified students fail to enroll in higher education. There is still a gap between low-

income and high-income student participation in college. The percentage of low-income high school students who attend college within two years of graduation has improved from 46 percent in 1970 to 57 percent in 2005. But so has the percentage of high-income students gone from 79 to 86 percent — leaving the low/high income gap similar, notes an Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities policy paper. (Paul Shelly, 2006)

Logistically, the government has programs in place to try to level the playing field when it comes to disadvantaged students. For example, The Aid for Institutional Development, commonly referred to as Title III programs, support improvements in educational quality, management and financial stability at qualifying postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). This is necessary based on concrete evidence that our society has more students who need financial assistance while attending college. In the FY2005, 36.8 percent of all resident undergraduates received federal Pell Grants. These grants are specifically targeted to student from low to middle class families who have demonstrated a need to help pay college costs. More than 90% of families receiving Pell assistance earn less than \$35,000 a year (White, 2006). Financial aid funding hasn't kept up with rising costs. In the mid-1970s, for example, the maximum Pell Grant for low-income and working-class families covered nearly 40% of the average cost of attending a four-year private college; now it covers about 15% (Kahlenburg, 2004). Funding from the Aid for Institutional Development focus on institutions that enroll a large portion of minority and financially disadvantaged students with low per-student expenditures (Institutional Development and Undergraduate Education Service, 2007).



Monetary resources are not the only barrier students from low-income families experience when trying to get into college. Students from low socio-economic situations tend to have additional social and academic hardships against them. According to Corrigan & Hartlet (2007) the key barriers that hinder low-income students from attending higher institutions revolve around the fundamental essentials necessary just for getting into college, including, applying for college, being academically prepared and, financing alternatives. According to research published in June 2005 in *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 75 percent of students from high-income families complete college by age 24, yet only 9 percent of students from low-income families complete college by this age.

Nearly 40 years after Congress passed the Higher Education Act, low-income students are still much less likely to attend college than their wealthy or middle-class peers. Two-thirds of the nation's wealthiest 25 percent of students enroll in a four-year college within two years of graduating from high school, but just one in five from the bottom 25 percent do so. In fact, low-income students are virtually shut out of the nation's most selective colleges: Among the top 146 colleges, 74 percent of students come from the richest economic quartile and just 3% from the poorest. In other words, you're 25 times as likely to run into a rich kid as a poor kid on America's elite campuses (USA Today, 2006).

### *Minority*

Minority enrollment has continued to be a consistent challenge at colleges and universities throughout the nation. Minority enrollment in colleges over the last twenty years has more than doubled. For instance, from 1980 to 2000, minority enrollment jumped from 2 million students to 4.3 million students, a 122% increase (Hammer, 2003,

6). Hispanic enrollments increased by nearly one million students over the past twenty years, and female enrollment has also skyrocketed. The American Council on Education (ACE) reported that minority enrollment in professional schools increased by 200%, and minority enrollment in graduate schools increased by 188% (Presidency, 2003, 42). Ironically, white students experienced the lowest growth of all the groups. Between 1990 and 2000, white student enrollment in colleges declined by 2.4% (Gomstyn, 2003, A25).

Research clearly indicates that minority students continue to enroll in institutions where low-income students constitute the majority of the student body. In congruence with this finding, colleges that have a smaller percentage of low-income students also experience a lower enrollment of minorities. In 1998, black and Hispanic students made up a large portion of the student body in college institutions where the majority of students were categorized as low-income (Horn, *How 4-Year College Graduation Rates Vary with Selectivity and the Size of Low-Income Enrollment*, 2006). Horn (2006) goes on to state that black students attending institutions with large low-income enrollments constituted one-quarter of the freshmen cohorts in doctoral and masters institutions and 29 percent in baccalaureate institution, in contrast, black students made up 2 and 5 percent of the freshmen cohorts in selective institutions with small low-income enrollments.

There are not many disadvantages in higher education when it comes to increasing minority enrollment; however it is a very difficult process. Whites continue to have higher high school graduation rates when compared to under-represented minorities. Many minorities may never enroll in college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2000, Hispanic youth born outside the United States contributed to

45% of all high school dropouts, and African Americans contributed to almost 18% (Di Meglio, 2005, 2). These percentages are frightening when it comes to trying to increase minority enrollment in colleges and universities.

Even if minority enrollment and access rates were on a level with white students, students have not been able to obtain the degree production rates as other students. Despite prodigious policy efforts to broaden educational opportunity, there remain marked and persistent racial and ethnic differences in educational attainment (Mare, 1995). Research indicates that minorities earn degrees at a ratio of 1:2 and 1:3 compared with white and Asian students (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Within each racial/ethnic group graduation rates tended to decline as the overall population of low-income students in the cohort increased (Horn, *How 4-Year College Graduation Rates Vary with Selectivity and the Size of Low-Income Enrollment*, 2006). Research concludes that White and Asian students tend to graduate at higher rates than black and Hispanic students. Horn (2006) states the average gap in graduation rates between White and Black students was 18 percent points, and between White and Asian students was 12 percentage points. Research shows that the majority of minorities are concentrated in non-management and lower-paying jobs in our nation. This trend can be attributed to several factors, including immigration, geographic mobility, cultural factors and educational attainment (Steeves, 2007).

As governmental agencies see that minorities are not completing degrees in higher education, they are viewing the dollars they give to colleges and universities more closely (Siedman, 2005). Governmental agencies want to see end results and are seeking legislation to make sure dollars are spent wisely, thus accountability measures are being

put in place. In a time of tuition deregulation and fiscal shortfalls, Siedman (2005) indicates that colleges are being held to a more strident approach to reporting data and demonstrating clear results of improvement.

#### *At-risk Students Enrolling in College*

There are key ingredients and motivational factors that encourage at-risk students to enroll in postsecondary education. Recent evidence from National Education Association (2006) indicates that family is critical to student achievement. Parental engagement with a child's education is not a new concept. As research indicates, parents with moderate to high-risk youth who frequently discussed school-related issues with their children in high school had much higher odds of 4-year enrollment in postsecondary education compared with students whose parents had little or no discussions with them. Special emphasis is given to at-risk students who have strong parent or peer engagement factors. Horn and Chen (1998) indicate that parents' educational expectations exerted a strong influence on whether or not moderate to high-risk teens enrolled in postsecondary education. According to Barton and Coley (1992), the family's sense of engagement and participation in their child's educational outcome has more to do with their educational attainment than income, parent's education levels, marital status and family size.

Horn and Chen (1998) suggest that at-risk students who reported that most or all of their high school friends or peers had plans of enrolling into a 4-year college were far more influenced to enroll into school than students who didn't have friends or peers enrolling into 4-year institutions. Coleman (1990) suggests a portion of college enrollment numbers are directly correlated to high school students providing educational

resources to their fellow students regarding postsecondary education opportunities.

McDonough (1997) emphasizes similar sentiments suggesting the impact of social status on the development of aspirations for college. Congruently, Akerlof and Kranton (2002) conclude that a student's primary motivation on educational enrollment and attainment is a reflection on his or her social status and fitting into an environment and social setting such as a college campus. Horn and Chen (1998) stated the importance that friends attributed to learning activities such as studying and getting good grades had a strong, positive effect on whether or not students enrolled in any postsecondary education.

Another factor for increasing the opportunity for postsecondary enrollment for at-risk students is actively participating in college preparation activities (Horn and Chen, 1998). This means getting information about the colleges students want to attend. Information-gathering involves a strategic plan of pulling pertinent information about college requirements such as financial aid, entrance exams, application process, GPAs, and many additional attributes. Horn and Chen (1998) indicate that at-risk students who get help with financial aid, application process and entrance exams increase their chances of getting accepted to the postsecondary schools.

Another compelling factor for at-risk students who reported participating in outreach programs significantly increased their chances of enrolling in postsecondary education. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education (2007) promotes TRIO programs, which are educational opportunity programs designed to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The history of TRIO is progressive, which began with Upward Bound Program that emerged from the Economic Act of 1964 in response to the presidential administration's War on Poverty (U.S. Department of

Education, 2007). The main function of TRIO programs is to support programs targeted to serve and assist low-income, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities to progress through attaining educational goals from middle school to post-baccalaureate programs.

Much controversy has been generated over the past few decades about eligibility and the definitions of educationally disadvantaged students; however, the Research Triangle Institute defined eligible members as groups of people who historically have been under-represented in higher education and who are below the national averages on educational indices (Kendrick & Thomas, 1970).

As Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, “All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence,” ([www.trio.org](http://www.trio.org), 2007). Warren Buffet, who is an American investor, businessman and philanthropist stated, “It is not necessary to do extraordinary things to get extraordinary results” (Journal of Investment, 2005, p.22). The Upward Bound program is dedicated to providing instruction in math, laboratory science, composition, literature, and foreign language. This educational program provides additional services such as: instruction in reading, writing, study skills, and other subjects necessary for success in education beyond high school; academic, financial, or personal counseling; exposure to academic programs and cultural events; tutorial services; mentoring programs; information on postsecondary education opportunities; assistance in completing college entrance and financial aid applications; assistance in preparing for college entrance exams, and work study positions to expose participants to careers requiring a postsecondary degree (Educational Government, 2005).

Since 1966, Rhode Island College began an Upward Bound program that has enrolled over 2,000 students. The success of this program has been overwhelming. Of these students, there has been a low (0.1%) high school drop-out rate. The most recent evaluation of students who graduated from Rhode Island College Upward Bound Program experienced 99.1 percent acceptance rate; 97.9 percent enrollment rate; 76.6 percent college graduation/retention rate (Rhode Island College, 2007).

The TRIO Dissemination Project was added under The Higher Education Amendments of 1998, providing the opportunity to expand TRIO programs. As with any program, improvements are continually being made to assist low-income, first-generation college students. TRIO programs have the ability to work with other institutions and community agencies that serve low-income and first-generation college students but do not have TRIO grants (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The Posse Foundation is a structured organization that successfully identifies recruits and trains student leaders from public high schools to form multi-cultural teams called "Posses." The program began when an individual dropped out of college implying that he would have never dropped out if he had had his "Posse" with him. As Kingsbury (2005) indicates, the Posse foundation is an organization that helps inner-city kids get into elite colleges and follows through by ensuring they graduate. The foundation, which is funded by a variety of groups including Goldman Sachs, Sallie Mae and professional football charities aims to identify top students from high schools in poor urban areas that recruiters from elite colleges tend to pass by (Kingsbury, 2005). According to the foundation, the concept behind the Posse is the belief that a small, diverse group of

talented students, a Posse, carefully selected and trained, can serve as a catalyst for increased individual and community development (Posse Foundation, 2007).

These teams are then prepared through intensive Pre-Collegiate Training Programs for enrollment at top-tier universities nationwide to pursue their academics and to promote a cross-cultural communication on campus (Posse Foundation, 2007). These teams form student organizations that continue their existence until the students graduate from college. A sense of belonging is formed early on with the students, which in turn helps them adapt to the new academic environment of college life. The Posse Foundation has achieved great success helping students gain college access and obtain financial scholarships. The Posse Foundation at the University of Wisconsin believes that since the United States is becoming more multi-cultural, the leaders in this nation should reflect the country's rich demographic mix (University of Wisconsin Foundation, 2007).

The Posse Foundation provides many positive opportunities for academic organizations and the students who attend them. The Posses facilitate annual PossePlus retreats, which involve hundreds of students from the general student body in discussions on academic life, race, sexuality and student faculty interaction (University of Wisconsin Foundation, 2007). While the Posse teams thrive and excel within their selective groups, they provide consistent encouragement to other non-Posse students who are not part of the majority culture by creating an inclusive community on campus. Posses help to increase the numbers of Hispanic, African American, Asian, and other students from diverse backgrounds in the student populations at Posse Partner institutions by helping to make the campus more appealing to students from all backgrounds.



A “Posse is a place where your guard can be dropped no matter how long your back has been turned,” states Colin O’Mailey ([www.possefoundation.org](http://www.possefoundation.org), 2007)

### *Importance of Obtaining a College Degree*

A college degree is more important in 2007 than ever before in the history of the United States. Many corporations are requiring undergraduate degrees, and the job candidates who obtain postsecondary degrees will earn more and have more job opportunities than individuals without degrees (Kennedy, 2003). Kennedy (2003) goes on to indicate that when disadvantaged individuals complete their college degrees, they significantly increase their social and economic circumstances. Kennedy used the socioeconomic diversity index to define the term disadvantage, which has three parts: Family income registering at the poverty level index; highest level of education by either parent; and, proportion of students in high school who qualified for free/reduced lunch (Government Accounting Office, 2003). The Government Accounting Office (2003) indicates that states are beginning to hold colleges accountable for retaining and graduating their students. Higher education institutions are identifying strategies and developing goals to reduce the gaps in college completion and increasing overall college degree achievement. The Government Accounting Office (2003) found three common programs 4-year colleges utilized that assisted with student retention. One was increasing the actual number of students entering postsecondary education. Another method colleges employed was focusing on their performance in retention and graduating students. Finally, colleges began assisting students through various programs encouraging them to graduate on time.

Another area that is not new to fostering education completion is financial assistance. If financial aid is available to students who are in need, this makes the college experience easier to endure and remain as an active student (Government Accounting Office, 2003). Financial aid is commonly used by the low-income, minority and first-generation students as this study has stated. The overall effectiveness of financial programs is unknown, according to Government Accounting Office (2003); however, the education system has identified this as a priority as students that fall into disadvantaged categories are worthy recipients of college degrees.

It is during high school that students begin contemplating if college is a path they would like to pursue upon graduating with their high school diplomas. As McGuire (2005) states, high school students may find themselves asking, “Why is it important to go to college?” McGuire (2005) believes that attending college provides opportunities which are not as widespread to those who have not received a higher education. It is further implied that generating an income upon graduating high school is very appealing to new graduates, thus attending college may not seem a dire priority. Not only is college expensive, some don't fully appreciate the financial rewards a college graduate will receive upon completion of a higher education degree. As Carter (2006) indicates the number of jobs and their salaries and benefits are greater for college graduates than those who do not attend college.

The U.S. Department of Labor reported in 2003, that workers with a bachelor's degree had median weekly earnings of \$900, compared to \$554 a week for high school graduates (see table 1 for additional data on earnings). These rewards will seem too far away for some and these individuals will choose immediate gratification with a job right

out of high school. However, as McGuire (2005) suggests, high school graduates today are unable to obtain the number of high-paying jobs that were once available as the nation has transferred from a manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge-based economy reliant on individuals who have obtained a college degree. Carter (2006) suggests that in past generations, there were many levels of jobs available to those without college degrees; however, now many of those jobs don't exist, or they require a college degree (See Table 1 for potential earnings).

Besides a general desire to attend or not attend post-secondary education institutions, Americans generally respect, appreciate and encourage individuals to take this path upon high school graduation. 84 percent of Americans say that it is extremely (37 percent) or very (47 percent) important to have a college degree in order to get ahead. The same study found that 77 percent of Americans feel that getting a college degree today is more important than it was ten years ago (Immerwahr, 2002). Immerwahr (2002) suggests that in the view of most Americans, it's very important for individuals to receive a higher education. According to Immerwahr's (2002) research, the findings from his study indicate that while the primary focus of higher education is to prepare for jobs and careers, another critical focus is gaining maturity, networking and learning how to get along with others. Although Americans are favorable of obtaining a college degree, they also do not condemn the people who do not have one to failure. For example, 67% say there are still ways to succeed in today's work force without a college education (Immerwahr, 2002).

Not only will approximately 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs of the future require some postsecondary education or training (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007), but

there are additional opportunities a college degree can provide for individuals in the work force and in life. McGuire (2006) suggests that when students experience a post secondary education, they have the opportunity to read books and listen to the lectures of top experts in their fields. A college environment provides forward thinking and stimulation that encourages students to think, ask questions, and explore new ideas. It also allows for additional growth and development, which provides graduates with an edge in the job market over those who have not experienced a higher education. The importance of a college education is also accentuated because of the opportunity to gain valuable resources during a college students' experience. Students have the ability to network and make valuable connections which are collected throughout their college career. The more professional and personal relationships students build during this time, the more options they will have when they begin their job search. The importance of a college education isn't exhausted upon achieving credible employment, having the degree often provides for greater promotion opportunity throughout an individual's life (McGuire, 2006).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine the resiliency factors that perpetrated the success of three at-risk students who obtained undergraduate degrees in spite of obstacles. This chapter outlines the methodology utilized in this qualitative study to thoroughly analyze the topic by answering the research questions and presenting the data in an organized manner. The researcher through a detailed qualitative study sought meaning from lived experiences of the participants. The research design is constructed as a process of detailed steps that adequately address the research questions and sub-questions, thus producing an in-depth qualitative research study. This study includes the following components: a statement of research questions, the research design, a description of participants, procedural details of how the sample was chosen, the instrumentation that was utilized, how the data was collected, analyzed and reported. Finally, a summary of the methodology is provided at the conclusion of this chapter.

#### *Research Questions*

The overarching question to be researched is “What are the social and academic factors that contribute to resilience for at-risk students at Georgia Universities?”

The sub-questions are:

1. What social and academic needs do these students believe are necessary for success?
2. What are the barriers that at-risk students face throughout their college experience?

3. What personal factors or people, within or outside the university, does the student attribute their resiliency for persistence and success?
4. What programs, organizations or social activities would you recommend universities offer to assist the students in achieving their goals?

### *Research Design*

The design of this study is qualitative which includes a descriptive analysis of the social and academic experiences of three at-risk students in the final semester of their senior year from universities in Georgia. According to Marshall and Grossman (1999) qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of social phenomenon. Schein (1985) stated, “We cannot understand organizational phenomena without considering culture both as a cause and as a way of explaining such phenomena” (p. 311). Patton suggests that qualitative research grows out of the forms of data the researcher collects such as direct observation, in-depth open-ended interviews and written documents (Patton, 2002). The researcher engaged in a semi-structured interview technique utilizing guided questions (see Appendix F for Guided Questions) to gain accurate and in-depth perspectives of the participants’ educational experiences through college. Patton (2002) indicates that by interviewing participants, researchers gain direct quotations from people about their experiences, feelings opinions and knowledge.

The researcher conducted interviews of three students from different universities who were minority, low income and first-generation. According to Seidman (1991), “Interviewing is a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues through understanding the experiences of the individuals whose lives constitute education” ( The researcher believes the information received from the at-risk students at the three Georgia

Universities will be an inspiration to students in facing similar situations as well as to professors and administrators to continue developing and enhancing social and academic programs that support these students. A semi-structured interview technique with guided questions was utilized to gain accurate and in-depth perspectives of the participants' educational experiences through college (See Appendix F for Guided Questions). Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggest that interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings. Prior to interviewing the participants, the researcher obtained permission from each participant to tape record each interview session. This maintained authenticity and accuracy of the interview. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) concur with other theorists that recollecting an interview session in its entirety is virtually impossible. Although interviewers can remember some details, it's impossible to remember matters such as pauses, overlaps and in breaths (p. 354).

