

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST
GENERATION, LOW INCOME, AND STUDENTS OF COLOR IN A FIRST
YEAR EXPERIENCE COLLEGE COURSE, RELATED TO
STUDENT PERSISTENCE AND RETENTION

By

Joanna White

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the experiences of underrepresented student populations (first generation students, students receiving federal financial aid and students of color) enrolled in First Year Experience (FYE) courses who then persisted to the following semester and remained enrolled at the college. The study examined students at a large, urban community college in central Connecticut and included 8 students as participants. The theories that guided this study were Astin's Theory of Involvement (Astin, 1999) and Tinto's Theory of Departure (Tinto, 1993). The central question for this study was: how do students describe their experiences in a First Year Experience course? A purposeful sampling of 8 students was used for the study. Data was collected by interviews, a focus group, and a questionnaire. Data analysis procedures were conducted based on Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The results of this study confirmed the Theory of Involvement (Astin, 1999) as well as the Theory of Departure (Tinto, 1993). The participants in this study perceived that they had a very positive experience while taking FYE coursework and that the coursework helped them in regards to persistence and retention at the college. The content and experiences in the coursework helped form meaningful connections to resources and programs, which kept them engaged and enrolled at the college. These connections helped students overcome obstacles and barriers to their success as students.

Keywords: underrepresented students, low income, first generation, students of color, community college, First Year Experience (FYE), retention, persistence

Copyright Page

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To the three little girls who are the inspiration behind all that I do, thank you! Your love kept me going on this challenging journey when I wanted to give up. You gave me love, hope and peace when I needed it the most. Being your Mom is my greatest joy! Dream big, beautiful girls and know that you can do anything!

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To my students, this is only the beginning. I completed this research because I am on a quest to understand your needs and serve you to the best of my ability! The marathon continues.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The transition to college can be a daunting, perilous and treacherous journey for even the most prepared student. The culture of colleges and universities are vastly different than any other experience in life and giving the proper support to first year students is essential for their overall student success. One proven way to support first year students and help aid in their transition is through the implementation of FYE programs (Bers & Younger, 2014).

Approximately 95% of colleges and universities have some variation of an FYE Program. FYE Programs vary from institution to institution and often contain a combination of services including FYE classes, FYE events and activities, orientation programs, as well as mentoring programs (Barton & Donahue, 2009). The implementation of an FYE class which includes topics such as study skills, time management, classroom etiquette, career exploration and overall orientation to campus life has been shown to improve academic performance and retention among students at colleges and universities nationwide. The popularity of FYE classes is growing, given the positive returns for the student and the campus community as a whole (Jamelske, 2009). The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to understand the experiences of underrepresented student populations enrolled in FYE courses who then persist to the following semester and remain enrolled at the college. For the purpose of this study, underrepresented student populations shall be defined as students of color, low income students or first generation college students.

Background

As time passes, both the United States and United States Institutions of Higher Education become more and more diverse. From 1990 to 2015, the U.S. Bureau of the Census reported a decrease in the population of white Americans from 80 percent to only 77 percent. There was a steady rise in minority populations during the same timeframe, for example Hispanic Americans increased from 9 percent to 17 percent and Black Americans increased from 12 percent to 13 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

U.S. Institutions of Higher Education are also experiencing significant changes over time. According to the U.S. Department of Education, between 1990 and 2013, the percentage of students of color in higher education increased from 23 to 30 percent. (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Although students of color are enrolling at U.S. institutions of higher education at higher rates than previous years, they are also leaving at higher rates than their white peers. Among students who enroll at a 4-year school, 62% of white students achieve a bachelor's degree in 6 years compared to only 42% of their black peers. (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Because the population of students of color continues to grow overall and yet there are stark racial and ethnic divides in higher education retention and graduation, the anticipated result is a growing number of Americans failing to complete college.

Given the anticipated negative outcome of continuing at the same pace, it is imperative for there to be interventions that will address the achievement and persistence gaps that exist in higher education between underrepresented populations and their peers. One proven intervention method which produces consistent positive outcomes across all demographic groups is the implementation of a FYE (Starke et al., 2001). In 2005, researchers Pascarella and Terenzini stated that FYE course participation had significant positive effects on students' transitions to

college and also on many related factors which all contributed to degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

One of the most prominent theoretical models used to inform the design of FYE courses has been the work of Vincent Tinto. Tinto's Student Departure Theory states "academic integration and societal integration are the keys to college student persistence" (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration refers to the students' performance academically and societal integration refers to student participation in college life. According to this theory, students who fail to connect with either one of these keys are more likely to leave the institution (Tinto, 1993).

Another prominent model when it comes to the study of student retention and persistence is the work of Alexander Astin. Astin's Theory of Student Involvement emphasizes the importance of students' involvement in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom. This involvement makes them invested in the school, thus increasing their investment in their academics. Astin's theory indicates that as students get involved in campus life, they are more likely to stay at the school and persist to reach their academic goals (Astin, 1999). This theory relates to the aspects of FYE courses, which help students, become aware of and involved in campus programs and resources.

Given the current research that indicates that FYE courses help students connect with the school, a key component of Tinto's Departure Theory and Astin's Student Involvement Theory, it is important to understand if there is a connection between the experiences of underrepresented student populations in FYE courses and their decision to persist at the college. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to understand the experiences of underrepresented student populations enrolled in FYE courses who then persist to the following semester and remain enrolled at the college.

Situation to Self

I currently serve as the Director of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) College and Career Program and as an Assistant Professor and Coordinator for Human and Social Services. I have been working in higher education for over a decade. My passion for helping every student is something I try to incorporate into the work I do daily. I am particularly passionate about working with underrepresented populations and this study is very significant to me in that regard. I am an experienced researcher, having completed several research projects during my Master's Program in Educational Counseling from the New York Institute of Technology. I also completed extensive research as part of my Honors Program Undergraduate Thesis at Eastern Connecticut State University.

I believe that God cares deeply about the least, the last, and the lost. As an educator, I am trying to find often overlooked students and hope to impart love into their lives in a real way that inspires positive change. I have always had a heart to work with the most challenging students because I have discovered that the students who need love the most often express it in the most unloving of ways. God has never given up on me and I hope to never give up on my students as well. I believe that education is an essential part of society and that it is important to reach all students, no matter their ability level, background, challenges or obstacles. I have observed educational inequity around me all of my life, and it has become the motivating factor that keeps me working hard to help level the playing field. I may not be able to change the whole world, but I believe that I can help change a students' world, one person at a time.

Problem Statement

The problem that will be addressed during this study is the low rates of retention for underrepresented college students. The population of diverse college students is steadily

growing, but many are not staying in school and completing their degrees. Compared to their peers, their retention and graduation rates are significantly lower. This is of great concern for colleges and universities nationwide and there is a distinct need to find ways to improve this problem.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to understand the experiences of underrepresented student populations enrolled in FYE courses who then persist to the following semester and remain enrolled at the college. This phenomenological study is designed to describe the lived experiences of 10 first year college students who took a FYE course and then were retained to the following semester. Participants are either first generation, low income or students of color and will be in their second semester at the aforementioned college. This study will take place in order to better understand their experiences in the course and their decision to remain at the college for another semester.

Significance of the Study

The proposed research study will contribute to the body of literature regarding the first year experiences of underrepresented populations, specifically their experiences when taking a First Year Experience course as it relates to persistence and retention. The majority of current literature focuses on either the First Year Experiences courses or the retention of underrepresented populations, but not both of them together (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Jamelske, 2009; McClenney & Greene, 2005; Museus & Quaye, 2008; Shuetz, 2008, Zeidenberg, 2008). Therefore, this proposed research study will fill in the gaps in literature by providing qualitative data that describes the experiences of underrepresented students in the FYE courses as they relate to persistence and retention.

The proposed research study will provide data that is valuable to different stakeholders in the educational system. Results from the study may help guide colleges and universities in regard to their outreach programs and plans to better retain first year students from underrepresented backgrounds. It may also help to strengthen the case for increasing the number of FYE courses offered at colleges and universities across the nation.

Research Questions

In order to research the experiences of underrepresented first year college students in regards to persistence and retention, the research question and sub questions will seek to dig deep into the feelings and thoughts of students. The research questions are grounded in the literature that indicates that underrepresented college student populations experience unique barriers and challenges during that can prevent them from persisting in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; McClenney & Greene, 2005; Museus & Quaye, 2008; Shuetz, 2008). The questions also probe regarding the FYE courses because of the literature that indicates their positive benefits to students (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Jamelske, 2009; Zeidenberg, 2008). Overall, the questions are designed to better understand the hurdles and obstacles that face first year students and also the possible impact of FYE classes on these experiences. The central question and sub questions are as follows:

Central Question

How do students describe their experiences in a First Year Experience course?

Sub questions

1. What are the perceived barriers facing them as first year, first generation, low income or students of color?
2. What elements of the First Year Experience class help address these barriers?

3. How did students' experiences in a First Year Experience class influence their decision to return to the college?

Definitions

1. *First Year Experience (FYE)*-Classes or programs designed to help first year college or university students acclimate to college life (Jamelske, 2009).
2. *Low income students*-students whose family income is below 125 percent of the federally established poverty level for their family size, as determined by the FAFSA (Engle & Tinto, 2008).
3. *First generation students*-students whose parents or legal guardians have not completed a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008).
4. *Students of color*-students who do not identify as white (Barton & Donahue, 2009).

Summary

The first chapter has presented an introduction to the proposed research study. An overview of the relevant literature illustrated the history of First Year Experience courses, the diversity of college campuses and the retention and persistence of underrepresented populations, revealing a gap in the existing literature. The researcher's motivation for conducting the research, relationship to the participants, and paradigm was articulated. In Chapter Two an outline of the literature review underpinning the proposed research study will be presented. Chapter Three will provide the research design, methods of data collection, and data analysis procedures of the proposed research study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Two of this proposed research plan is to provide a theoretical framework for the study and review of relevant literature pertaining to FYE courses, underrepresented populations in college and persistence and retention of these mentioned students. The study is grounded in Tinto's Departure Theory as well as Astin's Theory of Involvement. These two theorists emphasized the importance of connecting with the college community and these types of connections are part of the framework of FYE Courses. Research on FYE Courses will be reviewed to better understand its potential relationship to the persistence and retention of students. Additional research regarding underrepresented populations will be reviewed in order to see if the elements reviewed in the theories and FYE courses are related. Overall, the relevant literature regarding FYE courses, college campus diversity, retention and persistence of underrepresented populations will be presented in a way that provides the foundation for the current study.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories will be used as the framework for this study: Vincent Tinto's Student Departure Theory (Tinto, 1993) and Alexander Astin's Theory of Involvement (1999). Both theories and the related literature are held in high regard in the educational world, particularly when developing strategies to improve retention, persistence and graduation rates.

Student Departure Theory (Tinto, 1993). Vincent Tinto's Student Departure Theory is widely regarded as the main theory related to student persistence and retention. As the name indicates, Tinto studies the factors and circumstances related to students departing from or leaving a college or university. Understanding these factors and reasons for departure is

important in developing solutions to help retain students and help them persist towards their academic goals and milestones. Tinto's theory is based around three major obstacles that cause students to leave school: academic difficulties, inability to reach academic and occupational goals, and failure to connect or stay connected to the social landscape of the school.

Academic difficulties relate to challenges inside the classroom. Students may struggle to understand material, keep up with course assignments or not produce college level work. The leap from high school or work to college can be a stark contrast and a shock to many people. When students take multiple classes, with multiple deadlines, multiple professor teaching styles and multiple student personalities, it can create an overwhelming academic environment for students. When students struggle, they may not know where to turn in this new, independency-based environment.

Inability to reach academic and occupational goals related to students not reaching expectations or goals that they set for themselves. If students hit a road block or something takes longer than expected, they become discouraged and sometimes give up. Instead of seeking help or regrouping and coming up with an alternate plan, they simply abandon their goals altogether.

The final obstacle, failure to connect or stay connected with the social landscape of the school is a large deterrent to student success. Students try to juggle a full course load, a personal and sometimes professional life, and one top of it they have to develop new social interactions and relationships. While starting fresh socially may come as a relief for some, for many it creates high levels of anxiety as they flounder about, trying to piece together a new support system. Making new friends is never easy, and in the college experience, it is no different.

Tinto's emphasized that in order to persist, students need to have meaningful formal and informal interactions both inside and outside the classroom. Some examples of classroom

connections include forming a trusting relationship with professors and seeing them as helpful resources, having meaningful interactions with other students during class, and learning about campus resources as part of the course curriculum. Educators who take the time to incorporate elements of campus life into their curriculum are helping students overcome several of the obstacles that Tinto outlined. For example, taking students to visit a campus tutoring center can help the students in a variety of ways. First of all, it can help improve their academic performance, thus helping them stay on course to achieving their academic goals. Secondly, it can help them overcome academic difficulties by connecting with tutoring staff that can help them with specific questions or subjects. Finally, visiting the tutoring center could help the student meet other students or even start to study in groups for a class. This connects them with an office outside the classroom and encourages them to stay on campus to help reinforce the classroom learning they have received. Overall, this simple act on the educator's behalf can have reciprocal benefits for both the student and the educator over time. This is just one example of a meaningful experience outside the classroom.

Meaningful experiences outside the classroom can come in many different forms such as building friendships with other students, forming study groups, visiting campus support services offices for assistance, joining clubs and organizations, and spending time on campus when not in class. All of the aforementioned interactions and experiences can aid in students becoming connected with the school and thus being more likely to persist to future semesters. The relationships that they build with faculty and staff, students and support services offices can help them overcome the hurdles that are inevitable in a college experience. As students start to see that there are caring faculty and staff at the university, with helpful resources to assist them, they

can begin to form connections with various campus offices and develop relationships that will serve as the foundation for future learning and development.

From the time students are recruited to the school, the school should have a plan in place to not only bring the students to the school but to keep them there and help them achieve their academic goals. It is not just about getting them in the door, but keeping them, helping them learn and grow and then guiding them back into life with new skills and meaningful experiences while achieving the academic goals that they set out to accomplish. In Tinto's various pieces of literature, he outlines a path to success for students. It begins with recruitment and admission to college and making sure that the college is a good fit for the student's individual strengths, needs and academic goals. Upon admission, it is imperative that the students have a comprehensive orientation to the school from the onset in order to understand the academic and social landscape of the school they now belong to. Tinto suggests assessing student needs from the onset and enrolling them in appropriate first year experience courses and also academic counseling and support services. This requires a developed connection with students in order to understand them as a whole person. Once the faculty and staff understand the student, they can understand the student's needs. This interaction should start as early as possibly to help formulate a meaningful relationship between the student and the school.

Tinto emphasizes the importance of the first year of college, including the integration of a first year experience course. The first year experience course, along with other activities such as orientation can help students form connections with other students and with the campus community as a whole. The connections that students make during the first year of school have a significant impact of their connectedness to the school and ultimately may be what keeps them there to achieve their academic goals.

Theory of Involvement (Astin, 1999). Alexander Astin's Theory of Involvement is another theory that shares valuable insight into student persistence and retention. The roots of the theory are grounded in the experiences of students in relationship to their persistence and retention in college. Astin's theory emphasizes the importance of student involvement in college and is based around three main areas of students' lives: inputs, environments and outcomes. Examples of student inputs are: their demographics, background, and previous educational experiences. The students' environment refers to the experiences during college itself. The outcomes refer to the qualities, thought processes, characteristics and lasting impressions that students leave college with. All three of these areas are important components of a student's life. With the goal of developing a well-rounded student experience, all three areas should be noted and made a priority from the student perspective as well as the practitioner perspective as well. From the beginning to the end of the college experience, the way that students are involved in the world around them directly affect their overall success in college and beyond.

When it comes to involvement, Astin makes five basic assumptions: involvement requires a great deal of psychological and physical energy, involvement is continuous, involvement is both qualitative and quantitative, what a student gains from involvement is directly related to their depth of involvement, and finally academic performance is directly correlated to involvement. Students who are involved in extracurricular campus activities on campus perform better in the classroom academically. Their involvement in the campus as a whole helps them make connections between the work they are assigned in the classroom and how it relates to the overall campus community. They see themselves as an important part of the entire campus and put greater value on their classroom studies. The implications of this theory on higher education practices throughout the years have been significant. Colleges and universities have come to

recognize the value of student involvement as a contributing factor to student academic success while enhancing their overall holistic experience inside and outside of the classroom.

Subsequent programming, learning communities, campus programming and overall campus involvement activities have been emphasized and colleges and universities around the country. The importance of campus involvement cannot be understated and planning relevant, engaging activities and organizations for students to partake in is imperative to campus success. A rich and purposeful experience in school helps students stay connected to the school and persist in their academic path and ultimately stay there to complete their academic goals. These implications relate to the important data points such as retention, persistence and graduation as well as the overall vibrancy of the campus experience.