The interview technique was the best method to explore the research questions in this study. Gaining personal insight from the participants was critical in providing a thorough examination of resiliency factors. According to Glesne (2006), "Respondents answer questions in the context of dispositions (motives, values, concerns, needs) that researchers need to unravel in order to makes sense out of the words that their questions generate" (p. 79). Furthermore, participants may reveal unexpected abilities, strengths, and coping strategies when their performances are viewed in natural settings and authentic situations (Anzul, Evans, King & Tellier-Robinson, 2001).

The researcher utilized an ethnographic approach to successfully answer the research questions. Ethnography provides an up-close means of identifying significant categories of human experience and enriches the inquiry (Moll and Greenberg, 1990). A

student's personal account of their college experiences and the tools and resources they employed to achieve, provided the researcher and audience a translucent record of the institution's strengths and weaknesses in developing the at-risk student. Employing this approach, the researcher used the culture as the theoretical framework to interpret the students' constructions of reality and identify patterns in their perspectives and behaviors (Glesne, 2006). Through the interview process, this study engaged in ethnographic techniques that provided new perspectives and validated the culture from which the participants originated prior to the college experience. According to Agar (1996), ethnography provides a foundation for new concepts, new patterns and once these are obtained, researchers can make a valid case.

#### *Participant Selection*

This study focused on three college students in the last semester of their college year. These students were in good academic standing and were from the following three categories: low-income households, first-generation to attend higher education and minority students. The researcher consulted with colleagues from Kilkenny University, Killeen University and Belfast State University to appropriately identify a student from their institution that would be willing to participate in this study. The researcher was able to obtain candidates from each of the universities to voluntarily participate in this study.

During this study, the process of selecting the right participants was critical in obtaining a thorough understanding of at-risk students and their experiences. The end result of selection needs to "produce information-rich cases" that educators, individuals and society can "learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Glesne (2006) indicates that network sampling is



engaged when researchers obtain knowledge about potential cases from people who know people who meet research interests. Clark (1999) suggests that homogeneous sampling is utilized when researchers select all similar cases in order to describe some subgroup in depth.

### *Data Collection Methods*

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that interviews are widely used in qualitative research and usually begin with the researcher's autobiographical-oriented narrative that is connected to the research problem (see researcher's Autobiographical Roots of Study in Chapter 1). The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before contacting colleagues and participants (see Appendix B for IRB Approval). Once the participant was identified by the university colleague, the researcher sent the candidate a formal letter thoroughly explaining the details of the study (see Appendix C for letter). Once the candidates received and read the letter from the researcher, they were contacted by telephone to introduce the researcher to the participant and to explain the scope of the study and answer any questions the participant may have had. It was at this time that the researcher made an appointment with the participant for the interview session.

Prior to each interview, the researcher went over the Informed Consent Letter with the participants (see Appendix D for Informed Consent Letter). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews by utilizing guided questions to collect the data (see Appendix F for Guided Questions). The data was recorded on a tape recorder to ensure that the notes convey participants' experiences accurately.

The goal of the interview was to explore the participants' point of view, feelings and perspectives (Guion, 2001). Guion (2001) continues by suggesting that in-depth interviews yield information if performed accurately. The researcher engaged in a loose form of semi-standardized interview process (Berg, 2004). Berg (2004) suggests that this technique allows the researcher to have some questions predetermined, yet, the total freedom to stray from these questions as the participant's responses unfold. Guion (2001) suggests that the researcher's primary role is that of a listener thus engaging in conversations where smooth transitions occur from one topic to the next. The researcher incorporated probing questions to obtain a more complete story by asking the participant to elaborate on certain issues (Shank, 2006). The researcher followed the lead of Leedy and Ormrod (2001) and employed these techniques throughout each interview. For instance, 1) get written consent to participate in the study from each student, 2) set up the interview well in advance, 3) ask for permission to tape record the interview, 4) confirm the date immediately in writing, 5) send a reminder of the date in the interview, and 6) transcribe the notes of the interview (p.253).

### *Interview Questions*

The researcher compiled the following probing questions that engage the participants and maintained accuracy of their stories, experiences and knowledge. The researcher encouraged each participant to express their feelings and perspectives in-depth. These questions explored the lives of the participants while allowing the researcher to gain insightful information and data, ultimately answering the overarching research question and sub-questions.

1. Please tell me about your background.

2. During your elementary and secondary education, who were your mentors and what were the driving factors that encouraged you to go to college? Please explain.
3. Were you ever discouraged in college? Name some factors and/or people discouraged you?
4. What have you found to be the hardest/scariest part of college? Please explain.
5. When did you first realize you had an inner-strength; a resiliency of academic achievement?
6. Name some social and/or academic programs that you attribute to your success in college?
7. Name some things you needed from your college experience that you did not get?
8. Based on your college experience, what improvements would you suggest to college administrators that would improve policies and structure to promote success in students? Please explain.
9. Name some factors and/or people that attribute to you being where you are in life today?

### *Data Management*

Data management is a critical piece of collecting, analyzing and reporting data. Once each interview was complete, the researcher combined the notes and recordings to transcribe each session for accuracy. This step brought together all of the information-gathering approaches into one written form allowing the researcher to write out all questions and responses verbatim from the interview session (Guion, 2001). The

researcher compiled all interviews into Microsoft 2007, which has the ability to line number each sentence making the analysis more user friendly for the researcher.

### *Data Analysis*

The process of accurately analyzing the data is critical for any research study. It involves determining the meaning of the information by looking for themes, commonalities and patterns to make sense of the information (Guion, 2001). Furthermore, transforming this raw data into new knowledge requires the qualitative researcher to actively engage themselves in the demanding analytical processes throughout all phases of the research (Thorne, 2000). The researcher examined the data in each transcript identifying reoccurring themes and patterns. The researcher utilized Ryan and Bernard's (2003) outline and techniques to discover and explore the themes in texts:

These techniques are based on: (1) an analysis of words (word repetitions, key-indigenous terms, and key-words-in contexts); (2) a careful reading of larger blocks of texts (compare and contrast, social science queries, and searching for missing information); (3) an intentional analysis of linguistic features (metaphors, transitions, connectors); and (4) the physical manipulation of texts (p.89).

### *Summary*

The researcher's design was developed to investigate the resiliency factors in college students that encourage persistence to graduation. The researcher's design was constructed as a process of detailed steps that adequately address the research questions and sub-questions, producing an in-depth qualitative research study. This study includes the following components: a statement of research questions, the research design, a description of participants, procedural details of how the sample was chosen, the guided questions that were utilized, how the data was collected, analyzed and reported. After synthesizing the results of the study, the researcher used the findings to provide

meaningful insight on resiliency factors in college students. These findings will assist students, administrators and community members in our region.

## CHAPTER 4

### REPORT OF DATA ANALYSIS

This study was specifically designed to determine resiliency factors contributed to at-risk college students successfully being able to complete college despite the challenges they faced. Three students from three different Georgia universities participated in this study. Each at-risk participant was chosen by administrators within the university and interviewed to gain their perspectives and first-hand knowledge about their college experiences. The term *at-risk* in regards to this study refers to students who fall into three categories: low-income, minority and first generation. Statistics in the literature review overwhelmingly indicate that at-risk students have less of a chance of going to college and of those who do attend, not many graduate with their undergraduate degrees. Even in 2007, with the demographics changing vastly in America, our education system still lacks diversity.

The method of discovery in this research was qualitative. The researcher conducted intensive interviews with each participant during the month of July 2007. Each interview was conducted at a place and time of the participants' choosing. Prior to conducting the interviews, each participant read and signed the Participant Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D) before the interviews were conducted. The researcher went over the Participant Informed Consent Form verbally with each participant to ensure they understood three critical areas of the interview; the interviews would be recorded, there might be a need for follow-up interviews, and the identities of the participants and the schools they attended would remain anonymous.

After conducting each interview, the researcher personally transcribed the notes (see Appendix G). Once the notes were transcribed, a second pass of listening to the notes and comparing them to the written transcription was completed to ensure accuracy of recording the information provided by each participant. An analysis of the notes took place, once accuracy was complete. The researcher delved into each interview and made personal notes to organize the data and become more familiar with the participants and gain clear insight on their views and perspectives, which was based on the experiences they shared with the researcher. Structuring the information into a logical and organized format, this allowed the researcher to depict commonalities in thoughts and ideas that each participant discussed in the interview sessions.

#### *Research Questions*

The overarching question of this study was how at-risk college students incorporated their resiliency factors to successfully achieve an undergraduate degree in Georgia Universities. The sub-questions include the following:

1. What social and academic needs do these students believe are necessary for success?
2. What are the barriers that at-risk students face throughout their college experience?
3. What personal factors or people, within or outside the university, does the student attribute their resiliency for persistence and success?
4. What programs, organizations or social activities would you recommend universities offer to assist the students in achieving their goals?

### *Research Design*

The research utilized a qualitative research design. This approach allowed in-depth questioning about the resiliency factors that contributed to these college students' success. The qualitative approach enabled each participant to tell the researcher about their college experiences in length and in detail. By obtaining substantial information about the participants' backgrounds and the obstacles they overcame to achieve their undergraduate degree, the researcher gathered detailed data to present in the findings section of this study. This qualitative research design was effective because the participants were able to relax and express sincerity in their comments, suggestions and experiences. The researcher developed an interview guide that incorporated a small list of guided questions that emerged from the review of the literature.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section describes the participants who volunteered to contribute their stories and college experiences for the benefit of this study. The second section is an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences along with key interview points. This section also presents common themes and patterns of resilience combined with social and academic factors that the researcher found through analyzing and synthesizing the data.

### *Participants*

The researcher along with colleagues at three different universities worked together to select the right candidates for this study. The criteria for each participant consisted of the following: 1) seniors in good academic standing, 2) minority, 3) low income family and 4) first-generation students. Each participant, the towns in which they



reside and the universities they are attending have pseudo names to maintain confidentiality and meet Institutional Review Board Requirements (IRB) guidelines.

The participants' pseudo names are Kathleen Sheehan, James Goldman and Linda Emerson. The researcher describes each participant based on the information provided in the interview sessions. This information includes pertinent details about their background, their parents' education level and the accomplishments regarding their undergraduate degree. This information provided in this description incorporates the factors which puts these students in the at-risk categories being explored in this study. Upon completion of the participant descriptions, the researcher provided a Table (see Table 1), which provides an overall portrait of the student's demographic information.

#### *Kathleen Sheehan*

Kathleen is an African American woman who is 26 years old. She grew up in a poor community in the southern region of Georgia. She attended inner-city schools from Kindergarten to completing her high school diploma. Her parents are still married after 40 years, and she has five siblings. Her Mom and Dad did not complete high school and Kathleen is the only sibling to go to college and complete an undergraduate degree. Sheehan attends a Historically Black University (HBCU), known as Georgia University of Achievement (GUA), and will graduate Magna Cum Laude in December 2007 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration. In conjunction with Kathleen's success in college, she works full-time and is raising her five-year old daughter as a single Mom.

#### *James Goldman*

James is an African American male who is 22 years old. He grew up in a low-income community in a small rural town in southern Georgia. James' parents divorced

when he was seven years old, and he is a younger brother. James' father earned a high school diploma; however his Mom dropped out. James' brother did not pursue college upon high school graduation, thus, James is the only son to achieve an undergraduate degree. Goldman attends the Georgia University of Hope (GUH), and will graduate in July, 2007 with a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice. In conjunction with his success, he is employed by the U.S. Army as a Reservist, which assists him financially with his college tuition. Finally, James is a very spiritual person and he attributes a lot of his strength from his religion.

*Linda Emerson*

Linda is an African American female who is 23 years old. She grew up in a low-income community in southern Georgia. Her mother became pregnant with Linda when she was in high school, yet, she managed to graduate high school. Linda's father dropped out of high school and divorced her Mom. She has a younger sister who is in college and expected to graduate in two years. Linda is graduating from the Georgia University of Endurance (GUE), with honors, in December 2007 with a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood's Education. Among Linda's successes, she has maintained a part-time job to assist her with college expenses.

Table 1: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Parents' Education	Socio-economic	Degree
Kathleen	26	F	African American	<b>Dad-</b> dropped out of high school <b>Mom-</b> dropped out of high school	Low-income	B.S. Business
James	22	M	African American	<b>Dad</b> – high school diploma <b>Mom-</b> dropped out of high school	Low-income	B.S. Criminal Justice
Linda	24	F	African American	<b>Dad</b> – dropped out of high school <b>Mom</b> – high school diploma	Low-income	B.S. Early Childhood Education

### *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Three Georgia college students were selected to participate in this study. The researcher met with academic contacts from three different Georgia Universities to find candidates who were minority, first-generation and low-income. Prior to contacting these candidates, the researcher received Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix B). The researcher sent each participant a letter prior to the interview explaining the study in detail (see Appendix C). The researcher contacted the prospective candidates by phone, and again explained the details of the study and answered any questions the participants had regarding the study. The researcher set up convenient meeting dates and times for the interview. Each participant completed a consent form prior to interview (see Appendix D). Each participant also agreed to allow tape-recordings of the interview session. Names of the participants, towns and university names have been kept confidential, utilizing pseudo names. All other data collected in this study are factual.

The researcher utilized the research questions to gain the data collected. The data collected was received through interview sessions using guided-questions. This approach was successful in gaining insight on the students' perspectives on their college experiences. The researcher has taken particular care to present the perspectives of each student in a logical and sequential order as guided by the research questions. Also any central ideas, unique viewpoints or similarities in responses were emphasized in this section.

### *Practices and Strategies*

Research sub-question 1: What social and academic needs do these students believe are necessary for success?
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The following information has been extracted from the three at-risk student interviews as they discuss their school experiences in detail. Based on the data per each participant, two major and common themes emerged from the data. First, each participant relied significantly on a social network of close friends as one of their reasons for success in a college environment. These friends consisted of childhood friends or ones they met during college. Whether these students realized it at the time, they were building a group of friends around them that saw potential in them and would not let them fail. The social network of friends these participants' built around them became their fortress, and played a major role in their decisions to accomplish their goals in college. All three participants' agreed that it was the people they chose to be around and have in their network that kept them on the path to success. Ultimately, this was their form of emotional support, their guidance, their social outlet, their parental control; this social network meant everything to them, and still does.

The second theme which emerged was that each participant had a person(s) they could name in high school who mentored them and guided them. These people comprised of teachers, relatives, church leaders who provided hope and encouragement to help the participants endure the arduous task of completing college. These were the adult in their lives who provided the emotional support they needed and lacked from their home environment. These were significant people in their lives who were positive role models to them, guided them and provided continuous support along the way. Ultimately, these role models saw the light in them and encouraged them to keep the light shining and bright.

The excerpts from each theme will be presented in two sections, social network and mentors. The findings are presented logically by each participant utilizing their narratives collected in the interview process.

#### *Social Network*

*Kathleen contributed the following perspective on the manner in which her social network before and during college attributed to her college success:*

I have good friends. That's important to me because my inner-circle of friends, my closest friends, they are all either in school or have graduated from school. So my best friends Tonya and Nicole just graduated, one from Belfast State and the other from Kilkenny. I have a girlfriend in Shannon going to Chelsey State. My closest friends are all in school. They are the greatest support and encouragement because they all know first-hand. Whether they have had children or had to work full-time. I have been very fortunate to be surrounded by good and supportive friends. We have a good time, we go out, but it's just about so much more. It's a

lot more than just what you see on the outside. It's about being good friends, family, being good parents. It's such a great support system. I have great friends.

*James contributed the following perspective on the manner in which his social network before and during college attributed to her college success:*

Once I got into high school, at this time I had been best friends with uh, with the same person I've been best friends with since the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and we are still best friends today. And, I began to see him as, his Mom had a bachelor's degree, his grandmother had one, his aunt, all of them had their Master's degrees. So, they were all educated people. But, he was, uh, he was always a very smart person. However, whenever we got to high school, I noticed that he got, we were on two different levels and he got to do a lot more, a lot more activities, a lot more clubs, and I found myself getting left behind. And, I realized that, okay, I can't do this. I'm alone at lunch time because he's at a National Honors Society meeting.

*Linda contributed the following perspective on the manner in which her social network before and during college attributed to her college success:*

One of my best friends, Sarah, goes to school with me and we hang out together all the time. We encourage each other. We talk about the hard times and the good times. We have a lot in common and really, like, help other succeed. She and I have been through so much together. Thank God for Sarah. I mean, I don't know what I would have done without her. I felt so different and like I didn't belong. I was miserable my first year. Our first year we lived in different dorms, but in our second year, we lived in the same dorm so we kind of had a clique that we hung out with and it's kind of funny because it's almost the same group that we hang out with now. I mean, a few have gone, but most are still here. We get along

really well and help each other out when we can. We have become a family and it wasn't until like my second year of college that I really started feeling like I belonged.

### *Mentors*

*Kathleen contributed the following perspective on the manner in which the mentors she looked up to before and during college attributed to her college success:*

There wasn't one particular teacher that encouraged me, I mean, they were all encouraging in their own ways. So, Pauly Mullis was a word-processing teacher and she did CBE (Cooperative Business Education). She helped me get my first job as a student worker at the Board of Education and I worked with the Deputy Superintendent Paul Wagner. She was the first person to get me in the working field. I was thankful to her for that and she was always very encouraging. Um, Lula Baker, she was an English teacher Savannah High School, she was always very encouraging. My homeroom teacher, Shirley Michaels, um, never had a class from her ever, but she was one that would always say, be punctual, be on time and always treated all the students fairly. She held you accountable. So, it's those little things. She never taught me a specific subject; it was more like responsibility and self control.

*James contributed the following perspective on the manner in which the mentors he looked up to before and during college attributed to her college success:*

I went to an Ambassadors Club meeting, which was a Christian club. It was the first time going and I began to ask questions and the lady that was over the club, she really, uh really took me under her wing and she started holding me accountable for things. One thing is I don't like disappointing people and once she

began holding me accountable for things, I began to change my attitude. And my teachers knew that, they wouldn't call home to Momma, they would go and tell her. She would come and tell me, you know I'm disappointed in that, you are better than that and I was like awe God, I felt like crap. And, I began to talk to school-work counselors and they began to see something in me and that's what really made me turn around and by the time I graduated, I must have went from a 2.4 to 3.0 and that was when I graduated.

This other mentor goes back to my religion. Have you heard of Ron Parsons? He's like a very profound preacher-type. I saw him one time on TV and like I said before I had never been into the rap music. Like I said, for some reason, I always felt like I was set apart. And I would hear these old stories/gospels on the radio, but I remember seeing Ron Parsons on TV and I grew up in a traditional Lutheran church as opposed to a Pentecostal church where it's very wild. And, I saw Rob Parson on TV one day and there were people lined up at the altar and he was walking by touching their head and they were falling out and I was like, "wow. " What is that? At this point, I knew I was different. I loved going to church and singing with my grandma and to choir. My aunt sung and I would love to go hear her sing. My Mom never made us go to church. She took us when she had time. By this age, I was finding a ride to church and I was 12 and 13. I always knew I couldn't fit in with the regular people and it felt like this institution, this place called a church is what I could fit into. When I saw this Rob Parsons and saw him touching people and making them fall out, I was like I want to do that. Type thing and that is what kind of drew me out.