Related Literature

History of FYE Courses. Both Tinto and Astin emphasized the importance of connectedness to a school in order to feel as though they belong, thus causing them to flourish at the school. There are a variety of programs and services at colleges and universities designed to help students become connected and stay connected throughout their college experience. One such program that seeks to lay a strong foundation from the beginning is a First Year Experience (FYE) Course.

FYE Programs developed out of similar initiatives such as freshmen orientation programs. The first freshman orientation class took place at Boston College in 1888. A few decades later in 1911, Reed College in Oregon developed a year-long course that was separated into male and female sections. These courses set the foundation for what would happen decades later at The University of South Carolina. Despite the earlier records of Boston College and Reed College, The University of South Carolina is often regarded as being the birthplace of the

FYE Course. In 1970, the campus was experiencing a great deal of unrest and discord among its students. In an effort to help them come together as one, the President, Thomas Jones, promised to provide a course which would help students be unified and taught in a new way that would change education. In 1972, University 101 was born. This course was designed to teach students everything they needed to know about campus life and to help them to better understand and appreciate The University of South Carolina on a new level (Jamelske, 2009).

The University of South Carolina's course became a model that was replicated across the country. A decade after its first course, the University hosted representatives from over 175 colleges and universities nationwide, to discuss the first year experience. The following year, in 1973, the program's director, John Gardener organized the first Annual Conference on the First Experience, which continues to this date. The University of South Carolina continues to be the leading expert when it comes to FYE classes and the overall first year experience. They have online resources and professional development designed to enhance programs at other schools. They created a ground-breaking initiative that spread like wildfire across the nation and now serve as a resource to other programs throughout the United States and the world (Jamelske, 2009).

Versions of FYE Courses are offered at 95% of colleges and universities across the United States (Jamelske, 2009). These courses are designed to help students transition smoothly into college life, with various support services, experiences and information that will help them on their journeys. The structure and basic tenets of FYE Courses vary from institution to institution. Some courses are mandatory, while others are not. Course credit often ranges between 1 to 3 credits depending on the institution. Some courses are taught by full time faculty and others taught by support services staff or adjunct professors. Some courses have a more

traditional format and others are very outside of the box, taking students out of the classroom and around campus to various programs, support services offices and campus experiences in an effort to increase connectedness. Despite the various shapes and forms that the FYE Courses take, they all seem driven towards a common purpose: to help students positively acclimate to college life (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

FYE Program Evaluation. FYE Programs have been studied and evaluated by researchers for several decades. The program at The University of South Carolina was studied in 2009 and it was found that students who took a FYE Course their freshman year were more likely to return for their sophomore year than their counterparts that did not take the course (Jamelske, 2009). This study demonstrates the impact of a FYE Course on student retention and persistence, a promising development.

A study of FYE courses implemented in the Florida State University System found that FYE courses increased the chances of students persisting to the following semester, improving their grade point average (GPA), as well as ultimately improving their chances of attaining a certificate or degree (Zeidenberg, 2008). This study further demonstrates evidence of the potential for FYE courses to positively affect student retention and persistence.

A student at The University of North Carolina's Greensboro campus revealed the impressive results of students taking FYE courses. Their FYE Course is called University 101 and the freshman to sophomore retention rate was 81.9% for those who took University 101, as compared to only 74.4% of those who did not. Similarly, the University 101 students had an average of a 2.72 GPA their first semester, as compared with the lower 2.49 GPA of those who did not take the course (Hutson & Atwood, 2006).

In 2010, researchers Fowler and Boylan studied the impact of FYE courses on student GPA's, academic standing from fall to spring semesters, as well as success rates in developmental classes. The study included 453 participants and the findings were very encouraging. The percentage of students in good academic standing increased from 46% to 70% for students who took the FYE courses. Additionally, the percentage of students on academic probation decreased from 31% to 24%. Finally, the percentage of students dismissed from the institution decreased from 19% to just 3%. Student completion rates in developmental classes, along with their overall GPA's increased after participating in FYE courses (Fowler & Boylan, 2010).

All of these findings hold great promise for the positive effects of FYE courses on student development and achievement. They demonstrate higher retention rates, completion rates, persistence and GPA's. Given the positive effects of FYE courses, they are an intervention strategy that can create lasting, positive change not only in the lives of students, but in the campus community as a whole.

Community Colleges. Community colleges are a pillar in the academic community that serve over half of all undergraduate students in the United States (NSC, 2015). Like other academic institutions, community colleges strive to maintain academic environments in which students are supported on their path to reach their academic goals. Community colleges offer classes to students of all ages and academic levels in an environment that is interconnected with the community around them. Community colleges often a low-cost option and flexible class times for students, which can help overcome barriers to enrollment such as finances or scheduling conflicts.

With all the positive attributes of community colleges, come some negative statistics that are cause for alarm. Unfortunately, community college students drop out of school at a devastating rate. One half of community college students leave school before attaining their stated academic goals (Schuetz, 2008). This is not only detrimental to the students, who often end their academics prematurely, but also to the campus culture in regards to sustainability and financial stability. In an effort to increase retention, research-based intervention strategies are needed. Despite the shocking statistics, there has been little research done specifically on community college retention. The majority of retention studies have been completed at four-year academic institutions and lack transferability to community colleges. This creates an opportunity for study that is new and promising.

Keeping in mind the goal of retention, it is important to note that most students who drop out tend to do so early in their first semester. It is imperative to find interventions that are effective at keeping students engaged in their academics, as well as the school as a whole. Following Astin's model of student involvement, Schuetz further researched and found that students who were involved in campus activities outside of class were more likely to be retained (Schuetz, 2008). In a report by McClenney & Greene, it was found that 84% of students do not participate in campus activities outside the classroom (McClenney & Greene, 2005). To summarize, the Schuetz study shows the importance of campus involvement, while the McClenney and Greene article shows the stark lack of campus involvement. These interrelated issues involving campus involvement and engagement provide an opportunity for intervention and innovation. If the issue of campus engagement and participation in campus activities is addressed, it provides an opportunity for there to be significant gains in student retention, persistence and graduation rates at community colleges.

Community colleges are an important part of the educational system in the United States. A great number of students embrace community colleges as part of their educational journey. As of 2014, 42% of all undergraduates in America attended a community college. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, 46% of students who completed a four-year degree had enrolled in a two-year college at some point during their college journey (NSC, 2015). In addition, students who graduated from a two-year school had been enrolled in two-year school for at least five semesters (NSC, 2015).

In a culture where continuing education is highly valued, many students attend community colleges due to their close location, lower tuition cost, open admission policies and variety of certificates and degrees offered. Community colleges are especially appealing to first generation students, low income students and non-traditional students. Community colleges are a wonderful place for students to study and understanding their unique landscape and culture is vital to effectively helping community college students succeed.

Community colleges have a diverse student population, with students of all ages, education backgrounds and abilities. Students at community colleges have a wide range of their levels of academic preparedness based on their previous life and educational experiences. Community colleges enroll higher percentages of students who need remedial coursework or are not adequately academically prepared for college level work. Community college students enroll a higher number of low-income students than 4-year schools. These lower income students, in turn, are much less likely to graduate than their peers (Wilson, 2016).

Community colleges are known for their high enrollment numbers when it comes to underrepresented populations such as low income, first generation and students of color. The

U.S. Department of Education published a report that in the fall of 2014, 16% of all undergraduate college students were Hispanic, while 22% of community college students were Hispanic. Another statistic of note is the disproportionately high number of Black students enrolled at for-profit schools. 13% of all undergraduate college students were enrolled at for-profit schools, however 25% of all Black college students were enrolled at for-profit schools. There continue to be stark contrasts when looking at the percentage of Black and Hispanic students enrolled in two-year and four-year school, respectively. In 2014, 44% of Black college students and 56% of Hispanic college students were enrolled at a public, two-year college. Only 29% of Black and Hispanic college students were enrolled at public, four-year schools (Wilson, 2016).

The average age of a community college student is higher than the average age of undergraduates overall. Looking at data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study in 2012, in public and private four-year schools, about 20% of first and second year students were 25 or older. Conversely, 44% of first and second year students at public two-year schools and 58% of first and second year students at for-profit two-year schools were 25 or older. This study also showed that 80% of undergraduates at public and private four-year schools started college before they turned 20, only 58% of students at public two-year schools did so (Wilson, 2016).

Many community college students live at home to cut costs and remain dependents of their parents and guardians. 49% of all undergraduate students are dependents of their parents for financial aid purposes. Among the students at public two-year schools, 31% of that group were from the lower family income quartile, as compared to 22% in public four-year schools. Similar to the financial differences, there are also differences when it comes to first generation college students' attendance. In 2012, 36% of students who were dependents under their parents

at two-year public schools were first generation college students. In comparison, only 24% of dependent students at public four-year schools, and 19% of private non-profit four-year schools were first generation students. Almost half of all students in the for-profit sector were first generation college students (NPSAS, 2012).

Oddly enough, even though there is a high percentage of low income students at community colleges, this student group was least likely to apply for financial aid. Only 61% applied for federal financial aid, and 70% for any aid. Comparatively, in other sectors, more than 70% of students applied for federal financial aid and 80% applied for any aid. There are also differences when it comes to Pell Grant Awards. 36% of Pell recipients in 2012 were enrolled in public two-year, public four-year and private nonprofit four-year schools. The other 64% of Pell recipients were enrolled at for-profit schools (NPSAS, 2012).

Community college students are more likely to have work obligations outside of school, as compared to students in other educational sectors. In 2012, more than two-thirds of community college students worked at least part time and one-third worked full time. This is very different than public and private non-profit four year schools, where only 20% of students' work. Having work obligations outside of school can cut into time that students need to study, get involved in extracurricular events on campus, meet with professors, join study groups, and other college experiences. This lack of free time can potentially affect student grades and their overall college experience (NPSAS, 2012). Work obligations can also cause students to reduce their course load, becoming part time students. Students who enroll part time take much longer to complete degree programs and are less likely to persist to graduation (Martin, 2014).

Even the most qualified and academically prepared students struggle to persist and graduate at a community college, as compared to a four-year school. According to research completed in 2015, 69% of students who begin at a four-year school will graduate, as compared with only 19% who began at a two-year community college (NSC, 2015). This disparity is significant and again demonstrates the vast differences between community college students and four-year college students. It is imperative that educators understand the unique challenges and opportunities that present themselves at community colleges and develop programs that best serve their students.

Student Persistence and Retention. Research from a wide body of literature has tried to identify the various factors that influence student persistence in higher education. When it comes to low income students, particularly at community colleges, researchers Napoli and Wortman (1998) noted that the higher departure rates among community college students may be due to the high demands on the student, from multiple communities. Researcher Deil-Amen (2011) stated that community college students are one of the most marginalized groups in higher education. The factors that influence student decisions regarding continuous enrollment are important to understand in order to better serve them on their journey and help potentially alleviate stress and break down barriers to help them have a smoother and productive college journey.

Researcher Wilson (2016) studied a plethora of research material and from them suggested that there were seventeen factors that tend to influence student decisions regarding continuous enrollment. The factors are as follows: precollege experiences, early encouragement of degree aspirations, psychological factors, budgeting and employment, social and emotional support from family, social engagement with instructors, on-campus supports, sense of

adjustment and comfort, sense of self-efficacy, success strategies, social and cultural capital, match between college expectations and reality, isolation from the demands of everyday life, academic and social integration on campus, life experiences with family, self-regulated learning and finally student's educational expectancies (Wilson, 2016).

From these seventeen factors, Wilson then grouped them into five groups to better generalize the situations that influence student enrollment decisions. These five groups included: complementary school to college curriculum, academic advisement, sense of community, financial resources, and psychosocial development. These five groups summarize the important factors when it comes to the success of low income college students (Wilson, 2016).

A complementary school to college curriculum refers to a streamlined plan and curriculum to help adequately prepare students for life beyond high school. K-12 schools should work to align their standards in such a way that there is a natural progression into college academics. When academics are not aligned, there is a breach which causes students to be unprepared for college level work. This harsh reality can hit students during their first semester and be very discouraging, sometimes even serving as the reason they choose to leave. The feeling of academic inadequacy and frustration is one that many students experience, simply because there is not curriculum alignment from K-12 schools, leading into higher education.

In addition to academics, it is important that social and emotional topics relating to the college experience are discussed prior to entering college in order to best prepare students for success. Topics such as how to make new friends, how to resist peer pressure, how to care for yourself away from home, what to expect living on campus, how to handle homesickness, and more are all topics that students should talk about and learn about prior to attending college. A

complementary school to college curriculum can aid students in helping make a smooth transition to college, particularly those who are going to be first generation college students. They may not have someone at home to show them the ropes of college and rely on schools to provide them the information. It is crucial that schools include this information in their curriculum to help prepare students to transition into college life (Wilson, 2016).

Academic advisement and support are also crucial parts of college students' success. Having resources on campus that are available and accessible to students can help them make more informed decisions about their class schedules, major selection and other important decisions. This type of academic advisement starts long before college. Making sure that students follow an appropriate academic plan helps ensure that they have the courses needed to apply to the colleges they want. For example, if a student plans on going into a career in science or mathematics, it is usually required that they take a higher level math or science class in high school such as physics or statistics. If students take Algebra I in eighth grade, they will have a strong foundation to take these classes and they will also have room in their high school schedules to do so. If they do not plan their academic path early, they may not be able to take the courses needed to study what they want right away.

In addition to planning coursework to meet higher education requirements, it is important for students to study and take various standardized tests. These can range from the SAT and ACT to credit-bearing courses such as AP classes or credit-bearing exams such as CLEP tests. Students need helpful information regarding all of these tests to ensure that they are preparing appropriately and know what to expect. Performance on standardized tests can affect scholarships, program admission and more and it is important that students are given accurate and timely information in this area.

Support services such as tutoring and mentoring are also helpful to students as they navigate their college journeys. Without such support, students can feel lost in the system and make ill-advised decisions that can ultimately cost them time and money. Making sure that students have excellent academic advisement and support is imperative to their success (Wilson, 2016).

Wilson also described the importance of having a sense of community. Similar to the theories of Tinto and Astin, it is important to connect with the community around you. Students need to feel like they are a part of something bigger, something of importance to their existence. When college students of all ages, backgrounds and abilities set foot on a college campus, they are setting foot as human beings. They are human beings with the basic need to connect, to contribute and to thrive in an environment that celebrates them for the unique people that they are. The importance of including activities, programs and an overall atmosphere of excited involvement is important to not only the campus as a whole, but to the individual development of first year students (Wilson, 2016).

Setting the tone from day one is incredibly important. Students need to learn about the world around them, namely the college or university that they have chosen to attend. There are so many facets to the educational experience and learning them all at once can be overwhelming and incredibly daunting. Having caring, competent and available faculty and staff, reaching out to students and offering assistance from the beginning is a crucial part of student success. Students need to know that they matter and that they play a crucial role in the organization as a whole. Without students, there are no schools. This is a truth that should be highly regarded by school staff on all levels. Treating students with kindness, respect and care is not just the right thing to do, it is also a smart thing to do in order to ensure the overall success of the organization.

Customer service, professionalism, assistance and friendliness are all qualities that should be expected of each and every school employee. As a whole, the school should be presenting a united, welcoming front to students along their journey (Wilson, 2016).

Connecting students with resources is vital to their ability to be successful in higher education. Something as simple as a campus map can be useful to a student, frantically searching for their classroom on the first day of class. Even better, walking that student to class while explaining the campus map provides an even greater depth of care and consideration to that student. Everyone has moments in life where they try something new. Having people there to serve as guides along the way can help calm nerves and make the experience a positive, learning one. Having all the knowledge and resources in the world, but not sharing them with those who need it most is dysfunctional. Educators have so much experience and so many resources available and it is important to share those with first year students who would greatly benefit from them.

Financial resources are another area that Wilson described as a need for students. Finances can become a barrier for student success. While there are many financial aid resources out there, oftentimes students are not aware of them and thereby give up on their academic dreams, deeming them too expensive. Going back to the topic of academic advisement, there is great importance for financial advisement as well. Academic advisement and financial advisement should work in tandem to help students as well-rounded individuals. A student could be academically prepared for college, but if they do not have the resources needed to pay for it, they may not go (Wilson, 2016).

It is imperative that educators and community members work together to help students become aware of the various higher education financial resources available to them. There are thousands of dollars available through grants and scholarships that students may qualify for. This is an exciting process for students and receiving a grant or scholarship award may quite literally change the landscape for that student and their family forever. It is essential that educators provide updated, accurate information and assistance to students in a timely fashion, to assist them in making higher education a financial reality.