*Linda contributed the following perspective on the manner in which the mentors she looked up to before and during college attributed to her college success:*

I really have to say, my school counselor was really good about getting information to us. She helped us figure out how to afford going to school and she helped us file some of the paperwork. Ms. Parker hadn't been out of college for long so she knew what was out there and how to obtain funding for tuition, books and fees. Yeah, Ms. Parker, she sure was something. We would be hanging out in her office while she checked on stuff for us. Now, I'll say, this was probably the most help I ever got when it came to going to college. I really think that like Mrs. Parker from high school got me started off to a really good start.

Research sub-question 2: What are the barriers that at-risk students' face throughout their college experience?
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These three participants faced many challenges and barriers throughout their college experience. Based on the data collected per each participant, two major themes emerged from the information provided in the interview process. First, the participants felt a lack of support emotionally from their family members. The data reveals that since the parents did not attend college, they truly didn't know how to encourage their children to go to college or stay in college when feelings of dropping out emerged. This was tremendously hard for the participants to talk about. When discussing their emotions about their families, the participants' emotions were raw and their struggles were palpable. The participants' wanted the support from their immediate family, yet they knew it was not attainable due to their circumstances. The second theme presented in the data was isolation; a feeling of not fitting-in within the college environment. Each

participant expressed feelings of not fitting in, which caused inner-turmoil. These students just wanted to fit in, yet, couldn't find the means to break through with their background and personality. In many instances, they felt inadequate and different, although they looked like the other students. Mentors and friends would suggest getting involved to overcome the barrier of not fitting-in; however, another obstacle these participants' faced was finding time to get involved based on their schedules. Each participant worked throughout college to assist with their tuition and living expenses, thus having a job and studying didn't provided them with the opportunity to get involved. Each of the participants in this study came from a low-income family. While the participants found it hard to work and attend school, financial obligations did not hinder their decision to stay in school and complete their degree. The students found an inner-resilience to overcome the barriers and completed the necessary tasks to achieve their goals.

The excerpts from each theme will be presented in two sections: lack of family support and isolation. The findings are presented logically by each participant utilizing their narratives collected in the interview process.

### *Lack of Family Support*

*Kathleen contributed this perspective on her experiences of feelings about lack of family support during college:*

They (parents) were always encouraging me (to go to college), but it wasn't like a big hoorah, it was like, "great." "Go to school, do well." But, I didn't have someone guide me which is kind of why I went to Dubois because it was like someone else was trying to guide their child there. So, they wanted someone to be a friend of their child during school, like a pair. So, for me it wasn't like my

parents told me that I wouldn't do well in this environment or that I might not fit in. There was no one really there to guide me like filling out applications for college or to encourage me to fill out applications for college. Or, going to visit different colleges, so when someone introduced me to Dubois, So, um, they (parents) were excited I went, they were supportive, but I guess they didn't know what to do so they couldn't tell me what to do and kind of guide me, um, in the right direction. The recruiter came to the house and talked to me and everything sounded good. And my parents were like, "fine, you can do it." But, there really wasn't anyone to guide me that said, "look at this school, look at that school, maybe you should stay closer to home your first year or what do you want to do." I don't even know if my Father knows what my major is at school. I mean, he's supportive, he knows I go to school but if someone asks him, "so what is your daughter's major," he'd probably say, "I don't know, school."

I went to school for about a year at Belfast State. I did very well my first semester, but it was really my second semester that I got really discouraged and I didn't really have anyone to encourage me to go to school or to stay in school, so, uh...when I left it was okay to drop out of school. When I left school in 99', I didn't leave school the right way. I just left. Just knew I didn't want to go to school anymore. I just left, didn't withdraw. Just left school, which gave me a semester full of F's, so, I had five F's and maybe five A's. So, when I came back to school in 2005, I had a 1.88 GPA.

*James contributed this perspective on his experiences of feelings about lack of family support during college:*

My mom, she was a single mom. She worked 8-5, came home, cooked, went to bed and *that was it*. There was no we are all sitting in the living room, “how was school today?” That life was not there. By the time I was 15, I was on my own, my momma, she could pay the bills. My Mom always said, “you know, I’m proud of you.” She couldn’t help me with homework, uh, at this time I began to really, I began to explore God and she couldn’t help me in that area. She provided the necessities; I never realized I was poor until I went to college. My Mom, maybe she helps me once a year with insurance, that was 2 years and I’ve been on my own ever since. But that was pretty much it; I pretty much took care of myself since I was about 15. When I talk about took care of myself, I don’t mean housed myself, but I bought my own clothes, I paid my senior dues, I bought my own.... I took care of my own expenses. She provided a room for me to live. But, pretty much other than that I stepped out on my own. We didn’t have a relationship growing up. I felt as she did her job as a mother and not necessarily walked into the role as a mother.

I had no positive male role models what so ever. My Dad taught me how to be a womanizer. That’s what he did. You know. I remember times we would be at the house and one woman would be knocking on the front door and the other lady would be leaving out the back door. You know, that’s what he taught me. I didn’t follow that, I didn’t take heed to that. I was, I just couldn’t do that, I thought that was just so, how could you do that?

I try to surround myself by like-minded individuals. It’s like my family, they will call me and say, “Hey, I haven’t talked to you for awhile,” and I’ll laugh and

think yeah, there is a reason for that. I mean I love my family, I do but we have nothing in common. I'm not elevating myself above them it's like if you can't help motivate me to the next level, then we have nothing in common.

*Linda contributed this perspective on her experiences of feelings about lack of family support during college:*

My Dad was in and out of our lives. He was and still is like a poor excuse of a father. My sister and I know we aren't the only kids he has. I think like he has two others from two different women, and he doesn't take care of the other ones either. But, you know if someone sees him, he says he takes care of us and like gets us clothes and stuff. I think he even told someone like he was helping me with college.

Since my mom didn't go to college, she really didn't know about getting into college or what was necessary. She would listen to me and say, "awe, now honey (she was always calling us honey or sweetie) that sounds real good, but she really couldn't guide me, mentor me or tell me what to do." I mean, what I found out about applying for school and getting aid and stuff like that, I kind of, like find out about this on my own through friends. I can't really blame my Mom, I mean, she did the best she could under the circumstances.

*Feelings of Isolation*

*Kathleen contributed this perspective on her feelings of isolation and not fitting-in, in a college environment:*

I went to Dubois College, an all girls' school. In the beginning at Dubois, I had a very hard time fitting in, feeling like I belonged. Getting adjusted to going to school was hard. It just wasn't the right time for me. It (Dubois College) was not

for me, coming from a poor inner-city school and going to an all girls' school with more like privileged girls, it was totally different. I was like okay, it's a small school and feeling like you belong in a small school is so much about how you perform. I mean I could have competed and done very well but I was just so much like an outsider. There were other girls from the inner-city who were there but not like me. Like, I'm very outgoing, but those girls were kind of like quiet, reserved, standing in the background. That's not me. I'm not like that. I can't do that. I'm not boisterous. I like to go out and have a variety. I couldn't find where I fit in there and I probably could have given it a little more time but I was like, no, I've got to go. I have got to go. So, I stayed there for a semester, because I just felt like a fish totally out of water. Like in the desert somewhere. So, I came back to Belfast and started Belfast State University in 1999.

*James contributed this perspective on his feelings of isolation and not fitting-in, in a college environment:*

Before I went to college, my counselors said "maybe you should go to a technical school," they didn't push me out there. My other friends, they really said, "like go to this university, go there." I got accepted to a mediocre university, it was a trash, it was just a lousy school, I was, I went there and I did not feel safe when I was walking across the campus. And, I didn't get into Belfast State my first try. However, I don't know what I had to do, I had to write a letter or something, but I did something and I got a provisional acceptance. Got to Belfast State and had a good first year, 3.66 my first year, I think I had 3 As and 2 Bs, and I became involved on campus as I was in different organizations, however, it was the first time being away from my friends so um, I was very uh to myself. Uh, prior to this

I had joined the National Guard. So, uh the following semester I took off from school and I went to basic training, came back, enrolled in Armstrong, and had the worst semester of my life at that school. I was going through so much, so much drama, this was when I so called got really into the church and I realized that everybody cried Hosanna that cried Jesus, that these people were really different, cus I never was exposed to this as a child and I went through so much hell that semester, and I had a D, and F a C, a B, an A and a W. I had every grade you could get, but, however, when that last grade posted, I felt so relieved. I laughed. I took a break.

The hardest part, of college, for me was getting involved because by this time, I had been through so many other world experiences outside of college, I was very to myself. I didn't trust anybody. I took a class, back to the car and back to home to my dorm. That was it. So, my hardest part was getting out to people because I had limited my friendships in high school to a select amount of people, maybe about 4 close friends and I left. I had to get out of that, which proved beneficial. Sometimes at night, I don't have anybody to talk to on the phone, but it is good.

*Linda contributed this perspective on her feelings of isolation and not fitting-in, in a college environment:*

Looking back, the hardest part (of college) was going off to school and being alone. I can remember sitting in that dorm and just wanting to go back to the comfort of my small trailer with my Mom and sister. I mean, this was all I ever knew so I missed it. Thank God for Sarah. I mean, I don't know what I would have done without her. I felt so different and like I didn't belong. I was miserable

my first year. I think for me too it was hard because I was so shy. I mean, I was like almost scared of my own shadow. So, I think it was harder for me to meet people.

Looking back over the summer after my first-year, I remember not wanting to go back to college. My stomach would get in the worst knots when I thought about going back. It was like a really hard time for me. And, my Mom really couldn't help me, she uh... wanted me to go back to school, but dropping out wouldn't have been the end of the world either. I know I had to go back though. I think of where my little sister would have been if I dropped out, what kind of role model would I have like provided to her if I just quit.

Research sub-question 3: What personal factors, or people, within or outside the university, does the student attribute their resiliency for persistence and success?
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The following information has been extracted from the three participant interviews as they discuss their background, school experiences and resiliency in-depth. Each participant had a genuine, positive attitude. They provided informative data on their views and perspectives on how they found their resiliency against adversity in their lives. The participants had many similarities in the factors instrumental to their academic success. Each student attributes a portion of their resilience to their individual personal desires for achievement. Commonly, the participants had mentors or other significant people in their lives, such as teachers and close friends, who contributed to their resilience. This section is a result of the data collected and divided by each participant.

*Kathleen contributed this perspective on the factors attributing to her resilience:*



I did very, very well in high school, I was an honor graduate. I think I was like number 9 out of like 256 students. So, I just knew that I had so much more potential. I'm just going to have to do what I have to do. . I will graduate with honors. I am going to graduate magnum cum laude, so just a few more A's and I can get up to Magnum. I work hard... hard, hard, hard. I'm like, I can't get a C, I can't get a C. So, now here I am, I will graduate in December 2007 with honors. I always knew I could be so much more than what I saw around me.

There wasn't one particular teacher that encouraged me, I mean, they were all encouraging in their own ways. So, Pauly Mullis was a word-processing teacher and she did CBE (Cooperative Business Education). She helped me get my first job as a student worker at the Board of Education and I worked with the Deputy Superintendent Paul Wagner. She was the first person to get me in the working field. I was thankful to her for that and she was always very encouraging. Um, Lula Baker, she was an English teacher Belfast High School, she was always very encouraging. My homeroom teacher, Shirley Michaels, um, never had a class from her ever, but she was one that would always say, be punctual, be on time and always treated all the students fairly. She held you accountable. So, it's those little things. She never taught me a specific subject, it was like responsibility and self control.

All my teachers and professors (expected me to make it to college and be successful). They saw potential in me since Kindergarten. I always got awards, always honor student, Citizenship, perfect attendance. So, one of reasons I went back to school in 2003, is like I can't let all these people down. All of these

people had hopes in me, I can't let these people down. And, so...I knew what I needed to do, I was just like, I've got to do it. So, I was like, I can't allow being from a poor family or having my parents as graduates or having a baby stop me. I was like, I've got to do this.

I think it (resilience) just kind of came from within. I don't want to disappoint. That's where it comes from. I don't want to disappoint my family, my friends or my professors. And, I want to be able to be independent. I think my resilience comes from not wanting to disappoint people, because I feel like people expect a certain level of stuff from me and sometimes I can hear it in what they say, like, "Oh, you'll do it, you can do it, it's fine, don't worry about it, you got it." So, it's kind of like, "well, if they think I got it, I guess I got it." I'm like I better go do it, they've already added that expectation there.

*James contributed this perspective on the factors attributing to his resilience:*

I went to an Ambassadors Club meeting, uh, which was a Christian club. It was the first time going and I began to ask questions. The lady that was over the club, she really, uh really took me under her wing and she started holding me accountable for things. One thing is I don't like disappointing people and once she began holding me accountable for things, I began to change my attitude. And my teachers knew that, they wouldn't call home to Momma, they would go and tell her. She would come and tell me, you know I'm disappointed in that, you are better than that and I was like awe God, I felt like crap. And, I began to talk to school-work counselors and they began to see something in me and that's what really made me turn around and by the time I graduated, I must have went from a

2.4 to 3.0 and that was when I graduated and I'm talking about for me being nothing as a freshmen to by the time I graduated, I was SGA Vice President, editor in chief of the school newspaper, I was in Delta National Honors Society, I was in Who's Who Among American High School students twice. I was in the newspaper several times. So, it was a complete turn-around because of the friends I had decided to choose.

I would just have to say that my positive attitude goes back to God. Just back to my faith in God because I've been through oh so much. I remember seeing Ron Parsons on TV and I grew up in a traditional Lutheran church as opposed to a Pentecostal church where it's very wild. And, I saw Rob Parson on TV one day and there were people lined up at the altar and he was walking by touching their head and they were falling out and I was like, "wow." What is that? At this point, I knew I was different. I loved going to church and singing with my grandma and to choir. My aunt sung and I would love to go hear her sing. My Mom never made us go to church. She took us when she had time. By this age, I was finding a ride to church and I was 12 and 13. I always knew I couldn't fit in with the regular people and it felt like this institution, this place called a church is what I could fit into. When I saw this Rob Parsons and saw him touching people and making them fall out, I was like I want to do that type of thing and that is what kind of drew me out.

*Linda contributed this perspective on the factors attributing to her resilience:*

From an early age, I knew I wanted to be different and people said I was different. It's not like I thought I was better than my Mom or Dad, it was just that I needed

more for myself. I knew I had a lot of potential to do good things if I just stayed focused on my studies and out of trouble. I was determined from an early age. I was positive and could find a solution to anything. I knew I wanted to live a better life and provide better for a family.

I can't think of any one teacher that was a mentor to me in high school. I, uh, think all of my teachers liked me and encouraged me to do well. I would get asked by the teachers to participate in special academic events or do special projects and this gave me an inner-confidence that I lacked socially. I was good at the academic stuff. I mean, if you gave me a project or a test, I would do well no questions asked. I was very dependable and my teachers knew it. I know I never wanted to disappoint them. Disappointing them would have been so hard for me to deal with. I received most of my encouragement and motivation from school, either from my teachers or my friends.

Research sub-question 4: What programs, organizations or social activities did the school offer to assist students in achieving their goals?
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The following information has been extracted from the three participants' interviews as they discuss their college experience in a university setting. Each participant was asked about their involvement with the university; specific program and social opportunities. In addition to their involvement, the participants were asked what their recommendations would be to better meet the needs of the students during their college experience. Because the students in this study were relying heavily on financial assistance, they were not able to get involved as they would have enjoyed. Thus, they didn't have specific

recommendations about current programs in their university that were successful in retaining at-risk students. This section is divided into three sections identifying three themes which emerged from the data.

The first theme is social networking which is also identified in the sub-question 1 as a need for success in college. Each participant had a solid social network, which allowed them to feel like they belonged and were part of the university. This theme is reiterated in many forms throughout the interview process. It is evident based on these individuals that choosing a close network of friends allowed them to identify with others, remain positive even during times of turmoil and accomplish their academic goals. The findings in sub-questions 1 indicate that the participants' did not have access to family support for college achievement, thus, they learned to rely significantly on their social network for positive support, encouragement and motivation. Additionally, the friends in a social network have to be good role models and share the same goals and values for college success.

The second theme emerging from the data relates to mentors and the need for advisors and professional mentors on a college campus. It is clear from the data that the students in this study didn't have professional mentors throughout their college experience. Each participant indicated a need for someone professionally, with whom they could share their goals and aspirations, and gain feedback on the direction they were headed. The participants mention programs that assisted them or ones they heard about through other means such as a television special.

The overarching question of this study was how at-risk college students incorporated their resiliency factors to successfully achieve an undergraduate degree in Georgia Universities.

### *Discussion*

It became very evident to the researcher that the three students interviewed incorporated their sense of resiliency in accomplishing their academic goal of achieving their undergraduate degree. Each participant had three commonalities: 1) African American, 2) low-income family and 3) their parents did not graduate from college. This combination led to overwhelming hardships growing up. Although these students faced adversities from early on in their lives, they maintained phenomenal qualities of perseverance matched with an eagerness to succeed in life. Their positive attitudes were vibrant and contagious. It was apparent in the interviews that these students were leaders and role models for others in their situation.

Each participant had social factors in their lives, to which they contributed their success. Similarly, they had high school teachers and mentors who provided guidance, encouragement and support in high school and in college. Each student spoke passionately about their inner-network of college friends. Each of the participants indicates that having friends who share the same academic and social values empowered them to achieve their goals.

The participants experienced similar barriers throughout their college experiences, which could have prevented them from attaining their undergraduate degrees. The students shared common feelings of isolation and feeling like they did not belong in the college environment. In addition to not feeling like the other students on campus, these students didn't participate in campus activities because they had to work during college.

Another tremendous barrier for these students was lack of support from family members. Each student divulges information about how their parents were unable support them emotionally or financially throughout college.

The students all agreed that they wish they had a professional mentor who guided them throughout their college experience. The students didn't feel they received adequate one-on-one time with their advisors, thus, they believed they were making critical decisions on their own without collegial support. They each expressed unanimously that colleges need to do a better job of advising students about career opportunities in addition to ensuring they have the necessary classes to graduate.

### *Summary*

The qualitative method of exploration in this research project was to determine the social and academic factors that contribute to resiliency in at-risk college students. The data was collected through the usage of detailed interviews with three seniors, at three different universities in Georgia. The students had to be minority, first-generation and come from a low-income family. These students provided in-depth information about their lives, their resiliency, their college experience and how they attained a college degree overcoming tremendous adversity.

The researcher conducted each interview, audio-taped the interviews and transcribed them (see Appendix G). The anonymity of each student, the cities in which they reside and the colleges they attend were maintained by assigning pseudo-names for each identifying factor. The researcher organized the interview transcriptions in a logical manner before thoroughly analyzing the data. The researcher found that when the data was methodically organized, natural themes began to emerge. As these themes

materialized, similarities and differences of perspectives provided by each student became evident to the researcher. The significant findings regarding (a) social-networks, (b) mentoring and, (c) collegial barriers (lack of family support and feelings of isolation) were presented through text selections provided by the students participating in this study. A discussion of the significance and implications of the findings as well as recommendations for further research are included in Chapter 5.



## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was designed to determine what social and academic factors contribute to resiliency in at-risk college students. The study was conducted by utilizing qualitative research techniques. The researcher collected the data from in-depth, guided interviews of three at-risk college students attending Georgia Universities. These students had to be in good academic standing in their senior year. They also had to meet three additional criteria: first-generation, minority and low-income. A discussion of significance and implications of the findings of this study are presented in the present chapter.