Finally, Wilson describes the importance of psychosocial development. Understanding oneself as well as the world around, is important when trying to acclimate to a new environment. Elements such as self-esteem, self-awareness and self-motivation are all key components to any educational experience, particularly higher education. Self-esteem and self-worth is the reputation a person has with themselves. Self-esteem helps fuel motivation, in this case motivation to work hard towards the goals of higher education. If one has a low regard for themselves, they may not be motivated to continue, as they expect themselves to fail. Their motivation may be very low, which causes them to move slower towards their goals, often times giving up altogether. Self-awareness is another key component, as it helps serve as a compass, guiding in regards to how they are feeling or acting at any particular time. Self-aware people realize when they are off course and make strides to change their behaviors to help improve their situation. All of these qualities are important in higher education, as it is an ever-evolving journey that can involve disappointments, road blocks and unexpected dilemmas (Wilson, 2016).

Overall, these five areas: complementary school to college curriculum, academic advisement, sense of community, financial resources, and psychosocial development are important to the success of low income students. These topics should be a point of discussion for

educators, particularly those who work at institutions with a high population of low income students.

Underrepresented Populations. Within the general student population, there are particular groups that struggle in the areas of persistence and retention. It is important for the academic community to not only become aware of these populations, but also work towards solutions to the problems and obstacles that they face. First generation, low income and students of color have demonstrated concerning results when it comes to academic performance, persistence, retention and graduation. First generation, low income students make up one fourth of the total undergraduate population in the United States (Engle & Tinto, 2008). It is projected that due to the wealth gap increasing in the United States, the number of first generation, low income students attending college will continue to increase. While the number of students from these groups continues to increase, the unique challenges that they face need to be in the forefront of education. One of the reasons is the particularly low graduation rates. Engle & Tinto further discovered that after six years, only 11 percent of first generation, low income students had obtained bachelor's degrees, as compared to 55% of their peers. While this statistic is startling when it comes to academic goals and aspirations, this disparity creates a socioeconomic effect that spans beyond the classroom. As noted by Museus & Quaya, these low rates on completion can give way to issues of incarceration, increased student loan debt amounts, reduced overall income potential, as well as decreased ability levels to provide academic assistance to children (Museus & Quaye, 2009). There is a need for colleges and universities to address the needs of underrepresented populations and provide services and programs that will help them succeed not only as college students, but in life.

First Generation College Students. Imagine traveling to a foreign country where you have limited information, sometimes even a general idea of some of the main sights and attractions to look for, but not an in depth knowledge at all. Imagine not speaking the language and yet trying to navigate from place to place, trying to function normally as a human being. General tasks that seemed easy in a usual environment such as eating, sleeping, meeting with friends, having fun and overall feeling comfortable and happy can very quickly become frustrating in a new environment. Taking care of basic needs such as food and sleep are difficult when balanced with everything else going on. At first, day-to-day interaction are simply a struggle to survive, yet alone have fun.

This scenario is very close to what many first generation students experience when they first start college. First generation college students are commonly defined as students who do not have a parent who graduated from a four-year college (Swanson et al., 2017). First generation college students are courageous explorers, going where no one in their family has gone before, to college. They are embarking on a journey with little to no direction from their family and friends, with hope in their hearts for a new and better life. The hope that they have is coupled with a sense of responsibility to do better not only for themselves but for their collective family unit and for generations to come. This is a heavy load to carry at times and can cause an added level of stress on top of the academic pressures that these students are already trying to handle. Finding a balance of emotions and intellect in order to succeed in college is a large challenge that first generation students face every day.

There are millions of college students on campuses across the United States and approximately 20% are first-generation college students (Pratt et al., 2017). Of first year students on these campuses in 2007, 38% were first generation students (Swanson et al., 2017). On these

campuses, the language used is totally different than other environments. There are acronyms for everything: FAFSA, NCAA, SAT, RA, GPA and more! New and confusing words are thrown around and may hold little to no meaning for a first time, first generation student. The college language can be very similar to a foreign language in this regard. Similarly, the landscape of a college campus can be like visiting a foreign country. Within a home environment, people have their favorite places to eat, know where to mail a package, know where to go for advice, know where to go to blow off steam. The college experience is a completely different cultural experience from anything they have experienced prior. First generation students are entering a whole new environment with its own set of cultural norms and unspoken rules. First generation students may not come to college as equipped as a traditional college student, having the self-efficacy, self-esteem, financial and family support to survive and succeed in the environment. The college environment is brand new and all these things must be discovered through trial and error and takes a great deal of time and effort.

Once the landscape is mastered to some degree, there is the importance of communication to take into consideration. Communicating with college faculty and staff is very different than high school staff and administration. Some college classrooms hold hundreds of students and the professor may not know everyone by name, let alone chase students down to make sure that they finish their work. The work in college is very independent and if students are not doing their work, there may not be any reminder or warning to get up to speed or fail. Students are often caught off guard when they receive no feedback for an extended time period and then find out they are failing the class. It is up to the student to be proactive and learn how to professionally communicate with the college staff in order to succeed as a student. Skills such as writing a professional email, attending faculty office hours, asking a teaching assistant for

help, forming a study group, or writing an appeal for a grade are all things that college students may encounter, but that may be something first generation students are doing for the first time ever. Instead of being a joyful journey to college, at first students may become stressed beyond believe just trying to adjust to their new surroundings (Pratt et. al., 2017).

In life, change can be very difficult and as first generation students change to adjust to their new surroundings, these changes often cause them to start to be disconnected from their home surroundings. To begin with, first generation college students are typically less prepared academically and also have less exposure to college and college preparation than their peers with college educated parents (Mehta, 2011). This can create a rift between college and home life simply because friends and family do not understand what they have not experienced. A student might take a trip some for the weekend in search of support and understanding from family and friends, but as they start to vent and talk about their frustrations, even the most well intentioned friends and family may not have any idea what the student is describing to them. Well-meaning loved ones may make suggestions on how to cope or suggestions about the college experience in general that make no sense to the student and frustrate them even further. They may leave home and head back to campus even more upset than when they left in the first place. This creates a strange scenario in which the student does not feel like they fit it at college or at home. They may become frustrated and regret going to college at all, because they now feel isolated more than ever.

There are many factors that discourage first generation college students from continuing their education, ultimately resulting in alarming statistics about their retention and persistence as college students. For example, first generation college students are 71% more likely to leave college during their first year than non-first generation students (Pratt et. al., 2017). Despite their

high hopes and aspirations, they do not return to finish their education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), it was reported that 21% of first generation college students do not return for their second year of school. With so many students leaving after their first year, it is not surprising that first generation students also have a much lower 5-year graduation rate than their non-first generation peers. For first generation students the rate is only 13% versus 33% in the non-first generation population (Pratt et al., 2017).

One of the ways that colleges and universities can help underrepresented student populations is in the way of emotional, financial and professional support. First generation college students often need a great deal of support when it comes to attending college. First generation students generally receive less encouragement from their families to go to college. These families also have reduced resources to help their children attend college than families in which the parents attended college themselves. Their families might be supportive of the idea of education, but cannot offer and specific resources or advice when it comes to the ins and outs of college itself. They cannot provide the guidance that students so desperately need simply because they themselves never attended college. This scenario can often cause tension between loved ones, as many students feel as though their families simply do not understand. Families can provide a great deal of emotional support and should continue to be a part of their students' lives (Terenzini, et. al., 1996).

First generation students have a distinct need for positive adult role models who have gone to college and can offer specific advice about the experience. Building a strong social and professional circle while in college and beyond is important for the overall structure of the student's life. Having mentors, colleagues and peers who have gone through or are going through similar college and career experiences gives the students a sense of belonging and

purpose (Terenzini, et. al., 1996). Building these networks can be challenging and this is where FYE classes come in.

First generation students and pioneers, struggling to survive and if they do, they will create a whole new future and outlook for generations to come. This hope is the fire that drives them to succeed, the fire that keeps them going against all odds, and the fire that ignites their passion each day.

Low Income Students. It is often said that higher education is an investment in the future, an investment that costs students thousands of dollars. The value of education is emphasized heavily in society, yet the affordability of higher education can be out of reach for many students. According to the College Board, the average cost of tuition and fees for the 2016–2017 school year was \$33,480 at private colleges, \$9,650 for state residents at public colleges, and \$24,930 for out-of-state residents attending public universities (NCES, 2015). These costs do not include extra expenses such as room and board, books, transportation and spending money. For families with a limited income, these figures can be daunting. Even with federal student aid and institutional scholarships, the remaining cost to students and families may be out of their financial reach. Some may look at the price tag of the college or university and walk away from their dream of attending. They may not even go through the process of applying to the school or for financial aid, because of the sticker shock at the overall price. Because of these and other obstacles, low income students face challenges unique to their specific population that prevent them from enrolling in college and if they manage to enroll, they prevent them from persisting and completing their academic goals.

Most FYE classes contain a component of networking and social interaction. Students interact with other students both inside and outside of the classroom. There is often group work

that encourages students to get to know one another and find commonalities that can help them form lasting connections. FYE classes also contain lessons on campus resources such as tutoring centers, advising centers, and specific clubs and organizations for underrepresented populations. The professor acts as a connection between the students and these resources, thus providing an opportunity for them to connect with the campus as a whole. Developing a support system is vital to the success of the student and the FYE course can be a vehicle that helps build that needed support for the student (Barton & Donahue, 2009).

Navigating a college campus can be like learning a new language for first generation college students. There are so many buildings on campus, new terminology to learn, dates and deadlines, forms, procedures and the list goes on. Simply applying to a college and registering for classes can be a daunting task for some that involves several trips to the college. With acronyms aplenty, words such as: FAFSA, lit review, Blackboard, works cited page and others become a new vocabulary for students as they become acclimated to college life. It can be very daunting to take on a new challenge that requires you to change many of the things you know about life. Adapting to a new environment can be uncomfortable and may be one of the reasons why students struggle to stay in college. To have a sense of belonging is an important part of humanity. Getting adjusted to college life takes time and students need help along the way to stay motivated and not give up on the process. FYE Courses can be a powerful tool to aid students in their journey to success in college and career (Barton & Donahue, 2009).

Gap in Literature and Need for Current Study. As colleges and universities across America strive to recruit new students, retain students once they enroll, help students graduate and ultimately produce well-rounded graduates, it is imperative that current research help address some of the problems that administrators are having along the way. The number of first

generation students, low income students and students of color enrolling in college continues to rise. So, the numbers of these students leaving campus without a degree are rising as well. Based on the theories of Tinto and Astin, there is great importance in connecting students to the campus community and capturing their attention early in their college journey. Becoming involved in campus life early on can help them feel a sense of ownership in their education. Likewise, for many students who lack a support system at home, getting connected to on campus resources, faculty, staff, administration, peers and others can be of great benefit of helping them feel as though they belong. The major premise of this research study stems from the belief that it is imperative for human beings to form meaningful connections with the world around them. Throughout each day, as people navigate through life, they are surrounded by others who have various roles in their lives. From the moment of waking up, until the day is done, human connections are part of most everyone's lives. Components of the day such as traveling to and from destinations, purchasing food, working or going to school, communicating with others in person, online or over the phone, so many connections throughout the day. Along with the everyday connections, it is human nature to crave strong, lasting connections with select people. These people help create a much-needed support system of advice, comfort, encouragement and love. With all the up's and down's of life, those connections help create balance and strength to continue towards a person's goals and dreams.

Conversely, the absence of connection can create imbalance, despair and a feeling of wanting to give up. Loneliness can creep in and bring other negative emotions along with it. This toxic emotional environment can kill dreams, kill desires and kill goals until one is left with little inspiration and motivation for life. Isolation can cause one to question existence, purpose

and function. When feeling these overwhelming emotions, the lack of a positive support system can exacerbate them even more to the point of utter frustration and defeat.

The development of programs and services to assist first year students has evolved over the years. As the world changes, it affects the way students live their lives. Thus, effective education should also change and adapt in order to best serve the needs of the modern student. Students today have many different experiences than those decades ago, or even a year ago. Technology is changing, the global economy is changing, and communication is changing. The way in which education approaches students should be changing too in order to best serve students in an innovative and relevant way.

First year experience programs are an excellent point of contact with students in order to help assist them with questions and concerns that they may encounter as they start a new journey. In addition to the programs, a collective effort to welcome new students to campus is needed. Members of each and every campus office should be ready, willing and able to help assist new students in any way possible. It is an incredibly exciting time at the beginning of each semester. Excitement and anticipation fill the air as new students take the first steps towards their personal goals and dreams. This excitement should serve as fuel to help motivate faculty and staff to start the year with a positive attitude and hands ready to help those students in need.

A key aspect to developing a strong and effective first year experience program is fostering collaborative relationships among school staff. There is a plethora of helpful information, as well as a variety of resources available to students, it is sometimes just a matter of helping connect the student with the right person to help them.

First year experience program efforts should begin long before the students set foot on campus. They should begin with the development of strong, positive working relationships with colleagues in order to better understand various programs and services offered on campus. School staff should be well versed in the terms and important concepts of the school and practice sharing that information in a way that will help engage students in the campus as a whole.

It is absurd to expect college students to adjust to campus life and know about their resources, when the school staff are not aware of and engaged in all the campus has to offer. Information sharing is the first step to collegial support and collaboration as a campus. If college staff learn about other offices and programs and are able to articulate that information, with enthusiasm, to students, they present themselves in a professional and competent manner, which will gain respect from students. Excitement is contagious if the staff present the campus in an engaging way, students will become excited too and be ready to be active parts of the campus community. Once the staff are functioning as a cohesive, welcoming unit, as students arrive, they will be greeted with knowledgeable, friendly staff that will help make their transition to college life an enjoyable one.

First year experience program formats can vary from institution to institution but most generally involve some sort of campus orientation, academic advisement, along with a course taught by a member of the school staff. The selection of first year experience class instructors is very crucial to maintaining an inviting environment for students. Choosing instructors who are innovative, energetic and passionate about student success can help contribute to an engaging class experience overall. These instructors will spend quite a bit of time with the first year students, so it is important that they are aware of important campus resources, as well as ways to help students get involved in campus life early on.

Student life on campus is a critical part of the college experience and it is advisable for students to search for and join a club, organization or activity that matches their interests. This is a great way to meet new friends and have some fun while in an academic setting. These outlets are also an excellent way for students to step out of their comfort zones and try something new! The time period surrounding the college experience is one full of self-discovery, understanding and often times finding one's true sense of self. This time for self-reflection is crucial for growth as a student and as an individual in general. Ultimately, the ability to soul-search and contemplate life can be a useful tool when making career and overall life decisions down the road.

First Year Experience Courses include all of the needed elements to satisfy Tinto and Astin's guidelines in order form connections in students, thus boosting retention, persistence and graduation. While FYE Courses have been studied to some degree, there is a lack of research done at community colleges and with underrepresented populations such as first generation students, low income students and students of color. There is an urgent need to better understand these underrepresented populations and provide them with the resources they need to persist at their schools and ultimately graduate in a timely fashion. This current study proposes such research and can lead the academic community into a cutting-edge conversation that has the potential to positively affect the lives of many aspiring students.

Summary

The outline of the literature review in Chapter Two provides evidence regarding the issues surrounding first year, underrepresented populations in higher education and their experiences in FYE courses. Research has emphasized the importance of FYE courses but has

not been specifically studied in regards to underrepresented populations and not particularly in community colleges. Therefore, this proposed research study will contribute to the field of knowledge and close some gaps in the current framework of literature.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The beginning of this chapter will discuss the design, setting, and participants of the proposed research study. The chapter will then proceed with an examination of the procedures, the role of the researcher, data collection, and data analysis. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the trustworthiness of the proposed research study and ethical considerations will be addressed. The purpose of this chapter is to provide important information about the methodology of the proposed research study.

Design

The proposed research study is qualitative in nature and utilized a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological research study focuses on the lived experiences of an individual or individuals. The research focuses on the common themes that participants identify as part of the phenomenon. The description in a phenomenological study focuses on what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, phenomenology is grounded in the philosophical writings of German mathematician Edmund Husserl, who sought to better understand the lived experiences and stories of various people groups (Husserl, 1931).

A phenomenological methodology allows the study to examine the experiences of the participants and shed further light on the topic of FYE classes in regard to persistence and retention of underrepresented students. A phenomenological research study highlights the experiences of individuals experiencing a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This design is appropriate in order to answer the main research questions in a way that encapsulates the experiences in a vibrant way. This design will allow for a rich understanding of the experiences of the students in my study. Part of my desire in this research is to paint a picture of the lives of

these students in order to allow readers to have a rich understanding of their lives as college students. This vivid understanding allows readers to see them as individuals and not just as statistics, as they are often documented as. Interview data, focus group data, and questionnaires are collected from students at a community college in Connecticut. The three types of data are triangulated to strengthen the trustworthiness of the proposed research study.

Research Questions

Central Question

How do students describe their experiences in a First Year Experience course?

Sub questions

1. What are the perceived barriers facing them as first year, first generation, low income students or students of color?
2. What elements of the First Year Experience class help address these barriers?
3. How did students' experiences in a First Year Experience class influence their decision to return to the college?

Setting

The setting for this study is a local community college in Connecticut. The community college is in proximity to an urban center, with an adequate number of underrepresented first year students in order to easily access the desired sample size. This college has approximately 15,000 students, 54% of which are female and 46% are male. Of the college population, 50% of the students are Caucasian, 15% African American, 15% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 8% unknown. The average age of the students is 27.9 years old. The average tuition costs are \$5,600 per year. The data will be collected from FYE courses offered at various times throughout the year.

Participants will be recruited by email, fliers, and classroom presentations and will participate on a volunteer basis.

Participants

The participants for this study are 8 students at this central Connecticut community college. This sample size is appropriate for a phenomenological qualitative study as confirmed by various researchers such as Dukes, Polkinghorne, and Reimen (Creswell, 2013). The 10-15 students will be recruited from existing FYE courses. They have taken the class in the fall 2017 semester and have returned to the college for the spring 2018 semester, thus demonstrating persistence and retention. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, which means that the researcher chooses particular individuals and sites because they can better inform the researcher about the indicated phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Procedures

The first step of the proposed research study is to obtain the necessary approvals. The proposed study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board for Liberty University for approval. After confirmation that the proposed research study was approved, I contacted the Dean of Academic Affairs at the research site to explain my research and get approval to conduct a study. Then I contacted the First Year Experience professors as a first step in recruiting students. Participants were given paperwork that explained about informed consent and they signed a consent form in order to participate in the study. Interviews and focus groups were scheduled at the school based on the availability of the participants. On the day of the interviews and focus groups the appropriate consent forms were distributed, signed, and collected. The interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded then transcribed verbatim. The questionnaires were administered in an electronic format. The data collected from questionnaires

and the other methods was analyzed according to the procedures established for each type of data. These three methods of data collection achieved triangulation, per Creswell's recommendations for a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis was completed using Moustakas' modification of the Stevick-Colaissi-Keen method. These methods included a rich description of the participants' experiences, along with full disclosure of my experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The Researcher's Role

As the human instrument of the proposed research study it is important that I conduct myself with integrity, hone valuable research skills, and conduct the study with fidelity. The credibility of qualitative methods hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the research (Patton, 2002). In order to conduct a high quality phenomenological study, the researcher should be well trained because of the continuous interaction between the theoretical issues being studied and the data being collected (Yin, 2014).

As a professor of First Year Experience courses and the Director of a college readiness program, I have developed my own theories regarding student persistence and retention. I have personally experienced the positive effects of a First Year Experience course on students of underrepresented backgrounds. Therefore, I brought some bias into the proposed research study. In addition, I do not have any personal or professional relationships with any of the participants in the study, as I used students that I do not know from other sections of the course. In order to minimize any biased procedures, I depended on current literature and phenomenology protocol to guide the research study.

Data Collection

For the proposed research study data was collected from interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. By collecting different sources of evidence the collective research study was strengthened and it improved the overall quality of the study (Yin, 2014). Having multiple and differing methods of data collection is known as triangulation (Creswell, 2013). Using various methods helps corroborate the findings and provide validity. The proposed research study used three different methods for collecting data in order to develop converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2014).

I began data collection with individual interviews, followed by case studies and finally questionnaires. When completing the interviews, I was able to observe the participants and determine which might be amenable to participating in a focus group. When having participants complete the questionnaire, I drew from the populations in both the interviews and the focus groups and utilized the face time with them to explain any procedures related to the administration of the questionnaire.

Interviews

The first method of data collection used for the proposed research study was be semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews contain questions that allow for the creative expression of the participants, while keeping them focused on the topic at hand (Creswell, 2013). Interviews are important because they are an essential source about human affairs or actions (Yin, 2014) and this will provide rich information regarding First Year Experience courses, persistence and retention. A face-to-face, semi-structured interview was conducted with students. The interview questions were open-ended and used to gain a deeper understanding of how participants perceive the First Year Experience Course and its influence on persistence and

retention. The interviews took place in reserved conference rooms in the campus library. This location was convenient for students, professional, and quiet enough for recording purposes. Each interview was digitally recorded using an electronic voice recorder. A second recorder was used as a backup. During the interview, I took copious notes that later helped understand and analyze the digital interview content. The content of the interviews was transcribed verbatim for data analysis purposes. The interviews were more focused and will last approximately one half hour (Yin, 2014). The interviews addressed the main research questions and all three subquestions. The interview questions were peer reviewed prior to use.

Each interview began with the following icebreaker questions: “What inspired you to go to college?” and “What is your favorite class so far and why?”

The interview guide included the following eleven guiding questions:

1. What were your first impressions of your FYE class?
2. Did those impressions change throughout the semester?
3. What were the most important topics covered in the FYE class?
4. What are some obstacles you faced your first semester?
5. How did you overcome those obstacles?
6. Were there any lessons or information from your FYE class that helped you overcome those obstacles?
7. Why did you return to school this semester?
8. Did anything in your FYE class experience play a role in that decision?
9. Based on your experience in FYE, what advice would you give to incoming freshmen about to start FYE?
10. What were your favorite things about FYE class?

11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about FYE?

Focus Groups

The second method of data collection for the proposed research study was focus groups. Focus groups are small groups of participants that are invited to discuss topics chosen by the researcher and are facilitated with the air of questions that open up dialogue (Creswell, 2013). The researcher often chooses participants from those that they interact with in another data collection method such as interviews. I invited a group of 5-7 students from those previously interviewed to participate in the focus group. The focus group questions were open-ended and followed a semi-structured format. The focus groups took place in reserved conference rooms in the campus library. These are quiet, professional spaces that will allow the participants to dialogue freely and also for the content to be captured digitally without background noise. The focus groups lasted for approximately an hour to allow for active participation and responses to the prompt questions. The focus group meetings were digitally recorded with an electronic voice recorder, also using a second recorder as a backup. During the focus group, I took notes to ensure that I was later able to follow along with the digital voice recording. The content of the focus groups was transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

During the focus group I moderated a discussion about the influence that First Year Experience course has persistence and retention to deliberately try to surface the views of each person in the group regarding the issue (Yin, 2014). As the moderator for the focus groups it provides an opportunity to gain more insight of the personal perceptions and attitudes toward the First Year Experience courses (Yin, 2014). However, I was cautious not to dominate the focus group and encourage a balanced and active discussion from the participants. The focus groups

addressed the main research questions and all three sub questions. The focus group questions were peer reviewed prior to using them in the study.

The focus group began with two icebreaker questions:

1. Describe your college experience in two words.
2. Why did you choose those words?

The focus group question guide included the following ten questions:

1. Who in particular has had the most influence on your college experience thus far?
2. What obstacles have you faced in college so far?
3. When you face an obstacle in college, what do you do to overcome it?
4. Are there any particular techniques, skills or methods you use to address the obstacle?
5. Why did you decided to return to college this semester?
6. During your FYE course, did you learn about particular resources, information, and activities on campus? If so, which ones?
7. Since beginning FYE, have you utilized any of those resources, information or activities?
If so, which ones and how so?
8. Have you joined any clubs, organizations or social groups on campus? If so, how did you learn about these?
9. Would you recommend FYE classes to others? Why or why not?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about FYE?

Questionnaires

The final method of data collection for the proposed research study will be the use of questionnaires. These questionnaires will be designed to better understand the experiences of

students in the First Year Experience courses and also their experiences as first year students, in relation to persistence and retention. The questions will be open ended, which will allow for participants to elaborate on their experiences. The questions will be peer reviewed prior to using them in the study. The questionnaires will be distributed to participants toward the end of the study, which will allow for rich description to be collected which may possibly elaborate on what they have already shared in interviews and focus groups. The questionnaires will be emailed to participants from both the focus groups and interviews. They will take approximately 30 minutes to complete depending on the depth of participant answers. The questionnaires will address the main research questions and all three sub questions.

The questionnaire will include the following nine questions:

1. What was your favorite topic covered in FYE and why?
2. What takeaway messages do you have from your FYE class that you will apply to college and career?
3. What campus resources did you learn about in your FYE class?
4. Have you used any of these resources since taking the class? If so, how often?
5. Are you a part of any campus clubs or organization? If so, which ones and who told you about them?
6. Why did you decide to return to school this semester?
7. Did anything from your FYE class influence that decision?
8. What advice do you have for future FYE students?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about FYE?

Data Analysis

I completed data analysis by using Moustakas' modification of the Stevick-Colaissi-Keen method. This method involves several steps, including the researcher's epoche. This is designed to help the researcher set aside any biases they have on the topic. At this point, they also made sure that transcripts are recorded verbatim. Using an open mind, the researcher used phenomenological reduction in order to develop meaning from the text. This was followed by imaginative variation and synthesis of ideas. This method allowed me to include my own experiences with the phenomenon as well as describing the experiences of the participants. By fully disclosing my experiences, it can add richness and understanding to the research as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for themes, patterns and a deep understanding of the research. Moustakas recommends using a technique called bracketing during this part of analysis. Bracketing starts with the researcher describing their own personal experiences with the research in order to avoid it affecting the data. Putting it out there from the beginning achieves this method (Moustakas, 1994).

Prior to the analysis itself, I paid attention during the data collection process and began to search for patterns, insights, or concepts that seem promising to help understand the phenomenon. All of the data collected through interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires was coded and then analyzed and classified into general themes. Following transcription and bracketing, I followed with the task of memoing, followed by subsequent coding. Memoing is the process of taking notes with important keywords and themes found in the data collection items. This is a way of supplementing the actual verbatim text from interviews and focus groups and writing down thoughts, ideas and themes for future understanding in the data analysis

process (Moustakas, 1994). Coding follows next and takes those notes and organizes them and looks for themes and patterns (Creswell, 2013). Coding is the process of putting the text into categories and assigning labels to them (Creswell, 2013). This allowed me to see if any common themes or patterns emerge while understanding the experiences of students in a First Year Experience Course in regards to persistence and retention. After coding, I looked for significant themes, statements and takeaway messages, and especially significant statements. From these significant statements, I worked to provide both textural descriptions of what happened as well as a textural-structural of how it happened. By using these descriptions, I ultimately create an essence which describes the overall findings (Creswell, 2013). I am hopeful that this essence provides an overall understanding of the experience of participants experiencing this phenomenon and represent the research project as a whole.

Trustworthiness

It is important that the proposed research study does not distort the data to serve the researcher's vested interests and biases (Patton, 2002). To ensure the trustworthiness of the proposed research study triangulation, member checking, and peer review was utilized. Triangulation was achieved by using and coding multiple sources of data collected from interviews, focus groups, and documents. Through member checking the researcher has an opportunity to solicit participants' views of the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2013). The participants had the opportunity to examine the transcripts of their interview responses to ensure that misinterpretations did not occur. The peer review provided an external check of the research process (Creswell, 2013) to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the research.

Credibility

Since I have experience working with FYE classes and with underrepresented populations, I fully disclosed my experiences during the research. This exposed any potential biases that I may have and ultimately make the findings credible (Creswell, 2013).

Dependability

In order to achieve dependability, I employed the use of a peer review system. I coordinated with the department chair of the First Year Experience classes, who will have an expert opinion on the topic. They were able to review the research processes, artifacts and other related items with an expert point of view. This process of peer review is identified as a way to achieve dependability in a study (Creswell, 2013).

Confirmability

Confirmability was ensured through the practice of member checking. In this process, participants review data and data analysis to make sure that it is, in fact, what they intended to say. Participants check to make sure that everything is accurate so that the research can be confirmed (Creswell, 2013).

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to use the findings from this study and specific population and potentially apply them to relevant populations. By using rich, thick description, I was able to give others a full picture of this study so that they can decide if the results transfer elsewhere (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

In order to allow anonymity of the participants, everyone was assigned a pseudonym. In doing so, the study's reports can still maintain their rich, personal nature, but not violate the anonymity of the subjects. In order to make sure I was able to get individual opinions and avoid groups pressuring each other to feel a certain way, individual interviews were conducted. Formal approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board was granted before any research data is collected. To ensure research integrity I gained informed consent before any interviews or focus groups are conducted (Yin, 2014). The participants were completely informed about the purpose and nature of the proposed research study. The participants were also informed about the data collection procedures and data security. In addition, I adhered to the standards the ethical standards proved by the American Educational Research Association (Yin, 2014). Participants were able to opt out of the proposed research study at any time. Physical data was kept in a lockbox and electronic data will be kept on a password protected external hard drive. Both the lockbox and external hard drive were kept in secure locations, that I only have access to with a key, adding another level of security.

Summary

The research design of this qualitative study was identified as a phenomenological study. The rationale for using a phenomenological study design was clearly articulated and appropriate justification was stated. The site and participants were identified along with the rationale for why the site was chosen for the proposed research study. Data will be collected from three various sources during the study and data analysis procedures were discussed. The procedures to

strengthen the trustworthiness of the proposed research study were outlined. The chapter was concluded by identifying and addressing ethical considerations of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of underrepresented student populations enrolled in FYE courses who then persist to the following semester and remain enrolled at the college. This phenomenological study was designed to describe the lived experiences of 8 first year college students who took a FYE course and then were retained to the following semester. Participants were either first generation, low income or students of color and were in their second semester at college. This study took place in order to better understand their experiences in the course and their decision to remain at the college for another semester. The purpose of this chapter is to give a brief description of the participants of the study and to present themes that were developed through data analysis. A rich description provides a glimpse into the lives of the participants involved in this study. This study examined the experiences of 8 participants. Initially, I had aimed at getting 10-15 participants but had difficulty doing so. I received approval to lower my sample size to 8 students. The participants were recruited from a public two-year community college in the Northeast region of the United States. Results from this study are also discussed in this chapter, beginning with the development of themes generated from the data collected from one-on-one interviews and the focus group interview. After a presentation of the themes, a discussion follows which addresses the research questions.

Participants

This study on the experiences of students in a FYE course presented information about 8 first year college students in the Northeast. The 8 students were recruited from existing FYE

courses. They will have taken the class in the fall 2017 semester and have returned to the college for the spring 2018 semester. Participants fell into at least one of the three designated student categories: first general college student, low income student, student of color. Each participant answered questions on the questionnaire to provide more information about their experiences.

Table 1 gives demographic information about the participants.

Table 1. *Demographics of the Participants*

Participants	Gender	First Generation	Low Income	Student of Color
Alexis	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vanessa	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes
John	Male	No	Yes	No
Rebecca	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jessica	Female	Yes	Yes	No
Cara	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ariel	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes
Laura	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes

Alexis

Alexis is a remarkable young woman, full of life, vibrancy and resiliency. Alexis a first generation college student, a student who receives federal financial aid and also a woman of color. She is the first in her family to go to college, which is a unique accomplishment considering most of her family did not even graduate high school. Alexis said that her motivation to attend college came from a complete hatred of retail jobs, which she has worked in the past and currently. Alexis wants more for herself and her family and knows that getting a college degree will provide the resources and opportunities needed for her to have a stable career, not just a job.

Alexis loves science and participates in a women-only science, math, engineering and technology (STEM) mentoring program at the college. This small group of women is tight-knit and participates in various events, group activities and trips to help build camaraderie and encouragement amongst the group. Alexis expressed how STEM careers tend to be male-dominated, and so having this program for women helped them stick together and overcome any type of adversity they experienced. The fact that they have each other's backs helps them persevere, even when they feel like quitting.

Alexis is a very ambitious woman. In her first semester, she took five classes including The First Year Experience (FYE) course. In the class, she said that some of the most important topics were time management and learning from failures and experiences. Time management was helpful to her because she had a lot on her plate with classes, work and family obligations. Learning from experiences and failures, rather than dwelling on them and becoming crippled was an especially important lesson for Alexis and one that helped keep her in school. During the

semester she unfortunately was in a car accident that totaled her car. Her car was her means to get to work and school, so without reliable transportation she faced a huge hurdle and wanted to give up. Her FYE Professor was the one that convinced her to stay in school and to reenroll for the next semester. When she wanted to quit, her FYE professor was the link that kept her connected and helped her think of solutions. One of the solutions and advantages to staying in school is that the college offers students an unlimited local bus pass for free. This bus pass allowed her to stay in school and even use it to get to other places she needed to on the bus route. Alexis has since acquired a new job and is still enrolled in college and persevering towards her goals, one day at a time.

Another area in which her FYE course helped her grow was in the area of taking personal responsibility. Alexis mentioned that she used to blame everyone else for circumstances that were happening to her. Taking the course taught her to look at her own life and actions and take responsibility for things and also to take responsibility for the way she reacted to other people's actions. This change in attitude and outlook helped Alexis have a more positive view of life and feel empowered even in challenging circumstances.