#### *Summary*

The issue of at-risk college students not obtaining their college degrees is not new in the United States. It is a problem that has existed in our nation since the beginning of academic institutions. Despite its longevity, real solutions with proactive plans have not been determined to correct the present situation. With our nation's emergence into a knowledge-based society, obtaining undergraduate degrees are critical. Programs and organizations have been developed; however, the sense of urgency to promote and encourage the students in our society is not being addressed.

The overarching question of this study was how at-risk college students incorporated their resiliency factors to successfully achieve an undergraduate degree in Georgia Universities. The sub-questions were:

1. What social and academic needs do these students believe are necessary for success?

2. What are the barriers that at-risk students face throughout their college experience?
3. What personal factors or people, within or outside the university, does the student attribute their resiliency for persistence and success?
4. What programs, organizations or social activities would you recommend universities offer to assist the students in achieving their goals?

*Discussion of Research Findings*

Research sub-question 1: What social and academic needs do these students believe are necessary for success?
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This sub-question allowed the researcher to ask questions regarding the social and academic atmosphere of the college and gain the students' perspective on specific factors which foster a learning college environment promoting success. The participants unanimously agreed that it requires a social network of people and friends to be successful. The social needs are critical and sound simple, yet the concept has many layers. The participants congruently agreed that their close network of friends helped them maintain their values, morals and ultimately remain vigilant on the arduous academic path to academic achievement.

The at-risk students in this study relied significantly on their social network because they didn't have a strong sense of family network. Their parents couldn't assist them emotionally or financially so they chose people in their lives to be their foundation and support. These friends consisted of childhood friends or ones they met during college. While the students in this study were away from home, the social network of friends became people they identified with either through similar backgrounds or

comparable academic goals. The participants all agreed that having friends they could rely on, talk to and share academic concerns and successes with played a major role in the participants' decisions to accomplish their goals in college. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Maslow strongly suggests that people need to feel as if they belong. This need begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. People need different levels of social activity to be productive and happy. Some people only need a little while others require a significant amount of interaction with others. Some students have an easy time meeting new people and forming social associations while others struggle to form friendships. During the interview with one of the participants, she shared her overwhelming shyness and wanting to drop out because she didn't feel as she fit in. The other two participants shared a sense of not fitting-in and feeling different from the other students. They ultimately drop out and return to college at a later date.

These are common reasons people drop out of school. Students need to feel they belong and they need a partner to go through the trials and tribulations of college life. The problem in college arises when students go to college for the first time and are unfamiliar with their surroundings. It's easy to feel like a fish out of water as one participant indicated. New students don't have an immediate network of people they can identify with. For at-risk students, if they are minority, they may feel more comfortable with other minorities. If they are from a low-income family, finding a network of friends that can support their struggles would be comforting. In the end, the participants in the study unanimously agreed that it was necessary to find good friends as this will help students stay on the track to college success. Not choosing wisely can lead to detrimental

academic and social behaviors from students, thus participants concur that students need to put thought into who they allow to join their social network.

The second theme which emerged was each participant had a person they could name in high school who mentored them and guided them. They provided hope and encouragement to help the participant endure the arduous task of completing college. The participants' mentioned people in their lives who were significant role models to them. One participant, James, had a religious person who he said changed his life and his attitude. He didn't have any specific teachers in school that he considered helped him become resilient or achieve high standards for himself. However, James did indicate that most of his teachers expected him to achieve his goals. Kathleen and Linda mentioned key teachers or counselors in their high school who encouraged them, yet, they too felt an overwhelming support from most of their teachers because they were high achievers and good students. Because the teachers and mentors set high standards for these students, these standards became part of their encouragement throughout college.

Research sub-question 2: What are the barriers that at-risk students face throughout their college experience?
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These three participants faced many challenges and barriers throughout their college experience. Based on the data collected per each participant, two major themes emerged from the information provided in the interview process. First, the participants felt a lack of support emotionally from their family members. The data reveals that since the parents did not attend college, they truly didn't know how to encourage their children to go to college or stay in college when feelings of dropping out emerged. For instance, two participants dropped out of college at one point, and felt their parents didn't provide

motivation or support for them to remain in college to complete their degree. The second theme presented in the data was isolation; a feeling of not *fitting-in* within the college environment. Each participant expressed feelings of not fitting in, which caused inner-turmoil. As with the lack of emotional support, two of the students dropped out of college, while one student had conflicting issues of returning to college for a second year.

One of the obstacles these students faced was finding time to get involved based on their schedules. Each participant worked throughout college to assist with their tuition and living expenses, thus having a job and studying didn't provided them with the opportunity to get involved. The universities provided programs and organizations, which they could have joined; however, this was not a priority of any of the participants.

Each of the participants in this study came from a low-income family. It would appear that this would have been a barrier to these students and cause stress. While the participants found it hard to work and attend school, financial obligations did not hinder their decision to stay in school and complete their degree. Once the participants set their goals on completing college, they were resourceful in finding ways to accomplish this task. This is a true indication of their resilience and persistence. .

Research sub-question 3: What personal factors, or people, within or outside the university, does the student attribute their resiliency for persistence and success?
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The following information has been extracted from the three participants' interviews as they discuss their background, school experiences and resiliency in-depth. Based on the data per each participant, the findings from the data clearly indicate these at-risk students found their inner-resiliency through similar manners. Each participant had a genuine, positive attitude. They provided informative data on their views and

perspectives on how they found their resiliency against adversity in their lives. The participants each attribute a portion of their resilience to their individual personal desires for achievement. Commonly, the participants had mentors or other significant people in their lives, such as teachers and close friends, who contributed to their resilience. Two of the students suggest that they desperately didn't want to disappoint the people that believed in them (again, teachers, mentors and friends), thus, completing school was necessary. In addition to teachers, mentors, friends and self-induced resiliency factors, one student, James, clearly indicates that religion and his spirituality gave him hope and encouragement over the years, which contributes to his personal resilience.

Research sub-question 4: What programs, organizations or social activities did the school offer to assist students in achieving their goals?
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Each participant was asked about their involvement with the university; specific program and social opportunities. In addition to their involvement, the participants were asked what their recommendations would be to better meet the needs of the students during their college experience. Because the students in this study were relying heavily on financial assistance, they were not able to get involved as they would have enjoyed. Thus, they didn't have specific recommendations about current programs in their university that were successful in retaining at-risk students. This section is divided into three sections identifying three themes which emerged from the data.

The first theme is social networking which is also identified in the sub-question 1 as a need for success in college. Each participant had a solid social network, which allowed them to feel like they belonged and were part of the university. This theme is reiterated in many forms throughout the interview process. The individuals in this study

illustrate that choosing a close network of friends allowed them to identify with others, remain positive even during times of turmoil and accomplish their academic goals. These friends make up their social network of support. As a recommendation, each participant expressed the need for individuals in college to find someone who they can identify with so they can go through the college experience together. The findings in sub-questions 1 indicate that the participants did not have access to family support for college achievement, thus, they learned to rely significantly on their social network for positive support, encouragement and motivation. Additionally, the friends in a social network have to be good role models and share the same goals and values for college success. Pairing up with friends who do not value the same things could serve as a detriment to academic fulfillment. According to participant, James, the key is choosing the people in your social network wisely.

The second theme emerging from the data relates to mentors and the need for advisors and professional mentors on a college campus. It is clear from the data that the students in this study didn't have professional mentors throughout their college experience. Each participant indicated a need for someone professionally, with whom they could share their goals and aspirations, and gain feedback on the direction they were headed. The mentors in each participant's lives were established prior to their entry into college. The role of an advisor has become more of a situation where the advisor ensures you are registering for the right classes for your degree. However, the students in this study needed more guidance and personal assistance than they received in their sessions with their advisors. Some campuses developed programs geared to assisting students with career planning, goals and aspirations. One participant, James, indicated that he

participated in a program at his university which was supposed to serve as a professional mentoring program for African American students; yet, he stated it was ineffectual and became just another stop where he needed signatures. James did mention the Career Center as being very helpful in providing resources regarding employment and future job opportunities.

Participant, James, mentions the Career Center as being very helpful in providing information and advice about possible job opportunities, and preparing him for the working world. He also mentions the math lab as being a critical resource, which he utilized to assist him in his achievements in his math classes throughout college. As James indicates, the math lab helped him achieve in an area where he constantly struggled. He goes on to say that he began to comprehend many of the concepts which had been foreign to him before. Instead of giving up and getting discouraged, as some students do, James took advantage of the services available to him and met the mathematical requirements for his degree.

Participant Kathleen, mentioned a show she saw on the CBS Evening News with Katie Couric featuring the *Posse Foundation*, which is an organization, catered to assisting students in at-risk categories. The Posse Foundation forms college alliances with students who are from similar backgrounds and they experience college life together. The success rate of this program is phenomenal as mentioned in Chapter 2, Literature Review section. This organization illustrates the need for individuals to form social networks of people who are going to keep you motivated and encourage you to succeed along the way.



The overarching question of this study was how at-risk college students incorporated their resiliency factors to successfully achieve an undergraduate degree in Georgia Universities.

It became very evident to the researcher that the three students interviewed incorporated their sense of resiliency in accomplishing their academic goal of achieving their undergraduate degree. Each participant had the similarity of a low socio-economic background, was a first generation student and was a minority. This combination led to overwhelming hardships growing up. Although these students faced adversities from early on in their lives, they maintained phenomenal qualities of perseverance matched with an eagerness to succeed in life. Their positive attitudes were vibrant and contagious. It was apparent in the interviews that these students were leaders and role models for others in their situation.

Each participant had social factors in their lives, which they contributed to their success. Similarly, they had high school teachers and mentors who provided guidance, encouragement and support in high school. The students mentioned that all of their teachers expected them to go to college after high school. They attribute their fortitude to staying in college to significant people in their lives (teachers, mentors, and friends). The participants all agreed that they didn't want to disappoint these people, which made a tremendous impact on them staying on track to complete their degree. Having a close network of friends was critical for these students. They felt comfort in the fact that they had people they could rely on through their college experience. All students speak passionately about their inner-network of college friends. Each of the participants indicates that having friends who share their same academic and social values empowered them to achieve their goals.

The participants experienced similar barriers throughout their college experience, which could have prevented them from attaining their undergraduate degrees. They mention getting discouraged while attending college; two actually dropped out for a period. The students shared parallel feelings of isolation and feeling as though they did not belong in the college environment. They also felt completely different than the students around them, which became detrimental to their academic success for a short time. Because these students had to work during college, they did not participate in many activities on campus. Participating more on campus may have relieved some of these feelings of isolation. Another tremendous barrier for these students was lack of support from family members. Each student divulges information about how their parents were unable support them emotionally or financially throughout college. It is evident in their tone, their words and in their expressions that this is an incredible disappointment to them.

The students all agreed that they wish they had a professional mentor who guided them throughout their college experience. They mentioned that the advisors they were assigned to, signed them up for necessary classes to complete their degree, but didn't provide additional guidance. The students didn't feel they received adequate one-on-one time with their advisors, thus, they believed they were making critical decisions on their own without collegial support. They each expressed unanimously that colleges need to do a better job of advising students about career opportunities in addition to ensuring they have the necessary classes to graduate.

#### *Analysis of Research Findings*

The findings indicated that the perspectives of the three college students are very similar in many aspects with only a few differences. The candidates in this study

had very similar upbringings and attended similar elementary and high school educations. They all had tremendous obstacles growing up, which could have easily put them on a path of not attending college. Since the parents of these students did not attend college or were not active in their lives, the participants didn't feel as though they had emotional support regarding college situations. The interviews clearly show the students' disappointment in the lack of support from their families; however, this did not prevent them for reaching their goals.

Additionally, since the students were from low-income families, the students were financially independent throughout college. The students relied on Pell Grants, Federal Student Loans and work to pay for their tuition and living expenses. The students' parents were not able to financially contribute to their education. While some students would use the lack of finances as an excuse not to attend college, these students agreed that they found ways to fund their college degrees utilizing the resources available to them.

The participants agreed that they gained their emotional support from a close social network of friends, formed by them. They unanimously agreed that these friends played significant roles in their lives; personally and academically. The participants formed close bonds with other students who shared the same social and academic goals. By forming these close ties, the students were able to gain support and encouragement on a regular basis from these individuals.

The participants agreed that they did not receive adequate professional counseling from their advisors and universities. Each student agreed that they were disappointed in the lack of time they received from their advisors. They truly needed a professional

mentor on campus with whom they had regular access to go over career options and social and academic trials and tribulations. This issue was reiterated when the researcher asked the participants to specify recommendations relating to programs, organizations or general university improvements.

### *Implications*

The implications of this study relate directly to at-risk students and the academic, social and resiliency factors that contributed to their ability to attain an undergraduate degree. First, the results of this study suggest that a great deal of time and energy should be dedicated to how universities can create programs that cater to at-risk students. In order for the successes to be seen at the university level, interaction needs to occur earlier in the education process. As universities move to P-16 education, high school counselors and teachers need to be trained and equipped to advise students on their education options after high school. This means reaching out to the students who don't necessarily fall into the top ten percent. If educators believe that everyone has an equal opportunity to attend college and graduate, the students have to be equipped with necessary college information, as well as academic and financial support. If at-risk students are not entering colleges at the same rate, strategic plans with innovative ideas must be put in place in P-12 education. A total collaboration among educators at the P-12 and the college level should focus on the future of all students. Educators and administrators will have to implement their creativity in order to develop effective collaboration techniques. In addition to the techniques implemented, tracking and assessing programs is imperative to see results and make necessary improvements.

The second implication of this study is action. It's a collaboration of educators, administrators, community leaders, parents and students that can formulate strategies, create action plans and implement results. Minority, first-generation and low-income students are not making as much progress as traditional students. If our nation is truly interested in improving our numbers and providing educational opportunities for our at-risk students, change has to occur. These students persevered through the academic institution. However, two out of the three students dropped out for a period of time. Many at-risk students who drop out may not return to college, thus putting them in a category of becoming an unfortunate statistic.

These at-risk college students will achieve their goal of attaining their undergraduate degree. They persisted against all odds and they are proud of their accomplishments. The third implication is that these students are quick to mention that academic improvements are necessary for universities. These students craved their advisor's time to professionally develop them for the future. At-risk students, who don't have parents or mentors to help them through the college experience, really desire one-on-one time with their professors. These at-risk students couldn't call home to their parents to get college advice, because their parents did not go to college. Thus, they truly need the ability to interact with advisors and mentors to gain insight and information about careers, co-op and internships, developmental workshops and many more things. Many at-risk students rely on an outside income such as work to subsidize their tuition and fees. These students should be encouraged to work as interns within the university as studies reveal that if students remain on campus to work, they are more likely to stay on campus and graduate.

The fourth implication is that at-risk students need access to a social network since most do not have an active support group at home. As the students mentioned, their parents could not emotionally support them with college situations since their parents never attended college. These students will look for other students at the college who are like them with similar backgrounds. At-risk students need to have a close network of friends with whom they can identify and share their college experiences whether they are positive or negative. If at-risk students are identified immediately upon getting accepted to universities, the institutions have the ability to group the students with others who seem to share the same qualities. This strategy has been effective in the Posse Foundation and it makes sense. Universities already have programs on campus geared to assisting students, but as our nation changes, these programs need to be evaluated and restructured to meet the diversity of our country.

The long-term implication of this study is that universities will have a diverse student body graduating from college who are a direct reflection of our nation's ever-changing culture. The short-term implication of this study is that universities that have been struggling to graduate more at-risk students will initiate best practices and strategies and begin to see significant improvements in the achievement of these students.

### *Recommendations*

The researcher recommends that future researchers take the findings of this study and apply them to their institution. In addition to the findings of this study, universities need to take a true inventory of programs which currently exist and are geared to assisting at-risk students, currently in existence. This means deciding what has worked and what does not. It also means going beyond the numbers and surveys, but talking to

the students. A collaboration of students, educators, community leaders and faculty can be very instrumental in retaining at-risk students. In some cases, programs will need to be completely restructured or abolished. In a time of university assessments, this provides the opportunity for institutions to consider the students' needs and accommodate these needs.

### *Dissemination*

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education along with the Department of Education would be interested in the results of this study as the results are beneficial to all universities and at-risk students in the United States. The issue of at-risk college students is complex, so the researcher is confident that university administrators will be interested in reading an article on the results of this study in *The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or *The Journal of College Student Development*.

*The National Education Association*, *The National School Board* and *The National High School Association* would be very interested as our nation promotes a movement to P-16 education for our students. The results of this study could potentially influence administrators, school board members and community leaders to support at-risk student programs early in their education with the goal of encouraging college enrollment and degree attainment. The process should start early on, instilling the power of education into the minds of our youth. The researcher plans to contact each publication by sending copies of the dissertation to them for their review.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
IRB CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION



## Completion Certificate

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This is to certify that

**Kimberly Mullen**

has completed the **Human Participants Protection Education for Research Teams** online course, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), on 10/31/2006.

This course included the following:

- key historical events and current issues that impact guidelines and legislation on human participant protection in research.
- ethical principles and guidelines that should assist in resolving the ethical issues inherent in the conduct of research with human participants.
- the use of key ethical principles and federal regulations to protect human participants at various stages in the research process.
- a description of guidelines for the protection of special populations in research.
- a definition of informed consent and components necessary for a valid consent.
- a description of the role of the IRB in the research process.
- the roles, responsibilities, and interactions of federal agencies, institutions, and researchers in conducting research with human participants.

National Institutes of Health

APPENDIX B  
IRB APPROVAL



Georgia Southern University  
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Phone: 912-681-5465

Administrative Annex

P.O. Box 8005

Fax: 912-681-0719

Ovrsight@GeorgiaSouthern.edu

Statesboro, GA 30460

**To:** Kimberly P. Mullen  
607 Laurenburg Drive  
Richmond Hill, GA-31324

**CC:** Dr. Meta Harris  
P.O Box-8131

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Date:** July 6, 2007

**Subject:** Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered: **H07244**, and titled "**The Social and Academic Factors that Contribute to Resiliency in Georgia Universities**", it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable.

*Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.*

**This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter.** If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,



N. Scott Pierce  
Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs

APPENDIX C  
LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Kimberly P. Mullen  
607 Laurenburg Drive  
Richmond Hill, GA 31324

Dear,

I am a doctoral candidate at Georgia Southern University in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation. My dissertation is titled: The Social and Academic Factors that Contribute to Resiliency for At-Risk Students in Georgia Universities. It is a study of selected Georgia college student's perspectives of the social and academic factors that contributed to their ability to graduate from a four-year institution. In addition, the study focuses on these students' resiliency factors that attributed to their strengths and allowed them to complete their goals of academic achievement against all odds. Research indicates that at-risk students are more likely not to attend college and the students that do attend higher institutions are not likely to graduate.

I plan to interview three Georgia students in their senior year who meet all three of the at-risk categories this study focuses upon: minority, first-generation and low-income. These students must be in their last semester of their senior year and must be in good academic standing. Based on these criteria, my colleague has identified that you would be a great candidate to interview. In addition, my colleague has talked with you and indicated you may be willing to participate. I would appreciate it very much if you would agree to let me interview you regarding your background and your college experiences. It is my desire to educate school administrators and other students that fall in at-risk categories about the struggles and hardships these students face throughout their college experience.

It is my desire that when this study is complete, it can be used to develop programs for at-risk students that work. In addition, I would like for this study to provide hope to students in at-risk categories achieve goals of academic achievement by sharing the experiences of students just like them. I would like to assure you that the information that you provide in the interview will be used in a professional manner. With your approval, the interview will be audio-taped so that I will be able to record your comments accurately in my data.

I have enclosed a copy of the Informed Consent Form that you will be requested to sign at your interview. Your identity and that of your school will not be revealed in this study. Thank you in advance for your consideration and assistance in this study. If you have any questions concerning this study, please contact me at (home) 912-727-9909, or (cell) 706-580-4005, or by email at ([kimberly\\_p\\_mullen@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:kimberly_p_mullen@georgiasouthern.edu)). Upon your request, I would be extremely happy to share the results of the study.

Sincerely,

Kimberly P. Mullen

APPENDIX D  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP

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My name is Kimberly P. Mullen, and I am a graduate student enrolled in the doctorate program at Georgia Southern University. My dissertation topic involves social and academic resiliency factors that contribute to at-risk college students obtaining their college degree.

The purpose of this study is to provide valuable information of resiliency and persistence to students in similar situations, so they too, can find an inner-strength to obtain an undergraduate degree. In conjunction, the findings from this research will provide beneficial information to colleges and higher education administrators to establish necessary programs and policies to promote collegial success among at-risk students.

The purpose of this email is to request your participation in gathering necessary information for my study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. Please indicate by replying to this email if you are willing (or not) to share your experiences with me in a guided-interview session that will last approximately one and a half hours. If you decide not to participate in this study, there will not be any penalties.

If you decide to voluntarily participate in this study, your identity will remain anonymous. I will audio-tape the interview session to insure accuracy and to allow me to take notes on your comments. These tapes will stay locked in my home and will be destroyed after dissertation. In the written dissertation, you will be referred to by a pseudonym to assure your anonymity at all times.

Thank you for your participation and assistance with this study. If you have any questions regarding this research study, you may contact me at home at 912-713-7338. You may contact my advisor Dr. Meta Harris at 912-681- 0275, if you have questions about the study or policies and procedures. Finally, you may contact the coordinator or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-681-5088 may also be of assistance should you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Again, thank you for your time.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Title of Project: The social and academic factors that contribute to Resiliency in At-risk College Students

Principal Investigator: Kimberly P. Mullen, 607 Launenburg Drive, Richmond Hill, GA, 912-713-7338 [Kimberly\\_p\\_mullen@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:Kimberly_p_mullen@georgiasouthern.edu)

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Meta Y. Harris, P.O. Box 8131, GSU, 912-681-0275, [myharris@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:myharris@georgiasouthern.edu)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX E  
GEORGIA APPLICATIONS

**Name and Address****Student Name**Last name: First name: Middle name: Suffix:  Preferred first name: **Birth name (if different from above) or other name(s) that appear on your records:**First name: Middle name: Last name: 

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

First name: Middle name: Last name: 

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

First name: Middle name: Last name: **Mailing Address****To which all admissions correspondence should be mailed.**Street:



City:   
 County:  ▼  
 U.S. state/territory:  ▼  
 Zip code:   
 Country:  ▼  
 Int'l postal code:

If this is a temporary mailing address, enter the date to stop mailing. If not, leave blank.

mm/dd/yyyy

### Permanent Home Address

Check here if your permanent and mailing addresses are the same.

Street:   
  
  
 City:   
 County:  ▼  
 U.S. state/territory:  ▼  
 Zip code:   
 Country:  ▼  
 Int'l postal code:

### Contact Information

Telephone number at your permanent address:  (###) ###-####

Daytime telephone:  (###) ###-####

Evening telephone:  (###) ###-####

International telephone:

Cellular telephone:  (###) ###-####

E-mail address:

(to which all correspondence will be sent)

Which semester do you plan to enter?

**Program of Study**

Do you plan to seek a degree?

What degree do you intend to earn?

What is your intended major?

\*Major is Pre-communication for first-time applicants

\*\*Major is Pre-business for first-time applicants

COBA = College of Business

COE = College of Education

CHHS = College of Health and Human Services

CIT = College of Information Technology

CLASS = College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

COST = College of Science and Technology

Have you applied to Georgia Southern University before?

If yes, term:

Year:

Have you ever attended Georgia Southern University before?

If yes, last term enrolled:

Year:

Do you have an ID assigned to you by Georgia Southern University?

If yes, ID#:

High school:

CEEB code:

City:

U.S. state/territory:

Country:

Date attended from:  to:  mm/yyyy

Date of graduation:  or GED:  mm/yyyy

Diploma type:

\* Entered college prior to graduating from high school

Type of institution:

### Other High School Information

High school:

CEEB code:

City:

U.S. state/territory:

Country:

Date attended from:  to:  mm/yyyy

Type of institution:

---

High school:

CEEB code:

City:

U.S. state/territory:

Country:

Date attended from:  to:  mm/yyyy

Type of institution:

---

High school:

CEEB code:

City:

U.S. state/territory:

Country:

Date attended from:  to:  mm/yyyy

Type of institution:

### SAT Reasoning Test

Have you taken the SAT?

	Date	Critical reading	Math	Writing	Total score
1.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
2.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
3.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
4.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

mm/yyyy

Did you have your scores sent to Georgia Southern University?

Are you planning to take or retake the SAT? If yes, please enter the intended test date(s).

1.  2.  3.  mm/dd/yyyy

### SAT Subject Test

Have you taken the SAT Subject Test?

	Date	Subject	Score
1.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="Click here"/>	<input type="text"/>
2.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="Click here"/>	<input type="text"/>
3.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="Click here"/>	<input type="text"/>

4.

5.

6.

mm/yyyy

Did you have your scores sent to Georgia Southern University?

Are you planning to take or retake the SAT Subject Test? If yes, please enter the intended test date(s).

1.  2.  3.  mm/dd/yyyy

**American College Test (ACT)**

Have you taken the ACT?

Date English Math Reading Science Writing Composite

1.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
2.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
3.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
4.	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

mm/yyyy

Did you have your scores sent to Georgia Southern University?

Are you planning to take or retake the ACT? If yes, please enter the intended test date(s).

1.  2.  3.  mm/dd/yyyy

**Advanced Placement (AP)**

Have you taken any AP exams?

Date Subject Score

1.

2.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>
3.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>
4.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>
5.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>

mm/yyyy

Did you have your scores sent to Georgia Southern University?

Are you planning to take or retake the AP? If yes, please enter the intended test date(s).

1.  2.  3.  mm/dd/yyyy

### International Baccalaureate (IB)

Have you taken the International Baccalaureate?

	Date	Subject	Score
1.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>
2.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>
3.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>
4.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>
5.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>
6.	<input type="text"/>	Click here <input type="button" value="v"/>	<input type="text"/>

mm/yyyy

Did you have your scores sent to Georgia Southern University?

Are you planning to take or retake the IB? If yes, please enter the intended test date(s).

1.  2.  3.  mm/dd/yyyy

### College Information

List all colleges you have attended (most recent first) and the total credit hours that will be completed prior to enrollment at Georgia Southern University.

College/University 1

College/University:	Click the 'Find' button to select the institution
CEEB code:	<input type="text"/>
City:	<input type="text"/>
U.S. state/territory:	Mississippi
Country:	Click here
Date attended from:	<input type="text"/> to: <input type="text"/> mm/yyyy
Are you currently enrolled?	Click here
Number of credit hours earned:	<input type="text"/>
Total credit hours enrolled at this institution:	<input type="text"/>
Graduation or expected date:	<input type="text"/> mm/yyyy
Degree earned:	<input type="text"/>
Semesters/Quarters?	Click here
ID number issued at this institution:	<input type="text"/>

### Residency Information

**University System of Georgia System students are responsible for registering under the proper tuition classification. In general, classification of in-state status for tuition purposes requires an individual to have established legal residency and domicile in Georgia for 12 consecutive months prior to enrolling.**

### Residency Information

Do you claim to be a resident of Georgia for tuition purposes?  Click here

**If yes:**

Have you ever lived outside the state of Georgia?  Click here

Have you lived in Georgia continuously for the past 12 months?  Click here

How long have you lived in Georgia? Years:  Months:

Are you currently active duty military or a family member of someone who is active duty military?  Click here

Are you currently a member of the Georgia National Guard or a family member of someone who is a member of the Georgia National Guard?  Click here

Home state of record:

If you answer yes to any of the above military-related questions, you may be asked to provide a copy of your current military ID card and orders assigning you to a Georgia military installation.

Have you attended a Georgia high school for at least one year?

Have you graduated, or will you graduate from a Georgia high school?

### Campus Specific Information

#### Father Information

First name:

Middle name:

Last name:

Street:

City:

U.S. state/territory:

Zip code:

Country:

Int'l postal code:

E-mail address:

#### Mother Information

First name:

Middle name:

Last name:

Street:

City:

U.S. state/territory:

Zip code:

Country:



Int'l postal code:

E-mail address:

[Finish Your Application](#)

APPENDIX F

GUIDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. Please tell me about your background
2. During your elementary and secondary education, who were your mentors and what were the driving factors that encouraged you to go to college? Please explain.
3. Were you ever discouraged in college? Name some factors and/or people discouraged you?
4. What have you found to be the hardest/scariest part of college? Please explain.
5. When did you first realize you had an inner-strength; a resiliency of academic achievement?
6. Name some social and/or academic programs that you attribute to your success in college?
7. Name some things you needed from your college experience that you did not get?
8. Based on your college experience, what improvements would you suggest to college administrators that would improve policies and structure to promote success in students? Please explain.
9. Name some factors and/or people that attribute to you being where you are in life today?

APPENDIX G  
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTIONS

## KATHLEEN SHEEHAN INTERVIEW

Killeen University

July 8, 2007

I – Interviewer

P – Participant

*I: Please tell me a little bit about yourself and your background.*

P: I will probably repeat myself a lot. I'll probably talk a whole lot. I am 26 yrs old, I'll be 27 in July. I grew up here in Belfast on the west-side in a very poor area. There was drugs, crime and murder and everything. I remember the police kicking the door in like two doors down. So, yeah... we grew up in some rough neighborhoods. I am the 6<sup>th</sup> of seven children. I have 5 sisters and one brother. My parents have been married for almost 40 years now. About 40 years. Neither of my parents finished high school. None of my siblings have gone to college. Um, I'm getting very emotional as you can see (tears). I'm the first one to get my degree. Okay, Um, let's see I finished high school in 1998. I went to Dubois College, an all girls' school. It was not for me, coming from a poor inner-city school and going to an all girls' school with more like privileged girls, it was totally different. There was a lot of lesbianism, which was something that I was totally not used to, I mean, like girls pushing their beds together and slept in the same room. And, this was like at the freshman level. This wasn't like upper-level. So, I stayed there for a semester, because I just felt like a fish totally out of water. Like in the desert

somewhere. So, I came back to Belfast and started Belfast State University in 1999 and I went to school for about a year at Belfast State. I did very well my first semester, but it was really my second semester that I got really discouraged and I didn't really have anyone to encourage me to go to school or to stay in school, so, uh...when I left it was okay to drop out of school. Big mistake. So, um, I stayed out of school from 1999 to 2003. During that time I had a little girl. I have a daughter. I started working at Textiles Incorporated in 2001 and did really well at Textiles Incorporated. I progressed really, really quickly. I went from on the phone as an agent to, into management in like a year. So, and I learned a lot there. But, I felt like, felt like, I just had so much more to offer. So, all my friends were back in school or already finished school. So, I was like, I need to go back to school. I did very, very well in high school, I was an honor graduate. I think I was like number 9 out of like 256 students. So, I just knew that I had so much more potential. So, in 2003, I said forget this job, I'm just going to have to do what I have to do. So, I started going back to school part-time. I began taking two classes in 2003, then two classes in Spring. I did like two and three classes at a time. I had to work full-time because I had more responsibilities. In the Spring I decided to go back to school full-time. I took four classes in Fall, Spring and Summer session. I did very well, which I knew I was going to do well anyway. Um, I love school. I love education. I've always done real well in school. So, when I got back to school, it was like, A here, A there, A here, A there. I knew what I was doing. I knew what I wanted to do. Um, but, when I left school in 99', I didn't leave school the right way. I just left. Just knew I didn't want to go to school anymore. I just left, didn't withdraw. Just left school, which gave me a semester full of F's, so, I had five Fs and maybe five A's. So, when I came back to school in 2005,

I had a 1.88 GPA. So, it takes like a thousand A's to bring that up to even something responsible, but I'm on track right now to graduate with honors. I will graduate with honors. I am going to graduate magnum cum laude, so just a few more As and I can get up to Magnum. I work hard... hard, hard, hard. I'm like, I can't get a C, I can't get a C. So, now here I am, I will graduate in December 2007 with honors.

*I: In high school, you achieved so much, what made you want to achieve? What motivated you? Did you see things around you that made you want to be so much different?*

P: There wasn't one particular teacher that encouraged me, I mean, they were all encouraging in their own ways. So, Pauly Mullis was a word-processing teacher and she did CBE (Cooperative Business Education). She helped me get my first job as a student worker at the Board of Education and I worked with the Deputy Superintendent Paul Wagner. She was the first person to get me in the working field. I was thankful to her for that and she was always very encouraging. Um, Lula Baker, she was an English teacher Belfast High School, she was always very encouraging. My homeroom teacher, Shirley Michaels, um, never had a class from her ever, but she was one that would always say, be punctual, be on time and always treated all the students fairly. She held you accountable. So, it's those little things. She never taught me a specific subject, it was like responsibility and self control.

I always knew I could be so much more than what I saw around me. My sisters and brothers are smart, probably smarter than me, but, they just being assistant manager was good, being a manager, being a supervisor is just fine. But, that just doesn't work for me. I was just like, I mean, even my sisters' work in banking and they pretty much run the

bank. If a customer has a problem, they go to them. But, it's like without that degree you plateau, you can only go so far. Even though you know pretty much everything that is going on, you can never go higher. It's like the glass ceiling that you create for your own self. It's not one that society has put there, but one that you put there. You can see up, but you can never get there because you don't have that background.

*I: Being from the same family and raised by the same parents, what put you aside? Did you have mentors or people along the way, in high school that said you were fabulous, you were smart, you were going to make it?*

P: Everybody. All my teachers and professors. All of them. They saw potential in me since Kindergarten. All of them. I always got awards, always honor student. Um, Citizenship, perfect attendance, all of them. So, one of reasons I went back to school in 2003, is like I can't let all these people down. All of these people had hopes in me, I can't let these people down. And, so...I knew what I needed to do, I was just like, I've got to do it. So, I was like, I can't allow being from a poor family or having my parents as graduates or having a baby stop me. I was like, I've got to do this. People are like how do you do it? You go to work, school and have a baby and do well and I'm just like, you just do it. I mean, it's hard but you just do it. I have a lot of support from my friends, my family and my aunt and my professors. It's just like a routine at this point, like I get up, go to school, go to work, pick up my daughter, come home, do this, do that, do your homework. It's like what has to be done right now. That's it. Now, my friends, I have good friends. That's important to me because my inner-circle of friends, my closest friends, they are all either in school or have graduated from school. So my best friends Tonya and Nicole just graduated, one from Belfast State and the other from Kilkenny. I



have a girlfriend in Shannon going to Chelsey State. My closest friends are all in school. They are the greatest support and encouragement because they all know first-hand.

Whether they have had children or had to work full-time. My friend, Emily's parents, are immigrants from Belize so she has a whole different perspective and different support group. I have been very fortunate to be surrounded by good and supportive friends. No foolishness. I mean we have a good time, but we don't have drama or all that other silly stuff. We don't do that. We have a good time, we go out, but it's just about so much more. It's a lot more than just what you see on the outside. It's about being good friends, family, being good parents. It's such a great support system. I have great friends.

*I: when you told your parents you were going to college, since they hadn't been, were they able to prepare you in anyway?*

P: No, not really. They were always encouraging me, but it wasn't like a big hoorah, it was like great. Go to school, do well. But, I didn't have someone guide me which is kind of why I went to Dubois because it was like someone else was trying to guide their child there. So, they wanted someone to be a friend of their child during school, like a pair. So, for me it wasn't like my parents told me that I wouldn't do well in this environment or that I might not fit in. There was no one really there to guide me like filling out applications for college or to encourage me to fill out applications for college. Or, going to visit different colleges, so when someone introduced me to Dubois, I was like okay, it's a small school so comfortable and feeling like you belong in a small school is so much about how you perform. I mean I could have competed and done very well but I was just so much like an outsider. There were other girls from the inner-city who were there but not like me. Like, I'm very outgoing, but those girls were kind of like quiet,

reserved, standing in the background. That's not me, I'm not like that, I can't do that. I'm not boisterous. I like to go out and have a variety. I couldn't find where I fit in there and I probably could have given it a little more time but I was like, no, I've got to go. I have got to go. So, um, they (parents) were excited I went, they were supportive, but I guess they didn't know what to do so they couldn't tell me what to do and kind of guide me, um, in the right direction. The recruiter came to the house and talked to me and everything sounded good. And my parents were like, "fine" you can do it. But, there really wasn't anyone to guide me that said, "look at this school, look at that school, maybe you should stay closer to home your first year or what do you want to do." I don't even know if my Father knows what my major is at school. I mean, he's supportive, he knows I go to school but if someone asks him, "so what is your daughter's major," he'd probably say, "I don't know, school." (laughter).

*I: What has been your hardest part of college?*

P: In the beginning at Dubois, I had a very hard time fitting in, feeling like I belonged. Getting adjusted to going to school was hard. In the beginning, it just wasn't the right time for me. At SSU, managing my time has been difficult. I have done well in my classes. I don't have a problem with people, so, I build good relationships with my professors, really quickly, so I've never really had professor/teacher issues. So, that has made it very easy. Time has been the hardest and sometimes people that haven't been to college, don't really understand how difficult it can be at times. So, it's like my Mother may have my daughter during the day and I may come home and be like, oh, I'm so tired. And, she'll say, "what are you tired for, you haven't done anything all day?" And, I'll say, "I've been to work all day and I've been to school." She'll say, "well, you use your

head all day, and I have to work with my body.” So, I’ll say, “mental exhaustion is just as hard as physical exhaustion. So, sometimes people don’t really know how much of a balancing act college can be. Balancing it and doing well is hard. But, once you get to a certain point. Your professors expect a certain level from you. So, it’s like I’ve had Dr. Torres five times. I can’t go in there and act silly b/c she expects me to do well. After the first assignments, the professors have certain expectations of you. Keeping up with the level of expectations has been difficult. Because, sometimes you do just want to slack or you just don’t want to do the assignment or you just can’t do the assignment. It’s just so hard and so time-consuming, but you know you’ve got to do it. It’s not acceptable for you to not do it. Somebody else can make a C, D or F, but not me. I can’t do it. I don’t want my professors to be disappointed in me. I don’t want them to say, “I know this isn’t Kacie’s paper.” So, that has been difficult, keeping up with that as well.