Alexis described the ways in which the FYE course helped her with study skills and other important college practices. She talked about the ways in which college is different from high school and the outside working world and how it is intimidating to have to learn a new language of sorts in order to be successful. The FYE course helped her better understand skills such as note taking, studying, time management, communication with faculty and staff and also helped her navigate the physical college campus as well. All of these skills helped her feel more empowered and at home in college.

Alexis highly recommended FYE courses in general and said that she thinks that all students should take them. She said that because the class is about personal growth and development as college students, anyone could benefit from it because everyone should be on a path towards betterment of self. The course also helps hold students accountable and allows them to vent about experiences they are having across the campus and the professor and other students can help them brainstorm ways to find solutions. Overall, Alexis praised the course and the positive impact it has had on her life and even said she would take it again if allowed to. This speaks volumes to the positive impact that FYE had on her life.

Vanessa

Vanessa is a hardworking, determined woman who is working hard to set an example for her family and especially for her younger siblings. Vanessa is the first in her family to go to college, is a woman of color and also receives federal financial aid. Vanessa spoke about her motivation to go to college being the desire for a better life for her family. Her mother works multiple jobs as a cleaning woman and Vanessa wants to work hard to help her pay the family expenses and get out of the cycle of poverty that has been in her family for as long as she can remember. Vanessa not only attends school full time, but also works to support the family's expenses. She lives at home and said that every month it is a struggle to pay the bills, and there is rarely anything left over.

Vanessa has chosen to be a psychology major and her face lit up when she talked about the current psychology class she is taking. She described how she loves psychology because it is like figuring out a puzzle and trying to put the pieces together and better understand someone. Vanessa expressed that the psychology course is her favorite subject and that she was really

disappointed that she had to miss it for an entire month. When asked to speak more about this, Vanessa explained that her family was in a tough place financially the previous month and that she was offered a second job to make extra money. The job would only last for a month, but it was on the same days as her beloved psychology class. She had to make a decision and ultimately the family's finances were more important than her attending classes, in her opinion. It was a tough decision to make, one that many students are torn between. As a result of missing class for a complete month, Vanessa is unsure of her current grade in the class and seemed sad that she had missed the content of a subject she really enjoys. Ultimately, the struggle between survival and family responsibilities took its place in the forefront of her priorities.

When asked about her experiences in her FYE course, she excitedly described her professor as somewhat of a motivational speaker. Her class took place at 8am and she said that although she was very tired sometimes, the professor had a way of getting the class excited, engaged and learning. When she felt like giving up in class or in life in general, the professor would encourage her that she could do it, that she should keep persevering.

One of Vanessa's favorite topics in the class was time management, which she felt was greatly needed in her busy and full life. Vanessa admitted that in high school, she did the bare minimum to just get by. When she transitioned to more demanding, self-sufficient work in college, she struggled. Her professor encouraged her that for every hour of class time, she should be spending two additional hours studying on her own. She took this to heart and to practice and worked very hard to develop study skills, as outlined in her FYE class. She formed small study groups in her classes. In a statistics class she was struggling in, she paired herself with another student whom she knew understood the subject in order to learn from her expertise.

Vanessa said that working with that strong student one-on-one helped build her understanding of the subject and also her confidence overall.

Vanessa spoke about persistence and never giving up. She knows that college is a challenge and a path that few choose. As the oldest child, she wants to set a good example for her younger brothers and sisters and show them that if she can do it, they can do it. She referred again to her FYE professor who advised her that college is only a few short years of her life and if she puts in the work now, she will be in a career for years and decades to come. It is worth the hard work and dedication in order to set herself and set family up for success down the road.

Vanessa would highly recommend the FYE class to other students. She said that the opportunity to learn how to be a successful college student will help her immensely on her college journey and the skills and confidence she gained will help her in life in general. She learned how to look for solutions while in the midst of a crisis, how to brainstorm ideas to be more successful and ultimately learned how to have a strong work ethic, where none existed before. She advised future students to give the class their full attention, because the course is really about them. Committing to one's personal development and growth is the best decision they could make and she was so glad that over the course of the semester she stayed committed. The course is a huge reason why she returned to school, because without the skills and confidence she gained from it, she likely would have given up. The FYE Course set the stage for a successful college journey and for that, she is certainly grateful.

Ultimately Vanessa wants to make her family proud, especially her mother. She wants to be able to provide a better life for them and believes that a college degree is the key to success. As she has taken classes, Vanessa feels drawn to social sciences, as she truly enjoys helping

people that are going through challenging times. She believes that with hard work, determination and faith, anything is possible. She wants to be an example to her family and also to potential clients in a future career that great things happen when you do not give up.

John

John is a vibrant, driven young man that has fully embraced his college journey and set out to be the best that he can be in life. John receives federal financial aid, which makes college a financial reality for him and his family. John chose to go to college because he believes that education is the key to a better life, both for himself and for his family. John aspires to be a future teacher, possibly in the area of history and social sciences. He is fascinated with learning about other cultures, as it brings an understanding of the world as a whole, as well as the world around him daily.

Upon beginning college, John encountered many challenges such a lack of confidence, lack of communication skills and poor time management skills. These challenges caused him to question his ability to persist and succeed in college. Thankfully all of these topics were a part of the FYE course that he took. John particularly spoke about how impactful the time management lessons and concepts from his FYE course were. John learned the importance of strong study skills, and using time outside to class to strengthen knowledge learned in the classroom. Taking care of important tasks such as homework and projects, before engaging in social activities became best practice for him and he noticed a change in both his grade and in his attitude. Planning ahead also became an essential part of John's homework and project schedule. Instead of waiting until the last minute, John came up with a plan to complete the work well in advance and to break it up in chunks. This not only increased the quality of his work, but also

lowered his stress level. John was taking the time to complete careful, well thought-out work and giving it the time and attention it deserved. Making time for schoolwork reaped its benefits and made him a more confident student. Managing his time well as a college student will prepare him to do so in years to come.

Confidence is also something that John spoke about being an essential part of his journey as a college student, taking the FYE course. John started without knowing how to effectively communicate with professors, staff and even other students. Through classes, lessons and activities, John learned the importance of advocating for himself in a respectful way. The FYE course gave him the tools and techniques to take hold of his life and take responsibility for his actions and outcomes. Realizing that he had the power to change his destiny caused him to be bolder and confident when it came to advocating for himself. Instead of just accepting a bad grade, he got in the practice of respectfully appealing to professors, asking other classmates for help on future projects and coming up with a study plan for future assignments. The concept of being a creator of his own destiny is something that he learned in his FYE course and embraced to the fullest.

John has persisted in college because he wants to fulfil his goal of graduating with an Associate's Degree and transferring to a four-year school to continue his studies. John ultimately wants to become an educator and feels as though his own lessons as a student will help prepare him to be in a position to assist others in the future. John has a high opinion of FYE courses, crediting them with helping him grow as a student and as a person. John is confident about his future and has newfound skills to help him along his journey. John highly recommends students taking FYE courses as early as possible in their college career, as the knowledge and experiences in the course can positively impact one's college experience.

Rebecca

Rebecca is a first generation college student and a woman of color. Rebecca is part of the STEM initiative at the college and took a women in STEM FYE course, with a small group of her peers. Rebecca is studying to be a scientist, specifically in respiratory care. She has a strong desire to help others and believes that through medical advancements, she can be a part of positive change in people's lives. Rebecca loves learning about the body, how it works, and how as a scientist, she can improve the lives of others. This sense of responsibility for others' well-being, as well as her compassion for people who are injured or ill is evident.

Rebecca started her college journey not quite knowing what to expect. She explained that her study skills and work ethic were not the best, but in a field like the sciences, she quickly realized that she would need to step up her game as a student in order to be successful. The courses she was taking required a lot of studying outside of class, as well as having a plan to tackle all of the assignments, as there were many. The FYE Course came at just the right time to help with that much-needed adjustment.

Rebecca spoke strongly about the importance of time management in her life as a college student. This seemed to be the most impactful lesson that she learned in her FYE course. For the first time in her life, she purchased a planner and was dedicated at mapping out her hours, days, weeks and months in a way that responsibly spread out her work and study load. Rebecca also worked outside of school at a local fast food restaurant, so balancing work hours, class time and study time was challenging at first. Rebecca found that having a planner and writing in dedicated study times was helpful for her. Without this type of pre-planning, she found herself spending any extra time she had doing leisure activities such as watching TV or browsing the

internet. As Rebecca now employed the habit of planning ahead, she found herself being more prepared and successful when it came to her academics. She also found that her stress level became lower and she was able to be more effective in all her roles in life such as friend, student, employee, and others.

Another area that Rebecca thought was important was that of taking personal responsibility and being the author of your story. Rebecca described her past life as allowing things to happen to her and allowing them to also dictate how she felt. Through the FYE course, she developed a sense of responsibility for her actions and realized that although you may not be able to control what happen to you, you can control your attitude and reaction. Rebecca also started to self-reflect through the various journal assignments in class and ultimately realized that in some cases, she was the problem, not the person she had been blaming. Rebecca tried to employ new, positive habits that took action and responsibility into her own hands. Rather than receive a bad grade and get upset at the instructor, Rebecca determined that she should be solution-based and come up with a plan of action to help do better next time. These types of lessons have helped Rebecca become a more positive person overall.

Rebecca appreciated her FYE course because it helped her become aware of on-campus resources, in particular clubs, organizations and special events. Rebecca has become actively involved in several clubs on campus and also signed up for several student trips. She said she never would have known about them, had it not been for her FYE professor sending out reminders of upcoming events on campus. Rebecca enjoyed these social aspects of college, as they make her feel connected on a social level to her peers. She thinks that having social events helps build camaraderie and community on campus and are an important part of the college experience.

Stress relief is another topic in the FYE Course that Rebecca tried to put into practice in her own life. Since Rebecca has multiple responsibilities such as school, family and an outside job, sometimes she felt run down and overwhelmed by it all. An important part of her growth the first semester was looking for positive ways to relieve that stress. Rebecca found her ways through physical activity. The gym became her escape from reality and also gave her extra energy to continue to work hard towards her academic goals. Rebecca mentioned that she saw her peers and even friends at home from other colleges trying to relieve stress in other ways that were not so positive, and ultimately seeing them crash and burn at their attempts to keep their lives in balance. Although she enjoys the occasional social event or power nap, she credits the gym for being the best source of stress relief in her life. She added regular gym sessions to her planner in order to block out the time needed to make sure she committed to self-improvement and self-love. Rebecca stressed the importance of stress relief, especially for college students but also for life in general. Being in balance helps one stay focused on achieving their goals.

Rebecca grew a lot in her first semester and credits the FYE Course with assisting her in the process of self-reflection. Rebecca made adjustments to her life in order to stay on a strong path towards academic success, rather than fall by the wayside or give up when times get challenging. Rebecca is determined to continue in school and complete her academic goals, while trying to maintain a balanced lifestyle in body, mind and spirit. Rebecca credits the FYE Course with helping her think differently and make positive changes in her life that have benefitted her greatly and will continue to do so in the future.

Jessica

Jessica is a first generation college student who receives federal financial aid. Jessica is a part of the women in STEM program at the college and like others in this study, participated in a special section of a FYE course with other women in STEM. Jessica loves math and the sciences, particularly computer sciences. She is fascinated with figuring out how things work and coming up with ways of improving them. Jessica likes to use logic in the world around her and likes when things make sense and are in order. This desire for understanding and meaning drives the work that she does in math and science, as she tries to better understand the world around her.

When Jessica first began her college journey, her personal quest for order and reason were disrupted by the chaos that often ensues at the beginning of one's college journey. Everything seemed foreign to her and she couldn't get a grasp or feel of how to be successful in this new environment. There was no given formula or instructions on how to be a successful college student and Jessica quickly started to feel her anxiety levels rise and start to affect her activities of daily life. Jessica was overwhelmed with all the details to enroll as a college student and seemed to hit speedbump after speedbump just to apply to college and register for classes. When she finally was able to get situated, she ended up adding the FYE course to her schedule.

At first, Jessica was wary of the class, she didn't know what to expect. She soon discovered a class that was the missing puzzle piece to her formula for success. The class taught her how to become a successful college student and a more balanced person in general. The FYE class showed her various ways to get involved in the campus community, causing her to

join a couple of clubs and organizations. Jessica said she never would have done that on her own, but that the class helped give her the extra push that she needed to try something new.

The FYE course also helped Jessica build a core group of friends at the college, which is a challenge since it is strictly a commuter school. Jessica said that most people come and go and unless there is some common bond or activity that helps them form a friendship, that they just move in their own space and go their own way. Jessica opened up to her classmates through various activities, which caused her to realize that she wasn't alone in her struggles to adapt to college life. The sense of belonging and camaraderie that she experienced in her FYE course helped her feel like she belonged and had made the right decision to enroll in college.

Jessica found that the more information she learned about the college and college life in general, the less she felt anxious about her college experience. Similar to the math formulas and science experiments she enjoys figuring out, she learned to embrace the puzzles and challenges of college life. She learned about campus resources and places to go if she had challenges that needed assistance. Jessica also realized that she was not alone in her struggles and her peers often made helpful suggestions that guided her in the right direction. Jessica learned that through every mishap, she was learning a lesson that would help her in the future and learned to embrace life with a more positive outlook. Ultimately, the FYE course became something that helped Jessica stay on track as a college student and played a huge part in the decision she made to continue her education this semester.

Cara

Cara is a first generation college student, woman of color and also a student who receives federal financial aid. Cara is a General Studies student, who is undecided in her major choice,

but especially enjoys human services, social work and counseling. She enjoys helping others and listening to their problems and would like a major that pairs well with that. She is unsure of what career she is exactly interested in, but is optimistic that she will figure it out in time.

When Cara began her studies in college, she was very skeptical of many things, but especially of her FYE course. She thought that this was going to be boring and pointless and was upset that she had to take it. Over time, she grew to appreciate the class and embrace the growth and positive changes that it brought to her life. One area in particular that Cara saw growth was in her time management and self-declared procrastination. Cara described herself as a laid-back individual, who in the past got things done when she felt like it. With this casual attitude and slow work ethic, she said she barely finished high school. Upon arriving at college, she immediately appreciated the fact that classes didn't meet every day and that professor didn't bother you to turn in work. At first she thought it was a really laid back environment, but then she realized she was setting herself up to fail several classes. Cara has no study skills set, and no idea where to go on campus for assistance with studying, taking notes and completing assignments.

Thankfully, early on in Cara's FYE course, time management was covered as one of the crucial topics. Practices such as planning in advance, keeping a journal or schedule, as well as breaking up work so that it wasn't all done at once were helpful suggestions for Cara. Also helpful was the suggestion to find places on campus to study and complete her work, as they would have less distractions than her home environment. Cara soon became a regular visitor at the campus library, as well as the academic support center. She worked on the majority of her schoolwork while on campus, as she found it helped her stay in a more academic state of mind.

Through the course, Cara realized that it was important for her to take personal responsibility for her actions. Even though professors might not remind her about assignments, she still had to get them done. Even though she might not have class a couple of days a week, she should devote those days to staying caught up with all her coursework. The lessons on personal responsibility in her class caused her to self-reflect and evaluate her actions and decisions from the past. Cara made the decision to develop strong work habits and a sense of responsibility and timeliness as a student. Cara said that in doing so, especially in becoming more organized, her stress levels decreased as she no longer had to cram things in at the last minute.

Cara learned a lot from the course, in a practical way that helped her in everyday college life. Without the course, she didn't think she would have been successful or been able to manage the workload. She would definitely recommend it to incoming freshmen and would like them to embrace it with an open mind. She admits she was very close-minded at the beginning of the course but ultimately learned a lot that has helped her as a college student.

Ariel

Ariel is a first generation college student, woman of color and receives federal financial aid. She is the oldest of four and lives with all her siblings, her mother and her best friend. She is fascinated with anthropology and the study of human behavior, and enjoys working with others both in class and out in the community. Ariel was excited to start college because she sees it as an opportunity to both socialize in a new environment and also lay a foundation for a successful financial future for herself and her family.

Ariel appreciated the sections of the FYE courses that focused on motivation. It is an area that she has struggled with, so she appreciated the practical advice that those sections and lessons provided her and they helped her learn how to motivate herself to keep pushing forward in her courses and also outside of school as well.

Ariel also enjoyed the sections on time management. Outside of class, she works and it is a challenge to balance her responsibilities at home, work and school. Ariel was inspired to start keeping better track of her appointments, deadlines and important events and by documenting them it helped her feel more in control. Her previous method had been to try to remember everything in her head, which often felt overwhelming. By taking control of her schedule, it empowered her and encouraged her to be in more control of her time and responsibilities.