*I: Where do you think you found your resilience, your ability to succeed?*

P: I think it just kind of came from within. I don’t want to disappoint. That’s where it comes from. I don’t want to disappoint my family, my friends, my professors. And, I want to be able to be independent. I mean like really independent. All of my sisters and brothers were married by the time they were 22. And, I’m like 27 and not married. I’m kind of the odd-ball. None of them moved out until they were married or had partners. I’m the only one that moved out by myself with my daughter. They didn’t purchase cars until they had someone that could help them. I went and did it myself. I guess being impatient has also played a part. I don’t like to wait on anything or for people to do stuff for me. And, I really don’t like to ask for help, that’s another thing I hate is asking for

help. So, I try to do stuff right the first time. I think my resilience comes from not wanting to disappoint people, because I feel like people expect a certain level of stuff from me and sometimes I can hear it in what they say, like, "Oh, you'll do it, you can do it, it's fine, don't worry about it, you got it." So, it's kind of like, "well, if they think I got it, I guess I got it." I'm like I better go do it, they've already added that expectation there.

*I: Have there been any social or academic programs to assist you while you've been in college?*

P: Not really, because I haven't been able to be active or involved in those programs, because I work, go to school and have a daughter. So, I haven't really been able to take advantage of that kind of stuff. So, I'm sure there is a lot out there, I just have not had the opportunity to take advantage of it since I'm a non-traditional student. I have been able to be involved in BEEP this year, which is the Black Executive Exchange Program through the urban league. And, they actually came to the school and have been to the school several years, but I saw them last year in February at the school and several other students were facilitators in panel discussions that they had throughout the day. And, so I was like, "Wow, that's something I would like to do." So, I went to Ms. Moseley to ask her if I could participate and she was like, "sure." I thought I was going to be like 1 of 20 students handling panel discussions, I was the only one. So, I had all of these people on this panel and I was the facilitator and the topic was Diversity in Corporate America and the perception of the non-traditional student. And as an accounting major, we don't really talk about diversity. I mean, we've talked about it some of our management classes, but my management classes have been basically management topics, it hasn't been diversity

in the management class or the Human Resource class. I really had to dig deep and do a lot of research for this project. I did well, and kind of had the expectation that I would do well. One thing about me is that I don't just feel like I have to meet the expectation, I feel like I have to exceed it.

*I: What suggestions would you give to SSU administrators to help educationally disadvantaged students?*

P: There is this group I saw on CNN /20/20 and it's called a Posse and it's specifically what this group targets, underprivileged kids from inner-city or first-generation. And, they actually go out and look for these students and they create a Posse. And, they were just talking about the statistics and how these kids may have had a lot of potential in high school and once they get to college, they kind of fizzle away. So, they created this group of students, about 10-12 of them. And they were just each other's support group. They were all alike in that they did well in school and had driving ambition and wanted to be more, but they have each other to rely on, and I think they had a 95% graduation rate. I think if they had formed a group specifically targeting those kind of students, not mentors per say, because you really need someone who has been from the same background. Someone who can say, "Oh yeah, I know what it's like to have this or I know what it's like to not have this or to be in this situation." So, just a group for those specific types of students, not just a mentor program that you go to when you need help. But, someone who comes to you and says, "hey, how was school, how's class, how are things at home, what are you struggling with, do you need someone to take you to the store?" Just little stuff like that. Especially for students who are away from home who don't have any support system.

*I: If you were asked to speak to a group of educationally-disadvantaged high school students and they said that their parents didn't go to college or they were poor, what kind of advice would you give them?*

P: Don't make that kind of excuse. That is the worst excuse. I mean how can you let what has happened to someone else determine what happens to you. If you've done this well for 12 years by yourself, 4 more is a piece of cake. Go ahead and knock them right on out. You really can, it's just that you have to have that drive. You really need someone there to support you, even if it's a friend. It has to be a friend who is in school because they have to be able to share those things and experiences with you. You need someone who can say, "man that test was difficult" or "did you study for this or how did you overcome this?" I would tell the students to do it but realize it's going to be different for you. You're going to be around people who can call their parents and say, "Mom and Dad I need so and so , just send it to me." Or, there will be students that have cars and you don't have a car or people that have things that you haven't had or can't even imagine having. I would tell them, if they want it, you have to go get it, don't make excuses about why you can't get it. And, don't blame it on your parents because they don't know almost how to help you in that way. They don't know how. So, don't let their ignorance, not ignorance in a bad way, but their ignorance hinder you from doing it. Because, they want to see you graduate, they want to say, "Ah, my child goes to Belfast State or my child goes here and has a Masters or Bachelors of whatever." They want you to do that, but they just don't know how to guide you, because no one has ever guided them. So, just do it and find somebody who is in school who can guide you, who has done it before. Or, find someone who has made those mistakes or who has had those

successes. I think a lot of time, students hear from people that have done good, good, good, good and say, "My family was this or my family was that, my momma didn't do this or my father didn't do that." So, they need someone to tell them how they did it. I don't want to hear just success stories. Tell me something bad that happened that you had to overcome. Tell me how you recovered from your failures. What did you do after you failed to recover? That's what I want to know. I also would tell them to take your time. If they can pace themselves and do five or six classes a time, that's great. But, if you can only do two or three, do that. If you have to work full-time, then just take two classes. I mean, you've got to go eventually. Would you rather wait ten years or go ahead and knock it all out in four? Also, find people that you can compete with as this helped me. I knew I could be in the top 5% of the class. If you're in there and I'm in there, then I have to do well. Or, if there are two As in the class, then I have one and you have one. Use the competition but pace yourself. You can't necessarily keep up with someone who has all the privileges in the world.

*I: What if an educationally-disadvantaged student said they didn't have the money to go to school?*

P: Um, if you have the grades, you can go. If you have at least a C, you can get a student loan. You can prove yourself. If you go to a school such as SSU, tuition is \$1600 a semester, that's just \$4000 in student loans. Prove yourself and you can get all kinds of scholarships. I think people don't realize how inexpensive it can be because they don't know there are student loans out there for you. There are different grants and scholarships. If your parents can't afford to send you, you still have the Pell Grants depending on how much you need. I think the information is out there, you just have to

be willing to look for it. Financial aid answers questions for you, but don't expect them to be like, look at all of this money you qualify for. It doesn't work that way. I wish it did. It would make it easier for those of us who really need financial assistance. Again, it's about getting out there and looking for it. Books are expensive but buy them online, never go to the bookstore for anything. Stay out of the bookstore. To me, money really isn't the issue because look at someone who is a doctor and may come out of school with 100k loans. So, you can get a B.A. or B.S. from a school in about 20k in student loans. I think not having the money is just another excuse, if you want it, you're going to get it. If you have the grades, you can go to college, even if you start off in a Technical school. But, don't say, I didn't have any money to go. There is money out there, something.



## JAMES GOLDMAN-INTERVIEW

Killeen University.

July 7, 2007

I – Interviewer

P – Participant

*I: My first question would be to tell me about yourself; your background*

P: Okay, well, uh... my parents are divorced. Um, They divorced, well, it was probably, I wanna say it was about when I was about seven. Um, I grew up in, um, I don't want to say it was a low-income community, but it wasn't a suburban area. Being from the country, you don't really know you are low-income. We lived in a trailer and that was all we ever saw around us were trailers. So, you know and that's and if we saw houses, it was a house that had been there for years. It didn't look any better than what we had. Um, we had a lot of children around us when we were growing up. I lived in a household with me and my younger brother. My mom, she was a single mom. She worked, um, she worked 8-5, came home, cooked, went to bed and that was it. Uh, we went to a babysitter who was a much older lady so I have a lot of experience in being like, I wanna say like, being raised by old people. Like, like having the wood-stoves, going out and actually tilling the ground and garden and feeding pigs in the backyard and chickens. So, I have a lot of, uh, exposure to that. Unlike city children that don't even have farm land, like moving to Belfast was something big for me. It was like I don't even have a backyard here. A backyard in the country, you could fit two or three homes in. So, um, uh, let's

see... I went to a low-income school that was definitely, uh, it was not funded very well. It was predominantly black. Uh, the all the white people, all the white students, they went to a private school down the street. Um, the location of the school and the community was also segregated. All of the blacks lived on one side of town and all the whites lived on the other side of town. Uh, as a child growing up, I had friends, like my brother, we had regular fights like everyone else. Um, but I wanna say that me and my brother, you could tell from early on that me and him were like night and day. He began to do a lot of different things, I, uh, for some reason manage to be set apart from normal people, I could never do the things other kids do, get into mischief acts that others could do without thinking twice about it. Uh, but we had the same friends because we were only two years apart, so we had the same kinds of friends and the same kind of means and everything. But, as we grew older, we just grew apart. I just, uh, I began listening to different types of music, he began listening to different types of music. Um, I eventually began to choose different friends, now my parents my parents, my mom never graduated high school, my Dad did. But none of them went to college, um.. We were always encouraged, I was always encouraged by other people who said "oh, you're going to be a lawyer, you're going to be something great." My brother grew up always being told he was bad and that he would grow up being bad and it was almost like uh, a self, self-fulfilling prophecy. And, uh, that's what he ended up walking into. Me, on the other hand, people said I was smart, people said I was going to be intelligent, that I was going to be something and I received it but at the same time I never really took hold to it. Up until high school, I did what I needed to do to pass. I did 70's work, C average work. I never liked math. Um, and I did that constantly, as long as I passed, I was excited about

that. However, once I got into high school, at this time I had been best friends with uh, with the same person I've been best friends with since the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade., and we are still best friends today. And, I began to see him as, his Mom had a bachelor's degree, his grandmother had one, his aunt, all of them had their Master's degrees. So, they was all educated people. But, he was, uh, he was always a very smart person. However, whenever we got to high school, I noticed that he got, we were on two different levels and he got to do a lot more, a lot more activities, a lot more clubs, and I found myself getting left behind. And, I realized that, okay, I can't do this. I'm alone at lunch time because he's at a National Honors Society meeting. And I said, I can't, I can't do this and that's when at this point here that I really, really began to religion played an impact in me. I went to an Ambassadors Club meeting, uh, which was a Christian club. It was the first time going and I began to ask questions, and the lady that was over the club, she really, uh really took me under her wing and she started holding me accountable for things. One thing is I don't like disappointing people and once she, uh, she began holding me accountable for things, I began to change my attitude. And my teachers knew that, they wouldn't call home to Momma, they would go and tell her. She would come and tell me, you know I'm disappointed in that, you are better than that and I was like awe God, I felt like crap. And, I began to talk to school-work counselors and they began to see something in me and that's what really made me turn around and by the time I graduated, I must have went from a 2.4 to 3.0 and that was when I graduated and I'm talking about for me being nothing as a freshmen to by the time I graduated, I was SGA Vice President, editor in chief of the school newspaper, I was in Delta National Honors Society, I was in Who's Who Among American High School students twice. I was in the newspaper

several times. So, it was a complete turn-around because of the friends I had decided to choose versus the friends my brother decided to choose. Because at this time, my brother had been left behind once or twice, he never graduated high school, uh, was getting suspended from school. He had begun to wear his pants around to his knees. I, uh, always wore mine at my waist, probably had my shirt tucked in, and I had a car. I worked two jobs. By the time I was 15, I was on my own, my momma, she had, she could pay the bills. Another thing is, she raised us on her credit card. We never lacked anything, we never had... I never realized I was poor until I went to college. The only thing I lacked was transportation. I looked like everyone else, the clothes... we never had the most expensive clothes, but we had decent clothes, we had... we never had to wear the same clothes twice in the same week. So, Christmas we got clothes, birthdays we got clothes, and she raised us on her credit cards. My Mom, I remember one time I was in high school and I happened to see a check-stub she had, and I wanna say it was, uh, she made less than 8 dollars. And, I was so overwhelmed, that changed me. It changed my entire attitude. I was like, my God, I made more on a summer job than my Mom was making and she had been on the job for 10 years.... And, that really disciplined me and I began my whole attitude toward a lot of things began to change and I've been on my own pretty much ever since. My Mom, maybe she helps me once a year with insurance, that was 2 years and I've been on my own ever since. But that was pretty much it, I pretty much took care of myself since I was about 15. When I talk about took care of myself, I don't mean housed myself, but I bought my own clothes, I paid my senior dues, I bought my own.... I took care of my own expenses. She provided a room for me to live. But, pretty much other than that I stepped out on my own. Uh, before I went to college, my, uh, my

counselors, before I became what I was my senior year, they said, maybe you should go to a technical school, they didn't push me out there. My other friends, they really said like go to this university, go there. I got accepted to a mediocre university, it was a trash, it was just a lousy school, I was, I went there and I did not feel safe when I was walking across the campus. And, I didn't get into Belfast State my first try. However, I don't know what I had to do, I had to write a letter or something, but I did something and I got a provisional acceptance. Got to Belfast State and had a good first year, 3.66 my first year, I think I had 3 As and 2 Bs, and I became involved on campus as I was in different organizations, however, it was the first time being away from my friends so um, I was very uh to myself. Uh, prior to this I had joined the National Guard. So, uh the following semester I took off from school and I went to basic training, came back, enrolled in Armstrong, had the worst semester of my life at that school. I was going through so much, so much drama, this was when I so called got really into the church and I realized that everybody cried Hosanna that cried Jesus, that these people were really different, cus I never was exposed to this as a child and I went through so much hell that semester, and I had a D, and F a C, a B, an A and a W. I had every grade you could get, but, however, when that last grade posted, I felt so relieved. I laughed. I took a break and then also, when I registered at that school, I got accepted there and I registered there within 3 days. So, I was rushed everything there. I felt so relieved and ever since then, my semesters, uh, they've inclined, I just had a 4.0 last semester. Made the President's list, the Dean's list. I'm the President of a Christian Club on campus, um, the Chaplain of the school choir. And, uh, that just brings me here. I think that's my background in a nut shell. I don't know if that's what you were looking for.

*I: NO, it is. Wow, very interesting that um you and I came from very similar backgrounds, to see so many similarities but, uh, who would you say, was it the one person in your church that really mentored you to go to college?*

P: Um, I would say this, now the young lady I was talking about, her name was Dr. Rhonda Edwards. She was not a part of my church. She was a teacher at the school. She was the one, um, I would say really took me under her wing and you know, really helped me grow. And, since then, and I was just maybe thinking a couple of days ago, everyone that was positive in my life were women, I had no positive male role models what so ever. My Dad taught me how to be a womanizer. That's what he did. You know. I remember times we would be at the house and one woman would be knocking on the front door and the other lady would be leaving out the back door. You know, that's what he taught me. I didn't follow that, I didn't take heed to that. I was, I just couldn't do that, I thought that was just so, how could you do that? But, my mentors were all positive women, my Mom always said, you know, I'm proud of you. She couldn't help me with homework, uh, at this time I began to really, I began to explore God and she couldn't help me in that area. She provided the necessities, but I would say that lady, Dr. Rhonda Edwards, she really helped me and inspired me to go to college. Including her would be my guidance counselor, my school-work coordinator. I wouldn't really give any credit to my school guidance counselor because I wasn't one of the elect ones, the top 10, one of the elect students and so I was pushed back, pushed back.

*I: Oh, so you feel like the high school counselors would cater to the top students?*

P: And which a lot of them do, I mean I look back now and what inspired me the most was that I'm able to go back in their face and say, "I'm doing this, what is your top students doing, they're not even at a technical school, they're working at some factory outlet store." You know that's where, that where it's just selfishness but that's what kind of made me really turn around things. I'm like you know, "look at me now."

*I: Was there anything before you went to college that scared you into thinking I'm not going to be able to go to college?*

P: Oh, God, uh.... I had no examples, I'm the first to graduate college from my family. My other cousins, they became LPNs, nurses.... But, I was the only one that was going to a four-year college from my family. So, what scared me was maybe going out on my own, because at this time I wasn't in the military so I first really experienced being alone. But, I knew that if I put my mind to it, I could make it work, I never liked math so I was afraid about that. I had to continue remedial math classes which I was glad to do because I never learned it in high school. They would write us off, they passed us and so I was excited to take it, I was excited to learn. And in math class I get so excited to learn something. I get like a C, and I'm like this is an A. I mean, this is like an A in my class (laughter). You don't know what this means to me. I mean, I get like a 76 and I'm like, "YES"!! (laughter). I mean, it's like all the ones I got wrong is because I didn't know them, but all the ones I got right is because I knew them. I get so excited.

*I: What do you attribute your positive attitude and your outlook, you can just tell, you have this personality, with your eyes and your smile, what do you attribute this to?*

P: (Pause). I would have to um, I would just have to say that all of that just goes back to God. Just back to my faith in God because I've been through, O', so much, so much hell,

just from being a young age at a young age seeing my Mom and Dad getting into fights in the yard, um, seeing boyfriends come and go, seeing girlfriends come and go. By the middle and high school years I never really fit in. By this time, everybody was listening to rap music. Everyone was listening to TuPac and whoever else was famous at that time, but I was listening to Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey (laugh).. In my mind, I was like, “I can’t understand what these people are saying” and they got all this crazy language and it was just like not me. So, I was different. My friends were like awe man, you are gay and stuff like that just because of the music I chose. So, however, they were serious, it was always a joking type thing . And, as I got older, I just began to dress very clean, my shirt was always tucked in, my clothes were always pressed. I watched some of my friends that I grew up with, with jeans that were twice their size, t-shirts that came down to their knees, so I just never managed to fit in. Being a small person, I was always picked on, I just realized that being ridiculed and being chastised was just a part of life. I mean, what was I going to do with it? Was I going to commit suicide? There were times when I thought about it but I was just, I realized that there was always tomorrow. So, that’s just what kind of helped me. There is always going to be tomorrow. My good deeds always outweighed my bad deeds. I had to go on, I just had to move on. I wouldn’t even say that it was because I was so religious because at that time, I wasn’t. I just had to look at really, what was the point. I look at their lives now and I’m like, I feel bad for you. You were the one picking on me and now, I’m like doing something for myself.

*I: Do you remember the moment you decided you wanted to go to college?*

P: Um.... Let me say this, I took the SATs 3 times. The first time, I didn’t do so hot. I don’t know what happened the first time. The second time, I fell asleep during it (laugh).



I did horrible. The third time I took it, I didn't work the night before. I took it with my best friend; he sat right beside me and my score jumped by a couple of hundred points. I think from like a 500 to 900 from the time I fell asleep. When did I think I wanted to go to college? I think it was expected for me to go. It wasn't a decision. It was expected. When I got my letter of acceptance, I went to school.

*I: Who do you think expected you to go to college?*

P: Oh, God... Everyone, everyone! I was the smart one, I was the intelligent one. I had manners, it was expected. And, it wasn't really pressure from my Mom. I mean I realize today that we are dealing with a lot of issues. Because my Mom, she came home from work, she cooked, she went into her room and she slept. There was no we are all sitting in the living room, how was school today, that life was not there for us and I did not know it until I went to college and my Mom cried because I left. She was calling me everyday. And, I was like God, why are you calling me everyday? You know, how are things going? If you need something, let me know. And, at this time I was already independent and I didn't realize that she wanted a relationship now and at this time I didn't know it but there was already a barrier there and my personal life was none of her business. And, she had no part of it. And, we are still dealing with it today, because, I've realized that she ended up, she's going to a therapist and I guess she's hitting that big life crisis. I didn't realize it, I didn't acknowledge it but I was like... we didn't have a relationship growing up. I felt as she did her job as a mother and not necessarily walked into the role as a mother.

*I: Very interesting, very perspective. And so, do you feel like you were left to make decisions on your own with your peers, ?*

P: Exactly, I mean I was the oldest. I had to watch out for my little brother. However, these people on the other side, these people were the ones that pushed me. My Mom, she always, she discredits herself a lot because she didn't graduate high school, so she doesn't feel like she's as smart. So, she was always, I can't help you, I'm not as smart. What she did was she took me to tutoring when I asked for it, she paid for it. Uh, my Mom didn't have to take out any student loans on my behalf. Uh, I don't think she has bought me college books since I started and I didn't have to ask her for anything. My Dad did help me a little semester or two, he didn't want me to join the Army, he said, I'll pay for you to go to school, and I was just like, "yeah, right, you haven't paid for one semester." (laughter).

*I: So, you've been financially independent for awhile?*

P: Since I was 15 and received my worker's permit, I've been financially independent.

*I: What do you think the hardest part of college was for you?*

P: (pause)....The hardest part for me was getting involved because by this time, I had been through so many other world experiences outside of college, I was very to myself. I didn't trust anybody. I took a class, back to the car and back to home to my dorm. That was it. So, my hardest part was getting out to people because I had limited my friendships In high school to a select amount of people, maybe about 4 close friends and I left. I had to get out of that, which proved beneficial. Sometimes at night, I don't have anybody to talk to on the phone, but it is good. I don't have back-stabbing people, I don't have

people talking about me. One of my best friends was out on the scene and met a lot of people, mingling, but low and behold, his business keeps him traveling up and down I95 and his friends are back down to a select few. So, the hardest part was just getting involved. That was always the hardest part for me and math (laugh). Let me add that students are motivated by me, because I will walk into a class, just having studied the information like 5 minutes ago and walk out and be like, "I just bombed that test." And, I'll be laughing and just say, I'll make an A on the next one and I'll leave it at that. And when I get the test back, it will be like a 93 or something like that. And, they'll be like, how did you do that? That's just funny walking out of a test thinking oh that test sucked and get like a B or an A or something. And with math, which I know is my weakest subject and I'm just writing and thinking, you know, it is what it is. I'll turn it in and I won't even fret over it. I don't fret over it because I've done my best. And, that's all I can do, because I know I've studied. In the end, when people ask, "how did you do," I'll say, "I passed."

*I: Do you think there were any kind of programs on campus that helped you?*

P: The math lab helped me. The writing center, I was always good in English, so I might have used it once. And, this was after I had already proofread my paper and I didn't have anyone else so I went there. But the math lab really helped me because this was my weakest area. So that's what really helped me.

*I: Were there any other organizations, like the Career Center.*

P: You know what's funny is that I used the career center the last semester when I was already a senior. But I want to say that the career center, they did not push themselves out

there like they should have. I don't think I even heard of the career center until I was a senior. And, that was because one of my friends got a job there and he told me to come by and take a personality test and that's how I heard about it. And, I said, "wow, what is this?" And, they sign me up on Monsters web and I've been in there like once every two weeks, like looking at jobs and stuff. I really don't think they threw themselves out there like they should. Maybe that was my fault, maybe I just grasp it or take a look at things the college had to offer.

*I: Did you have any professors, advisors, administrators that helped you achieve success in college?*

P: Hmmmm. When I was at Belfast State, I would say, no. The classes there were rather big so I didn't take hold of any of the professors. I did have some cousins in the Learning Center, so they were very friendly to me. When I got to Armstrong, I really enjoyed a couple of professors. Uh, but I can't say that any of them really helped me succeed. I mean, if I had a question about class, I would go there. If I had questions about my papers, they would help me such as what am I lacking, what do I need. But, none of them really said, "James, we are going to do this." I found my advisors were just there to look at the courses, determine what I needed and that's it. It isn't much of anything else. So, nobody within the college helped me.

I: So, who got you interested in being a probation officer? How did you come about deciding that was something you wanted to do?

P: When I got into the criminal justice field, I knew I wanted to work in juvenile delinquency. I knew juveniles, they still have hope. They need someone that can reach

them like I was at the age I was looking for help. The age my brother was when he started going stray. For him, something might have changed had he had a mentor in his life. So, I really liked juvenile delinquency and then I was in a class where we had to choose probation or parole and I chose probation and I just combined the two –juvenile delinquency and probation.

*I: You're about to graduate and looking back was there something you could use that you just didn't get?*

P: A mentor in college. At Armstrong there is a program called Ease. I just filled out a survey for it, but I can't recall what it stands for. But, it's hosted by the office of minority affairs and they team you up with a professional on campus who is supposed to mentor you. The individual I had did not mentor me at all. I just went in, he signed my papers and that's all. Actually, I would go in and tell him, this is what's going on and he would sign and I would leave. That was it. No one said, "hey let's go out to lunch." Nor did they give me feedback on their experiences in college. I didn't have none of that. I think I really needed a mentor. This would have really helped me. When I got to college, I had heard stories about going to dinner with the professors, I never had that. If I saw a professor at Wal-Mart, I was excited, I was like, "Hey, that's professor Decrew." You know, that's it. I don't know going out to dinner with professors, getting to know their families, yeah... none of that. I guess maybe that's the old way you know when colleges were a lot smaller. It would have been very nice to have a mentor, someone that said, "hey, me and my family are going to dinner, come join us."

*I: Did you have any other students that you looked up to that were doing good thing?*

P: Hmmmm. (Laugh). Beside my best friend who is in school in Spartanburg, SC, which is 4 hours away, I would say, “no.” because I was always separated myself. If you were not like-minded, I mean if you are all about making Cs then I don’t hang out with you. At this point, I’m making As and Bs. And, it’s those kind (people making As and Bs) that I manage to surround myself with. And at home, if we aren’t talking about work, we aren’t talking. I surround myself with people that are like me and that goes back to not wanting to be the outsider in the group. A lot of my friends, they go out and drink and every now and then, I may go out with them to be a designated driver, and since then I’ve been in bar fights and all kinds of crazy stuff. And, I’m like what is this? It’s 1:00 a.m. and this dude’s throwing beer bottles and going crazy, but uh... I try to surround myself by like-minded individuals. It’s like my family, they will call me and say, “Hey, I haven’t talked to you for awhile,” and I’ll laugh and think yeah, there is a reason for that. I mean I love my family, I do but we have nothing in common. I’m not elevating myself above them it’s like if you can’t help motivate me to the next level, then we have nothing in common. I want to invest in people that have a valuable return. I’m looking for networking, business partners and people that say, hey I went to college there.

*I: Do you remember growing up a defining moment that you knew you wanted to be different, that you wanted a different life?*

P: Um... let me tell you and this goes back to religion. Have you heard of Ron Parsons? He’s like a very profound preacher-type. I saw him one time on TV and like I said before I had never been into the rap music. Like I said, for some reason, I always felt like I was

set apart. And I would hear these old stories/gospels on the radio, but I remember seeing Ron Parsons on TV and I grew up in a traditional Lutheran church as opposed to a Pentecostal church where it's very wild. And, I saw Rob Parson on TV one day and there were people lined up at the alter and he was walking by touching their head and they were falling out and I was like, "wow." What is that? At this point, I knew I was different. I loved going to church and singing with my grandmom and to choir. My aunt sung and I would love to go hear her sing. My Mom never made us go to church. She took us when she had time. By this age, I was finding a ride to church and I was 12 and 13. I always knew I couldn't fit in with the regular people and it felt like this institution, this place called a church is what I could fit into. When I saw this Rob Parsons and saw him touching people and making them fall out, I was like I want to do that. Type thing and that is what kind of drew me out. And one thing led to another and I ended up meeting Dr. Rhonda Edwards, a Christian. I was never perfect, I was never a saint. I was still young and still doing my own stuff, but I just always knew I couldn't fit in with everyone else.

*I: Who would you attribute to where you are today?*

P: I would definitely give it to Dr. Rhonda Edwards. She started me and everyone else kind of sustained me. But, she started it. And, I can give credit to my Mom, because she did it and she did it by herself, my Dad paid \$178 a month for two kids and he helped with shoes maybe some clothes, but Mom was there. She was definitely the backbone. Spirituality is what kept me, and Dr. Edwards did this. Mom motivated me, like I said, but Mom just did her job.

*I: If you sat down with the President of Armstrong, and they wanted your advice on what they could have done to help you succeed?*

P: If I sat down with the President of Armstrong, he would first have to introduce himself to me. I don't know him, have never seen him. Don't even know his name. You know, the school has provided me with the tools I needed. I would have to knit-pick for something. I feel like they could have had more organizations on campus for black students, I was often the only black kid in class, but that sounds like I'm pulling the race card. They could cater more to first-generation students; provide more aid to those students. You can't expect these students to go out and make As right off the bat. Allow more scholarships for minorities that come from low income homes and can't make it happen. No one came along and said these are your options, these are available loans. There was a lot of money I should have received that I never knew about. Financial aid doesn't just give out money, you have to ask the right questions and research opportunities. I called people and wrote letters to get money. If it's due to me, I want it. Asking questions about what's available to students. They don't know if they don't ask.

*I: If you were asked to go speak to a group of high school students in a school such as the one you attended (mostly black, low-income) what kind of advice would you give them?*

P: Choose your friends wisely. I realized that in my life, the difference between me and my brother was our friends.



*I: What about motivating these high school students for college? What kind of hope would you give them with your experience to say they have a chance?*

P: Get someone you can run with. If you know this person is going to make an A, you want to hang out with that person so you can make an A. My friend, he was always top of the class, because he was just gifted like that and that's what I wanted. Get someone you can compete with. Don't get someone that is going to fall out on you. You can't train that way. Get someone that's going to stick with you.

*I: What about a student that says, "I come from a low-income, first-generation family, and I'm a minority and I don't have a chance to go to college."*

P: At that point I would say, they may not know the opportunities that can be presented to them. I didn't know the opportunities I was available for. I knew I didn't have the grades to get scholarships and my best friend went on a full-ride. I joined the Army and they are paying for me to go to school. I enjoy it. I mean, I didn't join just to get them to pay for my school. I enjoy being in the military at times. I would tell these students that you have to take your past and let that fuel you. You've got to let it fuel you. I'm going to be better than my parents, my family, my past. That's what you've got to do. My kids are not going to want me to drop them off down the street because they are embarrassed about the car their parents drove because it's so raggedy and loud. Because this is what we did to my Mom. We would say, "Mom, just drop us off down the road, we can walk from there." My kids are not going to have to do this.

*I: Well, it has been a pleasure talking to you.*

P: Awe, is that it? Wow!

I: Unless there is more you can add or clarify?

P: Well, that's pretty how much I made it. I give a lot of credit to my friends.

## LINDA EMERSON INTERVIEW

Kilkenny University  
Interview July 14, 2007

I: Interviewer  
P: Participant

*I: Please tell me about your background.*

P: Well, let's see, where should I begin? My name is Linda Emerson and um... I'm 24 years old. Okay, I grew up in a small rural town Cary, Georgia. Um, I have one sister. My Mom had me when she was 15 years old and my sister, Samantha, when she was 17. So, um, I'm the oldest and was responsible for my little sis a lot of the time. I mean, this is probably normal, but sometimes I resented my Mom for making me watch her. Uh, we lived we lived in a small trailer in like a trailer park. I mean, it was all my sister and I knew. There was a lot of petty crime in the trailer park but not like the crime in some of the other neighborhoods. We saw things, but not like murder and stuff like that. You heard about those things, but I guess we were pretty lucky there. I didn't feel safe sometimes, but I think that just went with the territory. Things are bound to happen. We saw the police every now and then, arresting people but even that felt normal. My Mom worked at a daycare full-time, but she didn't ever know how to manage money too well. I don't think she knows how to manage it any better today but my sister and I help her when we can. I think this makes her feel bad but she is always appreciative. When I was younger, I can still remember people calling our house asking about payments and when my Mom was going to send in the check. I can remember like coming home to our

electricity being turned off and one time her car got repossessed. Uh, we had no idea what happened to our car. And what made it worse was that my Mom, she like called the police to report it stolen. And, um... the police came to our house and the neighbors came over to see what happened. I'll never forget the look on my Mom's face when the police told her the company had taken it away cause she was like five months or something like that late on her payments. She swore to the police and in front of everyone that she had made the payments, but it was like my sister and I knew she didn't. I think our neighbors knew too, but it was still very humiliating for my sister and I. Um, my Dad was like in and out of our lives. He was and still is like a poor excuse of a father. Um, and my sister and I know we aren't the only kids he has. I think like he has two others from two different women, and he doesn't take care of the other ones either. But, you know if someone sees him, he says he takes care of us and like gets us clothes and stuff. I think he even told someone like he was helping me with college. I, uh... I think people that know him, know he is nothing but a lazy bum. Anyway, it seems like all he ever did was come around when he needed money from my Mom. And, I kid you not, to this day, she still gives him money. I mean, I still don't get it. It just doesn't make any sense to me and my sister. But, that is just the way it is, I guess. I mean, there isn't any reason he can't get a job, but it's like he is in and out of work all the time. I don't get it. Truly, my Mom is a good person for the most part and he just takes advantage of her. It's just that from an early age, I knew I wanted to be different and people said I was different. It's not like I thought I was better than my Mom or Dad, it was just that I needed more for myself. I knew I had a lot of potential to do good things if I just stayed focused on my studies and out of trouble. I was determined from an early age. I was positive and could find a

solution to anything. I knew I wanted to live a better life and provide better for a family. Anyway, I'm getting off the subject, sorry. Sometimes I get to talking and don't know when to stop. So, just let me know if I'm getting off the subject too much.

*I: No, actually, you are doing great. The information you are giving me is, uh, providing a great foundation for your life. Truly, it's fine. Please continue with your story.*

P: Um, okay, let's see where was I? All right, well, since my Mom worked full-time. I began getting up early to help get my sister and me to school on time. She just didn't have time. I have helped my little sister, like, since as far back as I can remember. I mean, it's kind of funny, but not really. Some of my friends and relatives used to call me little Momma. I can still remember my sister coming to me when she needed stuff, even if Mom was home. It was like just natural for her. As a matter of fact, to this day, she still comes to me if she has a problem, needs advice. The one thing about the way we grew up is that Samantha and I are very close. Again, like I said a few minutes ago, my Mom worked all the time so after school, I helped my sister with her homework and got dinner ready, and, um.....this went back for as long as I can remember. I mean, I wasn't a gourmet cook or anything like that (laughter). I was like a really good sandwich maker and could cook anything from like a can. We didn't have a microwave til' I was like, wow, I think I was a junior in high school. I still remember us getting it from like a neighbor who was moving. I can remember like being amazed at how fast it could like cook something. It's kind of funny though, now that I have a microwave in my apartment, I still like cook things on the stove-top more often. My room-mates laugh at me. I mean, it's just what I'm used to, it's me.

*I: What was your parent's education level?*

P: Um, my Mom did graduate high school and she did this while being pregnant with me. She tells me how hard it was for her to finish and how some of the teachers thought of her differently when she got pregnant, but she did finish. She really was a smart student too. I can remember one day finding her high school transcripts and seeing her grades and being proud of her. She shrugs it off and says she isn't sorry about the choices she made in life. I really feel like she believes this too. I don't think she has ever wondered what it would have been like to go to college. I sometimes look at my Mom and think she could have been so much more, she just didn't know her options and she has always said that during "her time" people didn't go to college as much as they do now. Now my Dad, well that's a different story altogether (laughter). He dropped out of high school when he was a junior. The teachers that had him probably didn't think anything about it either. They were probably just glad to get him out of the school system and I don't think the school district forced them to go school back then. Unlike now where you hear about parents getting into trouble for not making their kids go to school. You know, my Dad, he has really like never been dedicated to finishing anything in his life. I mean, he can't even hold down a job and pay his bills or like take care of the children he had. I mean I wish I didn't have to say this, but, really... honestly... he is a bum. I don't know how he does it but he always finds a way to get things handed to him. He gets by better than most. I don't get it, but I think he is a schmoozer. I guess some women just fall for that. I meana, I wouldn't. For me, a man has got to be honest and earn a living. I'm not going to take care of no one but myself. Anyway, it does sound like I'm probably angry at him, but he

is almost like a stranger to me and I feel like my sister and I... we just like know his game. For as slimy as my Dad can be, I really have to hand it to my Mom. Even though her life couldn't have been easy, you know, she always tried to encourage me and my sister to do our best, but, like.... since she didn't go to school, she really didn't know about getting into college or what was necessary. She would listen to me and say, "awe, now honey (she was always calling us honey or sweetie) that sounds real good, but she really couldn't guide me, mentor me or tell me what to do." I mean, what I found out about applying for school and getting aid and stuff like that, I kind of, like find out about this on my own through friends. I can't really blame my Mom, I mean, she did the best she could under the circumstances. Now, I'm going to graduate in December and my little sister will finish in about, let's see, two years maybe. She's doing well too. It's kind of weird that with two parents that didn't go to school and coming from the poor town that we did that we are both actually going to graduate from college. Who would have thought, right?

*I: What was your high school experience like? Did you have any mentors like teachers that encouraged you to go to college?*

P: Well yes, actually I did. I had a great group of friends. I mean, I look back and thank them for how far I've come. We are still like really close. I mean when we go home, we all get together and we try to see each other at the colleges we go to. All of my closest friends are in school and none of us have had it easy. One of my best friends, Sarah, goes to school with me and we hang out together all the time. We encourage each other. We talk about the hard times and the good times. We have a lot in common and really, like,

help other succeed. She and I have been through so much together and it will be one big party when we both graduate in December. She grew up in the same kind of situation I did, but like her Dad was killed for drugs and gang stuff when she was in high school. It was a really hard time, but she made it. I can't think of any one teacher that was a mentor to me in high school. I, uh, think all of my teachers liked me and encouraged me to do well. I would get asked by the teachers to participate in special academic events or do special projects and this gave me an inner-confidence that I lacked socially. I was good at the academic stuff. I mean, if you gave me a project or a test, I would do well no questions asked. I was very dependable and my teachers knew it. I know I never wanted to disappoint them. Disappointing them would have been so hard for me to deal with. I received most of my encouragement and motivation from school, either from my teachers or my friends. I mean, I was such a good student. I was in the Honors program and always made A's and a few B's. I was quiet and kind of shy, as you can see, I'm not that shy anymore. College has kind of like helped bring me out of my shell. Anyway, in high school, teachers knew I was a good student and I think they kind of expected me to go to college. I think they would have been like surprised if I had like decided not to go. And since I was in the Honors program, all of my friends had plans of going to school so it seemed only natural for me to want to go. No one specifically told me I should or I had to go, it was almost an expectation. It was just like something you had to do right out of high school. So, I did it and now I'm almost done. Ya' know? I mean, I'm proud of myself and what I've accomplished but I don't think it's like anything spectacular. I really feel like it was just the next step out of high school.