Ariel also mentioned that the FYE course helped her become aware of campus resources that she would not have otherwise known about. In particular, she became aware of the writing center as well as English tutors, both of which she utilized heavily throughout the semester. Ariel credits that additional support with helping her pass her courses and strengthen her writing overall. Another resource that she learned about were financial resources on campus such as scholarships and grants, as well as the overall financial aid process. By learning about these areas, she feels more confident moving forward in her educational journey because she has ideas and ways of paying for her education. Finances have always been limited for her family and it is a great relief to be able to find ways to pay for school that do not put an additional financial strain on the already tight budget.

Ariel spoke at length about her family dynamics and the strain and stress that she felt, wanting to provide a better life for everyone, especially her younger sisters. Being an example to

them was important, so she constantly felt the pressure to succeed and not let them down. Ariel felt as though if she made excuses and didn't work hard, her sisters would never aspire to greatness in their lives. Ariel also mentioned her grandfather being a source of inspiration in her life and telling her that he believed in her. He recently passed away and she felt as though it was her responsibility to honor him as she pursued greatness in her education and in life.

With all the responsibilities of school, home and work, Ariel emphasized how important it had been for her to seek mental health services in order for her to process everything. She carried around a great deal of grief and sadness over the passing of her grandfather as well as the pressure to succeed in school. Having an outside person, she could speak to, without bias, was instrumental in helping her process all that she was going through. In addition to this professional counseling, Ariel mentioned that the journals and writing assignments in class gave her additional places to express herself and her feelings. Ariel found these assignments to be therapeutic and appreciated the ability to express emotions, process them and then come up with helpful, realistic solutions for the future.

Overall, Ariel had a very high opinion of FYE courses and recommended that all first year students take the course. She noted the host of benefits, especially time management and motivation and how they had positively impacted her life.

Laura

Laura is a first generation college student, woman of color and receives federal financial aid. She is a first year student who hopes to continue her education and get a degree in possibility the medical field or in social services. Laura described an appreciation for her FYE course, as it helped her develop a better sense of self, particularly in the area of motivation and

time management. Laura described often times feeling scattered and that having her FYE instructor as a source of constant encouragement to stay on task was very helpful to her as a student. During the course she developed habits such as keeping a calendar and setting reminders for important dates and deadlines in her phone to help keep her on schedule.

Laura expressed an appreciation for lessons on motivation in particular. Exploring this topic helped her stay focused throughout the semester and remember why she was striving so hard towards her educational goals. Writing journals and reflections in class allowed her to write and reflect upon the reasons why in her life. In particular, she was going to school to make a better life for herself and her family. As a first generation college student, the landscape was challenging to navigate, as others in her family could not necessarily offer insight or advice when she was getting discouraged or needed assistance. By having a safe space in her FYE course, Laura was able to find a sense of community and found others who understood and identified with her particular struggles. Overall, Laura spoke highly of the course and recommended it for all first year students, as it helped her feel connected and motivated to persist.

Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of underrepresented student populations enrolled in FYE courses who then persisted to the following semester and remained enrolled at the college. Data collected from the interviews, focus group and questionnaires was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modified version of Stevick-Colaissi-Keen's method. This chapter will discuss steps for data analysis that led to the development of themes and a discussion on the participants' responses to the research questions.

Theme Development

An important part of qualitative research involves the process of data analysis. To answer the research questions, information collected from the questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interview was analyzed and themes were developed to describe how participants' experiences in a First Year Experience Course. The following information discusses the steps taken to analyze the data and the various themes are presented.

Epoche. Phenomenology includes the practices of having researchers bracket their experience with the topic of study in order to fully examine the participants' perspectives. Moustakas (1994) defined Epoche as "a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time" (p. 85). I completed data analysis by using Moustakas' modification of the Stevick-Colaissi-Keen method. This method involves several steps, including the researcher's epoche. This is designed to help the researcher set aside any biases they have on the topic. At this point, they also make sure that transcripts are recorded verbatim. Using an open mind, the researcher will then use phenomenological reduction in order to develop meaning from the text. This will be followed by imaginative variation and synthesis of ideas. This method allowed me to include my own experiences with the phenomenon as well as describe the experiences of the participants. By fully disclosing my experiences, it added richness and understanding to the research as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). I also utilized a researcher journal in order to express my thoughts, ideas and reflections that I was experiencing in order to help me process it outside of the actual data collection.

One-on-one interviews. The main source of data that was analyzed for this study came from the individual interviews with the participants. The interview questions were developed and were peer reviewed. I conducted face to face interviews with each participant which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The setting for the interviews occurred in a campus conference room, reserved for the purpose of these interviews. The setting felt comfortable and the participants spoke warmly and openly about their experiences. The interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the students, around their class times. I recorded the interviews using two audio recording devices to ensure that I was able to capture the entire interview. The interviews provided rich insights into the experiences of the students. There was candid commentary on their college experiences, as well as helpful recommendations for the future. Participants spoke passionately about their experiences at the college and provided an abundance of content for examination.

Focus group. After completing all the individual interviews, I conducted a focus group. Participants indicated during the interview whether or not they were interested and available to complete the focus group. 6 of the 8 were willing and able to attend. We met in a library conference room on a college campus and the interview took a little over an hour. The participants were at ease with each other and I gave each one an opportunity to respond to each question if she wanted. Although most of the students had never met each other before, they each expressed their experiences in FYE courses with ease, and there seemed to be an overall sense of agreement with their responses to the questions. The conversation during the focus group was energetic and participants shared openly about their experiences, providing rich content for analysis.

Questionnaire. Each participant was sent a questionnaire after completing their one-on-one interview. This questionnaire gave them the opportunity to add onto their previous responses or disclose things that perhaps they did not feel comfortable sharing in person. The questionnaires were distributed and collected electronically, which also aided in ease of preparation for data analysis.

Researcher journal. Throughout the data collection process, I kept a researcher journal in a Word file on my computer. After each interview I wrote in my journal to reflect upon my experience interviewing each participant. I recorded observations that I had regarding the environment of the interview, thoughts I had about meeting each participant and comments that participants made that I thought were interesting and wanted to go back to during data analysis. I thoroughly enjoyed the interviewing process and recorded in the research journal how I often felt inspired by the participants and their persistence through adverse circumstances. I also used the researcher journal to record my thoughts during the data analysis process to help me make connections and to brainstorm themes that would help to answer my research questions. The researcher journal was very helpful when it came to data analysis, as it helped me recall information and details about the participants at an enhanced level.

Horizontalization and clustering. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for themes, patterns and a deep understanding of the research. Moustakas recommends using a technique called bracketing during this part of analysis. Bracketing starts with the researcher describing their own personal experiences with the research in order to avoid it affecting the data. Putting it out there from the beginning achieves this method (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing was used during this part of the data analysis. Prior to the analysis itself, I paid attention during the data collection process and began to search for patterns, insights, or

concepts that seem promising to help understand the phenomenon. All of the data collected through interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires was coded and then analyzed and classified into general themes. Following transcription and bracketing, I followed the task of memoing, followed by subsequent coding. Memoing is the process of taking notes with important keywords and themes found in the data collection items. This is a way of supplementing the actual verbatim text from interviews and focus groups and writing down thoughts, ideas and themes for future understanding in the data analysis process (Moustakas, 1994). Coding followed next and took those notes and organized them as well as looked for themes and patterns (Creswell, 2013). Coding is the process of putting the text into categories and assigning labels to them (Creswell, 2013). This allowed me to see if any common themes or patterns emerged while understanding the experiences of students in a First Year Experience Course in regards to persistence and retention. After coding, I looked for significant themes, statements and takeaway messages, and especially significant statements. From these significant statements, I worked to provide both textural descriptions of what happened as well as a textural-structural of how it happened. By using these descriptions, I ultimately created an essence which describes the overall findings (Creswell, 2013). This essence provides an overall understanding of the experience of participants experiencing this phenomenon and represents the research project as a whole.

Themes. During the process of horizontalization significant statements from each participant were identified and related statements were clustered together. Once these statements were clustered together, themes were developed to help answer the main research question. Significant statements were combined across participants and a table was created listing significant statements across participants and related statements were clustered together to

develop themes to answer the research questions. A total of 7 themes emerged that answered the research questions. The following themes emerged: relationships, campus resources, motivation, time management, personal responsibility, communication, family. Themes, along with codes are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. *Themes and Associated Codes*

Open-Codes	Enumeration of open-code appearances across data set	Themes
Mentors	7	Relationships
Connections	8	
Support	8	
Encouragement	4	
Clubs and Organizations	3	Campus Resources
Academic Resources	8	
Faculty and Staff	7	
Discouragement	3	Motivation
Energy	3	
Goals	4	
Persistence	6	
Schedule	7	Time Management
Calendar	6	
Assignments	5	
Taking responsibility	7	Personal Responsibility

Maturity	4	
Self-awareness	7	
Task completion	2	
Not blaming others	5	
Verbal communication	4	Communication
Electronic communication	3	
Pressures	5	Family
Obligations	3	
Lack of understanding	6	

Relationships. A powerful theme that emerged during this study was relationships. There is great power in building a support system and network anywhere, but it is especially poignant during one's college experience. When setting foot on a new college campus, students are looking for guidance, someone to encourage them and talk them through any questions they may have. When they find someone they can connect with, someone who is positive, encouraging and full of information and resources they start to come alive and feel more at ease. Similar to a native tour guide in a foreign country, these people they encounter help guide them through the ins and outs of this new experience in a way that is exciting and comforting at the same time. They assist in translating what often times can seem like a foreign language and landscape of terms and places on a college campus. Having these connections and relationships helps put the student at ease and encourages them to continue on their college journey.

Sometimes the person that provides this connection for students is the FYE course instructor themselves. In many cases during this research study, the students noted that their

FYE instructor was a very warm, inviting person who help them acclimate to campus. AS Vanessa shared during the focus group: “Yeah, he was most influential to me because it was an 8 Am class so it was right in the morning, sometimes I didn't even want to be there but he was, he's a very well-spoken person and he's very motivating and he was always optimistic on all challenges that you face, and he motivated me to finish my first semester strong.”

FYE instructors took the time to make sure students were comfortable navigating campus and often included a campus tour on one of the first days of class. This simple act in and of itself started a connection between the students, instructor and campus in a way that helped things become more familiar and home-like for the student. Once they started to know their way around, they could confidently plan their day without feeling lost and out of place. Having a sense of direction provides a subsequent sense of ownership of one's situation.

For example, if a person visited Disney World for the first time, they might be overwhelmed at all it had to offer and might struggle to get everywhere they intended to go. If on their first visit, they went with someone who had already been there, it might provide them with a much more enjoyable experience since that person would serve as a guide to help them get to where they wanted to go. As time passed and perhaps they continued to visit the park on a regular basis, that individual's confidence would grow and they would be able to experience more and more of what the park had to offer. Perhaps even in the future they would feel so comfortable with their surroundings that they would advise other people in a way someone once did for them. This is the same type of helpful guiding that is needed and appreciated on college campuses. Sharing simple information such as directions of where to go, or helpful tips or the names of helpful staff members in various offices can mean a great deal to someone who is just starting out. Sharing such information could mean the difference between a student persisting in

their college journey or giving up and dropping out. The importance of relationships cannot be emphasized enough.

Participants in this study also noted during interviews and focus groups, the strong impact of meeting other like-minded students with whom they built rapport with and found inspiration from. Finding other like-minded individuals or bonding over the fact that they are starting a new journey together are things that help forge friendships in college that can last a lifetime. Due to the interactive nature of FYE courses, students mentioned that they were able to get to know students in their courses a lot better than other classes and created friendship that might not have existed otherwise.

Vanessa shared: “Well, I would try and make friends with people in class. Like, in the math class there was a woman that sat next to me that I didn't really talk to in the beginning of the semester, but as the semester went on, this is my statistics class, as the semester went on I started to talk to her. And then we'd meet outside of the classroom and we'd do the work together. So it's like, if I didn't know a question, she would know most of it most of the time, because she was really smart. Or, if she didn't know a question I would help her out. And with the computers, she's a little bit older, like, I would help her with the computer stuff that we would do online. So it was kind of like a good duo between us. So I think going with a partner really helped me get the work done. Because if I didn't know a question and I was alone, I would just be like, ‘Oh, I don't know.’ And I would just stop doing it. So I'm just like, ‘I don't know what I'm going to have to do.’ So definitely getting together in groups outside helped me, and also during the semester as well, trying to do group sessions in the library where we all study off of each other and quiz each other, definitely helped me for the tests, because I'm definitely a quizzier, to start tutoring for things.”

The FYE courses had a lot of group activities, as well as sharing opportunities in which students opened up to one another and found many commonalities. Some students made social plans outside of class and school with people that they met and interacted with in their FYE courses. These connections might not have existed without the aid of FYE coursework, in particular activities which encouraged students to get to know one another. As Alexis described “It was the only class that I really liked, because everybody in the room was always talking, everybody was always participating, not like my other classes, where everybody was quiet, and it's like, ‘Oh, no one's talking.’ But this class, I made some really good friends.” These activities have a profound impact, not just within the classroom but also beyond by establishing relationships with peers, thus helping build a support system.

Campus Resources. Continuing with the theme of relationships, students mentioned that during their FYE courses, they were connected to campus resources that they would not have otherwise known about. Through campus tours, attending special events and having guest speakers, students were introduced to faculty and staff from various departments and offices, thus connecting them to essential resources along their college journey. Rebecca said “it builds a support system, right off the bat. So you can always go back to them and branch out because I think support systems in your first year are crucial.” John said “It’s a good class to take, and definitely during your first semester, because you want to know what's provided and where everything is and know where to go and who to go to and just a general background for the rest of your college experience.” Alexis added to this sentiment “they provide you with the resources, you build a support, you build your own self confidence up, you learn all these different skills like how to study. You might have been an A plus student in high school, but in college it’s a whole different world. You are really responsible for your own stuff and you have

to be on top of your game and also you build a community with that class, you've learned so much about these people and so you are always going to have the community which is really important.”

Many different resources were introduced including advising and counseling, tutoring services, disability services, campus recreation, clubs and activities, financial aid, as well as department heads and professors from various disciplines. All of these connections helped broaden students' knowledge of campus resources, increasing their awareness of various programs and information that could be needed in the future. John expressed his appreciation for being introduced to the Academic Support Center, “I learned about the Academic Support Center, and used that quite a lot. Especially the writing center, because the tutors there are very helpful, informative, and I do, it helps me get a better grade on my paper and helps me understand how to organize a paper and what needs to be included, and that stuff so the academic course center was very helpful in my first semester, and I use it a lot.” Alexis shared about learning about Library resources “one of the first classes, our teacher had us do a scavenger hunt in the library and we learned about the group study room where you can go online and book a room up to like 4 to 8 people, or just two people, and I ended up doing that for group sessions or in a group project.” Alexis also shared about her gratitude for learning about counseling and disability services on campus “some of the resources I learned about was the Disability Center. It's not just for learning disabilities or something like that, it is also for mental illnesses, and it's actually saved me a couple weeks ago, to be honest, because I had a mental break down after math class. I went down there and was like, listen, talk to me or I'm going home and doing a bad thing. So there very helpful and helped me realize, hey your world is not falling apart as badly as you think, and you can still get to class.”

Timely information such as how to complete financial aid paperwork or registration paperwork was shared in class, which assisted students in preparing for future semesters. Many FYE instructors brought advisors to class and helped students with registration for upcoming semesters, giving them the guidance that they needed for the process and also saving them time and effort. By bringing the various resources to the students within the context of the classroom, the instructors were helping walk with the students in order to ensure their completion of things needed for their persistence and retention. This hands-on approach spoke volumes to the students and made them feel cared for, continuing to help their relationships with campus staff to grow. Jessica talked about her support system on campus, “I reach out to an Advisor that I trust, and thankfully I have a connection for them, for appropriate situations and stuff. Definitely that, staff on campus, but also sometimes, if I have people that I know like friends, or peers on campus, just spending time. Definitely keeping myself on campus, that obstacle of it being balancing life and school can be difficult but I think dealing with it doesn't help if you keep avoiding it.”

Rebecca also shared about her instructor and new resources during the focus group: “she makes me branch out more in my career fields so I know more people that are running it so I get to know them and put my foot in the door and branch out of the college too, and what to do in internships and opportunities you can try and get stuff on your resume, I thought that was very helpful.”

As students navigate their college journey, it is important to have campus resources that they know and trust. As they meander around campus and see familiar faces in various offices, they can reach out with confidence when they need assistance with a task. Without the introductions of these connections and resources, students might not feel as comfortable

approaching these individuals on their own. Having a sense of connectedness and belonging is essential to life and especially important while on a college journey.

Motivation. Motivation was a central theme with all of the participants, one that was essential and affected all of the other parts of their educational experiences. Participants noted that if one is not motivated, they will likely not commit to their educational experience or produce the best quality of work. Motivation levels vary depending on factors such as environmental pressures, level of course difficulty, outside demands and self-esteem. If one does not believe they can be successful at something they may not be motivated to try it.