*I: Explain in detail the challenges and disappointments you have faced in college.*

P: Hmmmm... the disappointments. Well, let me think about this for a minute (pause in interview). Okay, looking back the hardest part was going off to school and being alone. I can remember sitting in that dorm and just wanting to go back to the comfort of my small trailer with my Mom and sister. I mean, this was all I ever knew so I missed it. Thank God for Sarah. I mean, I don't know what I would have done without her. I felt so different and like I didn't belong. I was miserable my first year. I think for me too it was hard because I was so shy. I mean, I was like almost scared of my own shadow. So, I think it was harder for me to meet people. Literally, I became like Sarah's shadow. I followed her everywhere and she was great about introducing me to all the people she had met. She didn't have like a shy bone in her body. Our first year we lived in different dorms, but in our second year, we lived in the same dorm so we kind of had a clique that we hung out with and it's kind of funny because it's almost the same group that we hang out with now. I mean, a few have gone, but most are still here. We get along really well and help each other out when we can. We have become a family and it wasn't until like my second year of college that I really started feeling like I belonged. And looking back over the summer after my first-year, I remember not wanting to go back to school. My stomach would get in the worst knots when I thought about going back. It was like a really hard time for me. And, my Mom really couldn't help me, she uh... wanted me to go back to school, but dropping out wouldn't have been the end of the world either. I know I had to go back though. I think of where my little sister would have been if I dropped out, what kind of role model would I have like provided to her if I just quit. Of course it was Sarah that didn't give me the chance to back out. She would say, "Girl!!

You are talking foolishness.” I knew deep in my heart she would like be so disappointed in me if I had dropped out. Really, my sophomore year and on hasn’t been that bad. I mean, it has been hard, but I’m almost done and I’m so glad I hung in there.

*I: Was there a defining moment in your life that you decided you wanted more for yourself, such as a better life? Explain.*

P: Not really a defining moment per say. I mean, I think growing up in a trailer was so completely normal for me. I didn’t really know how poor we were until I like went off to school and saw like what my friends had. You really learn what you don’t have then. But, like, I didn’t feel like I had a bad childhood either. Was it easy? I would have to say, “no.” Could it have been easier, well.... I would say yes. I would have loved to have a Mom and Dad together in a home, eating dinner together and going on family vacations, but that just didn’t seem to happen where I lived. So, no one knew what they were missing out on. I don’t have anger towards my parents for what they didn’t give me. For the most part, I don’t even like have anger to my father for being so irresponsible. That’s just who he is. I don’t have to be like that. Anyway, like I said earlier, college was a natural path for me and this really makes me realize that my Mom did a lot of things right growing up. We didn’t have a lot, but I’ve always like respected my Mom for working hard and keeping our family together. I mean, I had friends in school that lived with Aunts or Grandmothers. So, the fact that she didn’t put her responsibility on to someone else is comforting cause I know she didn’t have it easy.

*I: Were there people in your life that expected you to go to college?*

P: I think so. I mean, I know I expected to go. But, since all of my closest friends were going and I had the grades, I think everyone kind of had that expectation for me. I think there were people that didn't know how I was going to be able to afford it, but all of my friends were getting Pell Grants or scholarships and using student loans so this too was a natural thing. I did have to do a lot of research to find out what was out there. But in the small town I grew up in, most everyone was poor so we were all in the same boat together. None of us were like getting a free-ride to school. And, I really have to say, my school counselor was really good about getting information to us. She helped us figure out how to afford going to school and she helped us file some of the paperwork. Ms. Parker hadn't been out of college for long so she knew what was out there and how to obtain funding for tuition, books and fees. Yeah, Ms. Parker.... She sure was something. We would be hanging out in her office while she checked on stuff for us. She would Now, I'll say, this was probably the most help I ever got when it came to going to college. Yes, I'll have like a student loan when I graduate, but, I'll also have a degree and the loan to me is worth it. Totally worth it!!! Well, let's see about my first job before I go bragging about not worrying about having to pay back student loans (laughter).

*I: How have you financially been able to go to afford college?*

P: Wow, that's a really interesting question. I really think that like Mrs. Parker from high school got me started off to a really good start. Since my family income was so low, I qualified for Pell grants which was very good. I remember looking at my Mom's total yearly income since this had to be reported and thinking how did she raise us on this

alone. I mean, I know we qualified for like Medicaid and free lunches at school but still, we didn't have much at all. You don't really know how little you have until you see income on paper. Anyway, somehow we managed I guess. But, through the years I have kept my grades up and have been able to maintain Hope. In addition to this, I have had to work quite a bit and take out some student loans. It doesn't seem all that foreign to me, getting this financial help. I got more help regarding financial aid from my high school counselor than I ever did in the actual financial aid office at the school. The employees there always seemed to be in a bad mood and the lines were horrendous at the beginning of every semester. It just seems like there has to be a better way. The financial aid system on campus doesn't make it easy for students to obtain financial help. I'm just thankful it has been available to me. I'm always trying to tell others what's out there because some people just are not aware of what they will qualify for. Some people come out of like financial aid frustrated because they don't know like anymore than when they went in. I wish it was different for people like me that who need help and have good grades, but don't know how to get the financial help. I think universities could do a better job of telling students what they are eligible for. They expect us to come in off the street and know this kind of information, but you just don't. Again, Mrs. Parker really got me started and showed me how to search stuff, so for that I'm thankful.

*I: On campus, have there been any social or academic programs that have helped you succeed?*

P: Hmmmm. Let me think. I mean not really. Not one that I can point to that like helped me maintain good grades and stay in school. I was a member of the African American

Organization for a little while on campus. And, I met some neat people and attended some worthy seminars, but it was hard to stay active especially once I got a job. I think the organization is probably very helpful to students of color like me, but, I kept a pretty intense schedule with school and work. Plus, I had my group of friends that I rely on. So, I wouldn't say there were any social or academic organizations that really assisted me, but, this isn't saying anything negative about them. It was really just me, I kind of kept to myself and didn't take advantage of the programs. I probably should have but just didn't at the time and now I'm almost done. It seems like my schedule is pretty much the same every day. I get up, go to class, go to work and come home and do school work or just hang out with my friends. Did that answer the question? Or was I just gabbing?

*I: No, you weren't just "gabbing." That definitely answered my question. I just have a few more questions, if you have some more time.*

P: Sure, I have more time. I'm happy to help with your project.

*I: Did you ever feel like giving up and quitting? Please explain.*

P: Yes and no. I mean I think I always knew in the back of my head I needed to finish, but it was probably during the first summer after my first-year that I thought about not going back and just quitting. But then... you don't know Sarah. There was no way she would just let me give up. Oh no!! That was the only time it really crossed my mind. Financially it has been hard, but it has been the same for all my close friends. No one has really gotten a free ride. There are kids in college that do get a "free ride." And, you see this. I mean, I think some students have their parents sending them a lot of money each

month, but, you can't really be jealous of that. Wait... I mean, you can, but it's like it's not even close to your reality so you just have to spend what you have and not think about what you don't have. I really can't complain, I mean... In some ways, I live better and have more in college than I ever had growing up. I always feel safe in my apartment and this wasn't always the case in the trailer park. So, in a lot of ways, I feel like I'm fortunate.

*I: What could the college do to help educationally disadvantaged/at-risk students stay in school and graduate? Are there any programs or services that they could offer?*

P: This is a great question. I think colleges should promote something like a buddy system, kind of like mentoring but different. I mean, for me, I had Sarah and she was my side-kick through school. We went through almost everything together and we understood each other because we had similar backgrounds. Not all students have a "Sarah" to help them and to me, I think this is important. Students will need someone to experience the good and the bad and to help them when they feel like quitting like I did. They need someone they can call at a moment's notice and say, "look, this is what I have going on." So, if students come to school and are alone, if the college could pair them with someone that was similar to them, this would be helpful. Hmmmm. I was just thinking of something else that could be helpful. Oh... now, I remember. I wish my advisor would have made more time for me. I feel like each time I went to visit her, we were just filling out the necessary paperwork and getting her approval signatures. I can remember many times wanting to ask her more questions, but she was always so rushed. In speaking to friends, I know this was common with advisors. I think if each college had

a person that was just responsible for career counseling, this would make it easier for students to get the advice and help they need. Registering for classes is the easy part, but, answering important life-long questions is the hard part that students really need help with. At least, that was my case and the case of my good friends.

*I: If you were asked to speak at a group of students from an inner-city school, who are mostly poor, without parental support, without many mentors, and who have seen far too much for their age..... What would you tell them about going to college? What kind of advice would you give them to encourage them to try? What words would you offer them to instill hope within them?*

P: Well, I would tell them a little bit about my background because I think people trust you more if they know what you had to do to get to where you are today. Then I would tell them that college can be a reality if they work hard. I know I didn't get anything for free. I really had to work for everything I've had. You have got to be willing to work and put in the time to get ahead. I would tell them this. I think some kids are used to getting things for free and getting a college degree is definitely something you have to work for in life. So, they need to know going into it that they have to be prepared to do the work. I would tell them that there are financial resources available but they have to keep good grades. Financial help is always available if the grades are there. I would encourage them to go to school regardless if they parents didn't go that if they want a better life than college was a necessary stepping stone. I don't know what else I would tell them. I would just say, "if you want it, just do it, because if I can do it than anyone can."

APPENDIX H

TABLES



TABLE H1:  
POTENTIAL EARNINGS

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 Table H1 Sample of Weekly Earnings

 Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by educational attainment and sex, 1979 and 2002
 

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	Men's earnings		Women's earnings	
	2002	1979	2002	1979
College graduates, total	\$1,089	\$908	\$809	\$605
Some college or associate degree	\$732	\$755	\$545	\$483
High school graduates, no college	\$616	\$707	\$459	\$424
Less than a high school diploma	\$421	\$578	\$323	\$348

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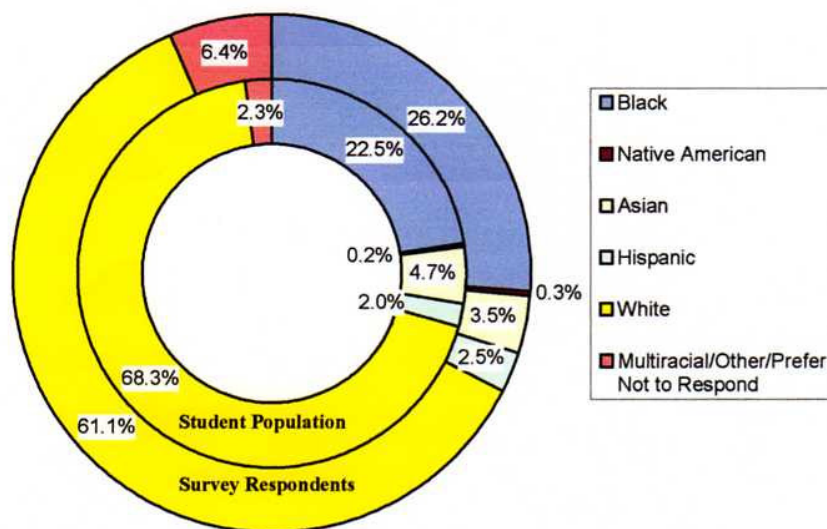
Note: Data are for workers 25 years of age and older.

TABLE H2  
DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

## Demographic/Background Data

Racial/Ethnic Group: A comparison of the breakdown by race of the survey respondents to the overall Fall 2001 student enrollment at USG four-year institutions is presented below. The race/ethnicity categories used by the University System of Georgia and the ACT instrument are slightly different; for example, USG has a multiracial category, while ACT does not. The breakdown among the survey sample is fairly consistent with that of the overall population.

Race/Ethnic Origin of Survey Respondents and Fall 2001 Enrollment

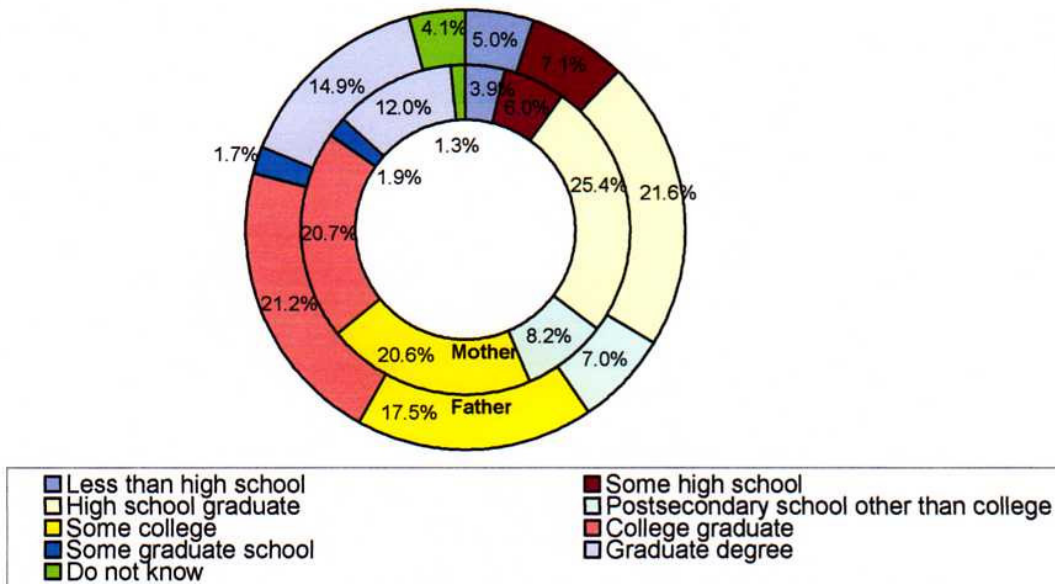


Age: The age distribution of the survey sample is very close to that of the enrolled student population in Fall 2001. A comparison of the sample and the population is presented in the accompanying chart.

TABLE H3  
PARENT'S EDUCATION

Parents' Educational Background: Students were asked for the highest level of education attained by their mothers and fathers. 35.3 percent of mothers and 33.7 percent of fathers have not pursued any education beyond high school. 34.6 percent of mothers and 37.8 percent of fathers had completed a college degree and/or a graduate/professional degree.

Highest Level of Education Attained by Parents



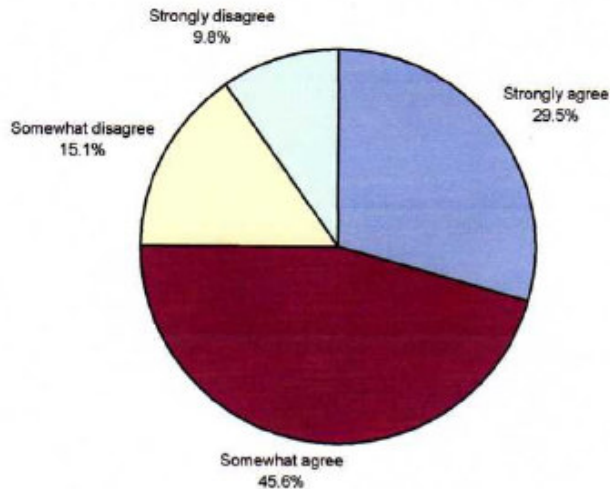
**Satisfaction with College Services**

Students were asked whether or not they had used any of twenty-two college services and programs, and if they had what their overall level of satisfaction was with that service/program.

Areas of Higher Satisfaction: Several items had an overall average satisfaction score over or near 4.00, indicating a high level of satisfaction overall. Students were particularly satisfied with *recreational and intramural programs and services, library facilities, honors programs, and computer services.*

Items Higher in Satisfaction	USG Avg.	% Who Used Services	1997 USG Avg.	Public College Norm
Recreational and intramural programs and services	4.11	33.8	4.07	4.05
Library facilities and services	4.00	80.7	3.91	3.98
Honors programs	4.00	8.1	3.89	3.87
Computer services	3.92	70.7	3.81	3.84
College-sponsored tutorial services	3.87	20.9	3.88	3.86

TABLE H4  
PREPARED FOR COLLEGE

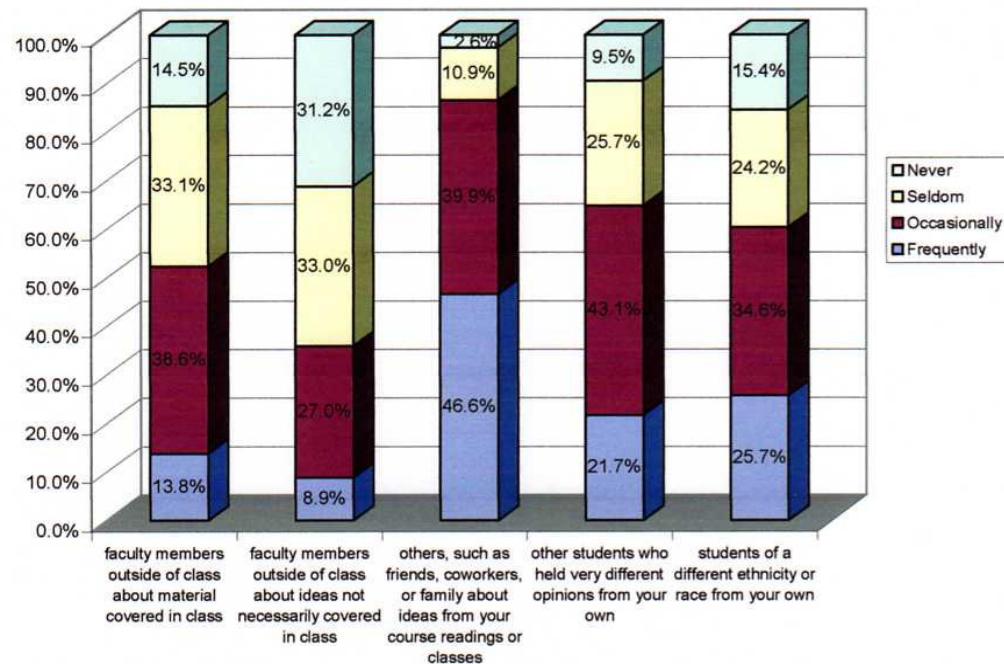
**High School Adequately Prepared Me for Academic Work at this College**

Several supplemental questions were adapted from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), an instrument designed to measure the extent to which students are engaged in behaviors that are known to be associated with desired learning and personal development outcomes from the college experience.<sup>7</sup> The results presented below will be compared to national benchmarks and analyzed further in other System research projects.



TABLE H5  
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

**Student Engagement: How often did you engage in discussion with the following...**



## Conclusions

The results of the 2001 Student Opinion Survey demonstrate areas of continuity in overall student satisfaction, as well as continuity in areas of student concerns. The largest improvements in student satisfaction are seen in the business processing of student life—admissions and registration, bill payment, and financial aid were all viewed much more favorably since the last survey.

Students remain concerned with academic quality and convenience issues. Satisfaction with advising services, course availability and academic calendars tended to decline from 1997 levels and continue to lag national norms. Additionally, satisfaction with student housing declined dramatically since the previous survey.

While composite results such as this can be used to identify large-scale trends, the most valuable use of these data is at the institution-level. Campus administrators will be able to identify areas of excellence and areas in need of improvement, and now have both a national benchmark and a prior-year institutional benchmark against which to measure their progress.