Navigating a new college campus can be daunting and participants expressed anxiety over trying something new, especially when they did not know the layout of the new space. While they may have been excited initially, as they continued to hit brick walls on their college journey, their motivation became lower and lower. There are many aspects simply to enroll in college and many of those steps are challenging, especially to first generation college students. Steps such as financial aid, assessment testing, course selection and purchasing needed supplies can all become hiccups in the educational journey. Without guidance and support, the motivation to persist and complete those tasks can wither.

Another aspect of motivation that was discussed was the motivation to rise above their current circumstances or the circumstances surrounding their upbringing in life. Many described living in poverty and watching family members work themselves ragged trying to earn a livable wage. The participants determined that they did not want to live that way and that they wanted to go to school to increase their earning potential, not only for themselves but in order to provide for their larger family units. Alexis said “it takes us to do the work on our own...that motivated

me. If you want to do something in life, and you want to be able to go above and beyond, you have to push yourself and work yourself hard, to be able to do that. Because nothing is going to be given to you. I didn't grow up with a silver spoon in my mouth. I've always had to work hard for it.”

Many participants had grown up in challenging neighborhoods, where crime and poverty were prevalent. Many still lived in such neighborhoods and saw them as motivation to get out of their current situations. They spent time on campus during the day and then returned to a very different environment, one which threatened to uproot all of their efforts to better themselves. In an instant, with one small decision, a student’s life could change dramatically and erase all the efforts they had begun on their higher education journey.

Using motivation to better oneself as fuel, participants noted in interviews and focus groups that it was what got them up early in the morning and kept them up late at night. The drive to succeed is powerful and something that ultimately kept them going, despite many obstacles. They wanted to quit often, but when they considered the alternatives, they realized that staying in college and persisting was the best option for them. When they looked at their surroundings, or into the eyes of their loved ones, they were even more motivated to press on towards their goals and aspirations.

The FYE Courses that the participants were a part of spent an entire unit on the topic of motivation. In it, students were taught that one’s values and expectations equaled their motivation level. This lesson seemed very eye opening for the participants, as they realized that if they were not excited about doing something or didn’t value it highly, they were less likely to stay motivated to work on it or complete it. For example, if someone doesn’t feel particularly

skilled at math and also doesn't see any value in it, they may not be very motivated to work hard at it. Conversely, if a student loves to write and values writing as a part of most jobs today, they may be highly motivated to work hard at writing assignments.

Motivation served as both a positive and negative talking point for participants. Many students expressed having different motivating factors in their lives that caused them to pursue higher education in the first place. Ariel expressed her source of motivation "My mom. She never really had an education. She actually grew up in a different country. Over there you had to pay in order to go to school. I'm actually the first person in my family to attend college and graduate high school in my family. So it was more of a motivation to make my mom proud, and experience a whole better lifestyle because she's always encouraged me."

Other participants expressed losing motivation as time progressed throughout the year, some to the point that they wanted to quit. Alexis expressed her frustrations after getting in a car accident and no longer having reliable transportation. She ended up taking the bus to and from school, using a free bus pass given to students enrolled at the college. "So again, taking the five classes, it was at night, so I had to drop some of my classes because my neighborhood is not the safest. And it was just really, really hard, and I told my professor, 'I don't think I'm coming back next semester. I really don't.' And she said, 'Just take one class. Just take one class. If not for the bus pass. You need the bus pass, right? You have no money. So you need at least the bus pass. Take one class.' And so her pushing me is what really brought me back and knowing that I don't have to take classes full-time and I don't have to get down on myself for not being a full-time student because I'm still here. And that's what's important. It's taking forever but I'm still here and I'm still working towards my goal, and that's what's important." Alexis' FYE professor helped her to stay motivated to stay in school, if even just for the free bus pass.

Taking the time to learn more about motivation and self-reflect on their own levels of motivation in life was highly regarded by the participants. Several also mentioned that their FYE instructors were instrumental in keeping them motivated to do their best in class and persist as students. Some event noted that their instructors' engaging demeanor motivated them to come to class in general, sometimes with very early start time such as 8 in the morning. The impact of examining the topic of motivation seemed to open up a new level of understanding for the students. Once students understood the concept of motivation and the implications that it has on their lives as students and individuals, they were able to make changes and adjustments to their behaviors as a result. Jessica said it as such "I think the biggest thing I can say that -- the most valuable thing that I have taken away is that student confidence, and that now I can say now that it is really crucial that you know especially in their first year, that student gets that experience and I think it will make college a lot easier in the long run."

Time Management. Time management is a theme that emerged many times over the course of the research study. The majority of the participants had many responsibilities outside their classes that competed for their attention and time. Responsibilities such as jobs, significant others, family relationships, exercise, travel, and others became overwhelming at times and hard to balance. The challenges that present themselves can derail a student from their academic path and create large hurdles that are challenging to overcome.

The transition to college when it comes to time management and scheduling can be a shocking one. For example, most high school schedules are predetermined by a school counselor or administrator and students simply follow the schedule on a daily basis. Most of their day is scripted and they are expected to be in certain places at certain times. College scheduling and timing is very different. Students select their own courses and sometimes have large gaps of

time in between classes and may even have some days with no classes at all. The temptation when a student has large gaps of time is to treat it like free time, rather than dedicating it to studying and preparing for upcoming classes. The freedom of choice when it comes to time management can be very challenging and trip up students along the way.

Many of the participants noted in their individual interviews the shock of transitioning to a schedule in which hardly anyone was holding them accountable. If they wanted to skip a class, they did. If they didn't want to complete homework, they didn't. Certainly there were consequences to their actions such as lower grades, but the level of freedom to make choices was new and different for them. The adjustment to a new type of schedule and more independent learning demands was daunting to many and a culture shock at first.

On top of school scheduling, many of the participants also worked, either part time or some even full time. The demands of their jobs, coupled with their schoolwork presented a very full plate of responsibilities, sometime overwhelming and exhausting them. When they were at work, they were thinking about school and when they were at school they were thinking about work. They rushed through each day, simply trying to get by and hardly ever taking time for self-care or reflection. Each day ran into the next and offered little room for unexpected situations or hiccups in their regular schedule. Alexis shared "I work at 4 in the morning, and then I come here, then I'm here until 7 which is past my bed time if I want to get 8 hours and wake up at 3 in the morning and get ready, and my job is exhausting and I'm on my feet all day and I get to class and I just want to sleep. There's that, finding time for homework, just like time management is really hard. And commuting as well, is a pain. Because I have to take the bus, and sometimes the buses don't do what they're supposed to and you get here 20 minutes late and it's not your fault, you caught the bus on time." Rachel also added "I had a job that was a lot time

consuming and I put off homework and when I did that I would screw myself over because I was so far behind. But when I stopped working at my job I just kept sleeping all the time and I still don't get to class on time.”

Participants spoke about using time management tools in order to stay on top of their responsibilities each day. Some used physical planners, other electronic means and even others used methods such as using sticky notes. Whichever method the participants used, they mentioned how their FYE instructors encouraged them to explore and find a time tracking tool that worked for them and to stick to it. Alexis mentioned “especially from the FYE class, having a planner was definitely a big thing. And one of them I actually learned to use, so I actually got to make my own and decorate it all the time, and always be in it. I keep track of my schedule, keep track of appointments, keep track of my money spending habits, how much I'm saving, my hydration, my food. I keep everything in that planner, and it's really helped me out a lot, because now I'm not like, "oh, I had an appointment 3 weeks ago." That's definitely a skill that has helped me out... Always put reminders down. Have a little calendar. Circle important dates. Make school your priority.”

One important point that was brought up by multiple participants was the suggestion to block out time for things such as studying, rest, self-care, healthy activities and time with loved ones. It seems natural to block off time for class and work, but they mentioned that it was important to block off time for those other healthy behaviors as well. If they did not block off the time, they were more apt to waste it on non-important things and feel discouraged at the lack of self-care and enjoyment activities. When participants included all essential, healthy behaviors and activities in their schedule, they felt much more fulfilled and motivated to tackle the challenging tasks such as work and schoolwork.

Participants emphasized that everyone has the same 24 hours in a day. Extra time cannot be created, but one can manage the time that they are given in more responsible and effective ways. By prioritizing important tasks and staying as organized as possible, students are able to feel in control of a sometimes chaotic lifestyle. It can also be very rewarding to look at a visual representation of one's schedule and feel proud of having tackled all that was required of them. Following a to-do list or using another tracking method and then being able to mark the tasks as completed was very gratifying for students. Prior to using these types of accountability methods, students noted that they felt scattered and didn't feel as though they were making much progress. Visually seeing their tasks crossed off on a list helped encourage them to keep pushing in all aspects.

The lessons taught in the FYE course that pertained to time management were embraced and well-received by students. Students noticed the profound difference that using time management tracking tools had on their sense of organization and also their overall productivity. They were able to take course syllabi and the various assignments and due dates and plug them into their new tracking methods, thus making sure that they had a comprehensive picture of their upcoming responsibilities.

Students also learned in FYE to do the important tasks first, so that they were complete and out of the way. Only after important things were completed should they enjoy leisure activities. Participants noted that in a technology-driven society, the devices that were designed to help aid in communication and responsibility often are the source of distraction or irresponsible habits. Texting, social media, or streaming videos or shows are all easily-accessible means of distraction, especially when students are trying to complete important schoolwork. Prioritizing important tasks and then rewarding themselves with fun activities was a

positive spin on time management that students grew to appreciate during their time in their FYE course.

Time management had a profound effect on persistence and retention, as it controls how effective student are at utilizing the time they have. If students do not have an effective way of utilizing their time to the fullest, they may not be able to complete all the school work that is required of them. They may not be well-prepared for tests and quizzes, may be scrambling at the last minute to complete projects and overall may not be producing their best work due to the pressure of having too much to do and not enough time. Having a plan in place when it comes to time is a proactive way to help prepare students for the rigors of coursework. Adequate levels of academic preparedness put students in a position to do their best work, both inside of the classroom and out. Being well prepared helps students to face all that each day holds and stay positive about their future goals and aspirations.

Alexis expressed her challenges with time management: “some of the obstacles would be school, life and work. Because I work at 4 in the morning and then I come here, then I’m here until 7, which is past my bed time if I want to get 8 hours of sleep. My job is exhausting and I’m on my feet all day. I get to class and I just want to sleep. There’s that, finding time for homework, just like time management is really hard. And commuting as well is a pain. Because I have to take the bus, and sometimes the busses don’t do what they are supposed to and you get here 20 minutes late and it’s not your fault, you caught the bus on time.”

Rebecca also echoed Alexis’ struggles, when asked about challenges in school: “I would also say time management. I had a job that was a lot time consuming and I put off homework and when I did that I would screw myself over because I was so far behind. But when I stopped

working at my job I just kept sleeping all the time and I still don't get on time. So also a personal problem that I'm trying to work on.”

John continued to share his thoughts on time management when asked about the most important lessons learned in his FYE course “time management, which is the key to college success, and to constantly always ask for help, whether it's a counselor, an advisor, or even your professor, or even a peer student as well. Those were topics that I felt were very valuable and important in the course, especially time management, because you don't want to take, or do an assignment that's due a certain day and you start it maybe a few days beforehand. You always want to make sure it's a week or two in advance.”

Cara also expressed one of her biggest struggles: “Procrastination. That was a massive thing for me. I may not have taken a lot of classes, but the classes that I was taking, they were. They weren't too tough, but I was fresh out of high school, so me doing homework straight out of my classes, it just didn't work. After a while, I was like, all right, well maybe I need to set up a schedule or at least figure out a time where I could do school and then homework afterwards, but it's not going to be right after class. So it won't be a killer two hours.”

Alexis talked about the area she improved the most through the FYE course, “time management, for sure. That was such a huge, huge thing because I mean, like last semester I was taking five classes and I was working a full-time job. So I was just like, ‘I don't understand how I'm doing this.’ And I ended up having to drop some classes, and it was kind of ... I was disappointed in myself, but it needed to be done. And that was another thing that was covered in the book, where, yeah, we have our struggles, we have our failures, but not to take those failures and see them as such. It's more like seeing them in a different light and using them as an

opportunity to grow from it. So yeah, that, time management, keeping a planner, touching upon procrastination, all of that.”

Personal Responsibility. Responsibility is a key component to student success. As one student described it, it is “the ability to respond.” Responsibility is empowering. It gives one a sense of ownership over one’s actions and reactions. Taking charge of one’s decisions helps take charge of one’s life.

Personal responsibility in an academic context manifests itself in many ways. It can be taking responsibility for being late to class and apologizing. It can be reaching out to a professor for clarity on an assignment. It can be taking ownership of one’s actions, rather than blaming others for situations. Personal responsibility can be empowering and can be the catalyst to sustained, positive behaviors both inside and outside of the classroom. When students learn to work toward solutions and think of ways that they can control their actions and subsequent destiny, there can be positive, powerful habits built over time.

Positive habits created by personal responsibility continue beyond the classroom. These habits manifest themselves in relationships, in the workplace and in daily habits. Rather than be complacent and negative about one’s situation, individuals are empowered to take charge of themselves and their actions and make positive changes in their lives. This positive, empowering attitude is one that shapes the mindset of students as they grow into responsible members of society as whole. Rebecca shared “FYE really opens your eyes, in knowing if you are the problem sometimes, you are the one that is not putting in the work. Instead of blaming outside of the situation, everything can be hard in life, but there's always ways to get it done by yourself and basically no excuses of getting it done.”

Alexis described her learning process when it came to personal responsibility in class “There's a chapter in the book in regards to accepting responsibility. And that particular chapter helped me a lot because I was one of those people that's like, ‘Oh, he's just a dumb professor. He doesn't know what he's talking about. Oh, it's this person's fault, it's that person's fault.’ And I had to sit back and say, no, these are my grades. This is like I have to work for this and I need to figure out a different way to do that. And whether it be when I sign up for classes, looking at Rate my Professor, see what other people say, or if I do get stuck with a tough professor, going up to them and explaining situations and that I don't understand things and working with them. And if that still doesn't work, then I just have to keep going and figuring out other ways.”

Personal responsibility allows for students to make connections and be problem solvers both within the campus community and beyond. Using a solution-based thinking strategy allows for students to see the possibilities, even in the most challenging of situations. For example, if a student fails an exam, rather than giving up on the course altogether, they can brainstorm solutions in order to improve their grade moving forward. Personal responsibility can manifest itself in this situation in a variety of ways: students could speak professionally with the professor and ask for clarification on the exam and ways they could improve or even possibly retake the exam, students could come up with a studying plan for future exams, students could join a study group for future exams, or students could visit a campus resource such as a tutoring center in order to better study for the future. All of these are positive solutions than empower the student to take charge of their academics and plan for future success. Students expressed taking responsibilities for their own future. Alexis said “college is something that I want personally, for myself, because I want a career. I want to be happy with a career. I don't want to be sad or upset or grumpy that I have to come to this job every day. I have to wake up. I got to do this. I want to

be happy.” By taking personal responsibility not only for past actions but for future plans, students play an active role in writing their educational story.

Communication. Another theme that was prevalent during this research study was that of communication. Students found it challenging to communicate with many people involved in their educational journey and appreciated the emphasis on communication skills that was included as a topic in their FYE coursework. Communicating one’s thoughts and ideas to many different stakeholders such as professors, administration, office employees, classmates, group members, significant others and family members can be challenging, as each may require a specific means of communication. Switching gears and learning how to effectively communicate with a diverse group of stakeholders can be challenging and is a skills set that is very important for students to develop.

One of the activities in the course that helped students learn to express themselves was writing. As Alexis shared, “if you really sit down and really think, you'd be surprised about what comes pouring out of your head and what's really bothering you and what's affecting your ability to strive in college, whether it be financial or family or your own pride or things like that. You learn so much about yourself, and knowing that helps you to be a better student and a better person overall. This isn't just for being a good student. This is something that it'll affect your entire life. So it's important.”

In a world in which communication on a daily basis happens in a variety of casual ways, such as texting or posting online, it is important for students to develop in-person communication skills in order to interact professionally and positively with a variety of people. Through the

FYE course, students were guided in the area of communication in order to learn how to effectively interact, in particular with professors or other college administrators.

Simple suggestions such as addressing someone by their professional title, maintaining eye contact, learning a professional handshake and respectful greetings were all important topics shared with the students. These suggestions and prompts allowed for the students to expand their communication skills, while learning to build valuable connections, especially with their professors. These skills help to build strong rapport and make communication lines clear and open should they need to speak with a professor or staff member along their educational journey.

In addition to in-person communication skills, students are also encouraged to improve upon their professional written communication as well. Communication via email is an important skill to learn while in college and beyond into the career field. Drafting a well thought out email, using professional greetings and language is imperative for students as they communicate with members of their institution.

Alexis reflected on her learning in class and how it affected her communication and relationships with others “the book was beneficial, your professors are beneficial, and the community ... it's gonna stick with you, and you learn so much about each other that you're gonna ... If you create that bond your first year, your first semester, when you see those faces again and again, you're gonna be able to help each other out more. Like this person might be taking this class and you're not taking it, but they can go and help you with your research and it's just ... It's a really helpful class.”

Along with the content of verbal and written communication, the importance of regular communication and feedback was emphasized to the students. Students were encouraged to

communicate regularly in order to understand their status and progress in coursework, as well as the student account status in various offices on campus. Learning to cordially document conversations in writing, in order to confirm mutual understanding is an important skill for students as they navigate the college landscape, especially in such matters as enrollment, financial aid, advising and degree plans. Keeping a written record of communication can help reinforce understanding later on and keep students on an efficient and effective plan towards graduation.

Family. A key element to students' lives is their relationship with their family or loved ones. Many of the participants in this study were the first in their families to go to college. Although many family members are supportive of the students' goals, there can often be a large disconnect between life with family and life at school. As described previously, the language and landscape of a college campus is very different from the outside world. Thus, trying to explain aspects of college to one's family may prove to be difficult and almost like speaking in a different language. An essential part of the FYE course assisted students as they processed the distinct differences between home and school.

In one sense, family can serve as a great motivator to strive for success. Many students noted that, while they have great admiration and love for their family members, they often times saw them struggling growing up. Watching family members work several jobs, and struggle to make ends meet caused the participants to seek alternate routes to financial stability. They saw education as a key to a better life and set off to improve not only their lives, but the lives of those they care about the most. Many participants expressed the desire to provide a better life for their families, in particular for their parents. They saw education as a way out of their current situations and therefore valued it highly.

On the flip side, many students felt a strong divide between their lives at school and their lives at home. They didn't feel as though they fit in with their peers at school because many of them had a longstanding history of family members attending college. As first generation college students, they sometimes felt ashamed to admit that they didn't know certain aspects of college life because no one at home had experienced it and could share it with them. When students were home, sometime the messages from family and loved ones was that since they were in college now, they were acting like they were too good for where they came from. Some went as far as accusing the students of losing touch with reality and being ashamed of where they came from. As Jessica described "I think one of the biggest obstacles has been learning about college itself, because being a, what's it called, a first generation student? My parents didn't really know much about how it works so that has been a process over my semesters here, just kind of understanding who to ask for help and also how to ask for help, and figuring what I needed help in."

Research Question Responses

Central research question. "How do students describe their experiences in a First Year Experience course?" To answer this question, it was necessary to examine the lived experiences of first year students in a community college setting in order to better understand their lives and their connections with their First Year Experience coursework. All of the participants in the study qualified as either first generation college students, low income students or students of color, many of them falling into all three categories. The factors and demographics associated with the participants make this study valuable to the body of research on community college students, first generation college students, low income students and students of color, as well as the overall study of First Year Experience programs.

Overall, participants described their experiences in their First Year Experience course as overwhelmingly positive. Comments such as “I just think it's just a great class. I think every freshman should have to take it. “, “Yes, I would say I do recommend that anybody goes. It’s a good class to take, and definitely during your first semester, because you want to know what's provided and where everything is and know where to go and who to go to and just a general background for the rest of your college experience.”, “It is a great class. I think it should be a recommendation for all freshman students, or sometime in your college career to definitely take it. Granted you might not want to take it your freshman year, but I do strongly recommend that freshman year for first year experience. It's a great class to take. I recommend it to everybody and anybody to take that class” and “they provide you with the resources, you build a support, you build your own self confidence up, you learn all these different skills like how to study. You might have been an A plus student in high school, but in college it’s a whole different world. You are really responsible for your own stuff and you have to be on top of your game and also you build a community with that class, you've learned so much about these people and so you are always going to have the community which is really important” all express the importance of the course.

Sub-question 1. “What are the perceived barriers facing them as first year, first generation, low income or students of color?” Students described a variety of barriers that stand in their way as they try to navigate their educational journeys.

One of the largest barriers is cultural competency, specifically related to college culture. As first generation college students, many of the participants had not experienced college life, nor were prepared for all of its complex processes. In addition to not experiencing it personally, because their families had not been to college, they were unsure where to turn to for advice when

they needed it most. Participants described visiting campus for the first time as an experience like visiting another country or planet. They were unsure where to go, who to see and how to survive. For each step in the enrollment process, a different office is involved and sometimes they are vastly spread out across campus. Students noted that they would take off work and set aside time in their week to come to campus in hopes of tackling all of their needed enrollment items at once. Navigating the various buildings, rooms and offices is challenging and participants noted in the focus group that at many points while searching for needed resources, they gave up due to their frustration. This meant that they left campus aggravated and needing to clear even more time in their schedule to return to campus another time.

In addition to the challenging enrollment process, once matriculated and in the thick of the semester, participants spoke about needed to navigate around campus to meet with advisors, attend events and visit specialists in various offices. Findings all of these essential elements to student success was sometimes like looking for a needle in a haystack. After finally finding the location of an office, the person they were looking for might not be there and they would have to return another day. In the meantime, students noted that they were struggling in their classes and struggling with important paperwork and processes such as financial aid and signing up for coursework. These delays may not seem like much to some, but for students striving for success, one more delay in receiving needed tutoring might be the difference in passing or failing a class. One more day in getting financial aid help might mean missing a deadline and owing thousands of dollars. Hiccups and delays in the educational process were frustrating for participants and because they were not confident in their own competency, sometimes they felt paralyzed and helpless in their situations.

Another barrier that many participants described was the lack of a support system and an overall feeling of loneliness in the educational process. Students expressed a desire to connect with their school and their classmates, but being a commuter, community college, students always seemed rushed to get from home to school to work, etc. Participants noted in their questionnaires that it was hard to make connections with other students as well as faculty and staff due to the rushed nature of the campus community. Students longed to connect, especially with their peers, since it was challenging for them to receive support at home or from others outside the campus community. Students noted feeling as though they didn't fit anywhere. When they went home, many people made fun of them and called them too good for the neighborhood and when they were on campus, they didn't feel as though they belonged. Especially when on campus, the lack of knowledge of the campus caused them to feel inadequate and made them want to leave.

A barrier that many of the participants mentioned was stress. Outside obligations or incidents that required their attention would pop up at seemingly the worst times and distract them from their educational goals. Balancing school, family, work and unexpected situations became very stressful for them and they were unsure of how to manage this stress. The academic workload, coupled with the pressure to succeed, along with trying to maintain one's self care are all things that are a lot to manage. Stress caused the participants to feel very overwhelmed at times and they were unsure of who to turn to, especially in a brand new environment.

Along with stress, the barrier of lack of time management skills was prevalent in conversations with the participants. Coming from high school schedules where nearly every minute of the majority of the day was scheduled out for them, it was a huge shock to have so

many gaps of time and to have to try to stay motivated to stay focused on school. When participants looked at their calendars, it appeared that they might be free to get together with friends, nap, or do other social and leisure activities, however the harsh reality is that much of that time needs to be dedicated to homework and studying in order to be successful as a college student. The level of independent work is a new and challenging concept for students, one that many struggle with. Without planning and other time management tools, time seems to slip away and large projects or important studying are often neglected.

Lack of long term college and career planning was another barrier that participants mentioned. Many students were unsure of their career interests when they started in college and they didn't have any idea of how to even begin exploring the topic. Many career goals that sounded good to them growing up, didn't appeal to them anymore. Participants also noted that they were confused about the various majors and programs that were offered at the college and what they entailed. They expressed not even knowing where to begin and what the next steps should be. They feared making a misstep, so often times they didn't move forward at all.

Sub-question 2. “What elements of the First Year Experience class help address these barriers?” One element of the First Year Experience class that helped the barrier of cultural competency were the embedded campus tours. FYE instructors took students on much-needed campus tours within the first few classes of the semester. Knowing how to navigate campus was much appreciated by the students, as they now gained confidence and a sense of pride and ownership of their campus. In addition to the campus tours, the FYE instructors also included class guests such as directors and leaders of various support services offices on campus. Putting a face with a name and gaining networking capabilities was greatly appreciated by the students. They noted that it helped them start to form connections and relationships with campus offices

and resources so that they felt more confident visiting them when they needed assistance or advice.

Getting to know campus locations and resources also assisted with the barrier of lack of a support system. As students got to know various campus offices and locations, they felt more comfortable going there and asking for assistance when needed. In addition, many participants noted in their interviews that the interactive activities in their FYE course allowed them to build friendships and connections within the class itself. The sense of camaraderie and connectedness helped boost their spirits and keep them connected within the college community.

The FYE course specifically touched on the topic of stress. In fact, an entire unit in the textbook was dedicated to it. Participants explored the definition of stress and noted that they learned that it is neither positive nor negative; it just depends on how you view it and what you do in response to it. Students discovered new ways to manage their stress level through self-care, leisure activities, prayer and meditation and other creative methods. The FYE course challenged them to make themselves a priority and to manage their stress before they attempted to take on the world. This centered approach to stress management was an encouragement to students and they noted that it made them feel more normal to know that other students were experiencing stress as well. Sharing stress-relief ideas with one another in class gave many students new ideas on how to be successful in this area.

Time management was also a topic which had an entire section and chapter dedicated to it in the FYE course. Participants noted that one of the most helpful things that they learned was the importance of written records of their plans. Several examples such as a calendar, planner, to-do list, electronic calendar, etc. were all helpful additions to their lives as students. Students learned to write down time to study for upcoming tests, and how to break up work so that it was

not as overwhelming. They also learned to block off time for self-care as well, continuing to help manage their stress levels. One important point was that everyone is given the same 24 hours, and we cannot create more time in a day. We can, however, manage the time that we have and use it effectively to the best of our ability. When students had a better handle on their time management and started utilizing tools to do so, they felt more confident and in control of their day.

Another area in which students gained confidence was in their college and career planning. In the FYE Course, students used online career planning tools, as well as the college website to explore college and career options including majors and programs available to them. In addition, many of the students visited the Career Center as well as Counseling and Advising as part of the course. This type of personal, long-term planning gave them vision and inspiration for the future and helped them to stay motivated to complete short-term work and assignments. There were also guest speakers in the course who were older students, who encouraged the first year students to persist and not give up on their goals and dreams. These students spoke about their particular majors and careers, put a face to an idea, and showed the students that it was possible to achieve their goals. By hearing the personal stories of their peers, they were inspired to continue working hard to explore long-term college and career options.

Sub-question 3. “How did students' experiences in a First Year Experience class influence their decision to return to the college?” Many students spoke about wanting to give up and quit their first year of college. The aforementioned barriers were overwhelming at times and made them question their decision to attend college in the first place. The stress level, large time commitment, lack of a support system and other pressures caused them to want to walk away and give up on their dream of attending college.

One of the biggest factors in students returning to college was their FYE instructors. Many students mentioned confiding in their professors and telling them of their desire to quit. Through powerful, encouraging conversations or the referral to campus resources, these instructors served as a lifeline to these students when they needed it the most. Many had no desire to persist, but the instructors gave them the motivation and encouragement that they needed, when they needed it the most. These instructors made a case for staying in school, sometimes in unconventional ways, but ultimately served as a huge factor in the students' decisions to return to school.

Another factor that influences students to return to school were the support services that they had connected with on campus. Offices such as Counseling and Advising as well as the Academic Support Center had friendly staff that they had started to build relationships with. Those relationships and connections are what the students coming back day after day, not wanting to disappoint their newfound support systems.

Another factor was their fellow classmates in the FYE course. The classes had developed a sense of community and having opened up to others, they bonded over their similarities as well as their differences. Many students had exchanged contact information and communicated regularly, both about school and about outside activities. Having a new support system and wanting to continue to be a part of that was important to students. Many of the students in FYE decided to get together with their fellow classmates and take future classes together in other subjects, because they had enjoyed taking classes with them so much. At this point, the support system in college was tri-fold, having the instructor, other college staff and finally their peers to encourage them to persist. This type of encouragement and commitment was just what they needed to stick around and continue their college journey.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the participants involved in this study, discussed the procedures that lead to the development of themes, and reported the results of the study by answering the research questions. Overall, the chapter gave insight into the participants of the study as well as the important topics and themes. This study added to the literature on community colleges, first generation college students, low-income college students and college students of color. The study also shed light on many of the daily experiences that first year college students have, including their joys, sorrows, victories and challenges. Overall, the study helps paint a picture of the experiences of community college students in FYE courses and what they go through on a daily basis.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of underrepresented student populations enrolled in FYE courses who then persisted to the following semester and remained enrolled at the college. This phenomenological study was designed to describe the lived experiences of first year college students who took a FYE course and then were retained to the following semester. This chapter summarizes the findings of this study, discusses the implications of this study in relationship to the previous studies in the literature, addresses theoretical, empirical, and practical implications, explains delimitations and limitations that affected this study, and provides recommendations for future research regarding persistence, retention and first year college students.

Summary of Findings

This study explored the experiences of first year students in regards to persistence and retention. The research was based on two theories: Tinto's Departure Theory and Astin's Student Development Theory and how they apply to students. The central research question was: How do students describe their experiences in a First Year Experience course? Based on the data collected through questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group interview, the participants in this study perceived that they had a very positive experience while taking FYE coursework and that the coursework helped them in regards to persistence and retention at the college. In addition to the central research question, this study also explored three sub-questions that focused on their experiences during the FYE course. The first sub-question was: What are the perceived barriers facing them as first year, first generation, low income or students of color?

Some of the noted barriers that emerged in the research were: finances, lack of family support and lack of familiarity with college culture and processes.

Another sub question was: What elements of the First Year Experience class help address these barriers? Within this sub question, the themes that emerged during the research were: motivation, time management, personal responsibility, and campus resources. Most of the participants mentioned all four of these themes multiple times, in multiple research methods. They were all noted as essential elements in helping overcome the perceived barriers in their first year of college. If particular attention can be given to including these themes in a students' first year journey, it will help strengthen them to be able to persist and stay on track. The positive influences noted in the data collection not only affected students' academics, but also their outlook, emotions, social life and other parts of their holistic well-being.

The third sub question was: How did students' experiences in a First Year Experience class influence their decision to return to the college? The overarching theme that emerged in this area was the positive, encouraging nature of the First Year Experience class and how the topics in class, coupled with an inspirational instructor, encouraged students to persist in their academic journeys. Over and over again, participants mentioned how impactful the FYE class was in helping them stay enrolled and motivated to continue their education and return for future semesters.

Discussion

The results from this study provide information that supports and extends existing research discussed in the literature review. This section will discuss the results of this study in relationship to the main theories of Student Departure Theory and Theory of Student Involvement as well as the topics of FYE Courses, College Campus Diversity and Retention and

Persistence of Underrepresented Populations. These areas are important to the success and growth of higher education as a whole, particularly in First Year Experience Programs. More research should be conducted in these areas to add to the literature to provide more research-based and evidence-based practices for educators to become more successful when supporting these students.

Theoretical Literature

Student departure theory. This study confirms Tinto's Student Departure Theory (Tinto, 1993). This theory explains that if students fail to make a connection on campus, they will leave. This theory has given a foundation for many research projects in relationship to student development, including the current one. This study provides particular insight on first year experience programs and courses in relationship to the components of Student Departure Theory.

Through this study, participants explained how powerful their FYE courses were at keeping them connected to campus and persisting on their educational paths. Participants described their strong relationships with the FYE instructors and how those powerful bonds kept them motivated to stay in school and to continue despite many challenges. In addition to connecting with FYE instructors, participants emphasized the importance of building relationships with their classmates. The FYE courses also introduced them to various resources such as tutoring, mentoring and academic advising, all of which helped them stay connected.

The study adds to the literature related to this theory, as it includes populations such as community college students, students of color, first generation college students and low-income students. This study examined the experiences of eight students, and the findings from this study add to existing research on First Year Experience programs, particular when it comes to

persistence and retention. Results from this study indicate that involvement in a First Year Experience program and course encourages students to make meaningful relationships and connections within the educational community, thus making them less likely to depart from campus. This study emphasizes the powerful, positive impact the First Year Experience coursework can have on a student's decision to persist at their institution.

Theory of student involvement. This study confirms Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1999). The theory emphasizes the importance of student involvement in the various aspects of campus life, especially beyond the classroom. The theory highlights the importance of this involvement as a key component to making in-class work valuable and meaningful, as it has connections to outside elements. FYE coursework included embedded connections to campus resources outside of the classroom. These connections helped students form relationships and obtain needed resources in order to persist and be retained for future semesters.

The Theory of Student Development includes five basic assumptions: involvement requires a great deal of psychological and physical energy, involvement is continuous, involvement is both qualitative and quantitative, what a student gains from involvement is directly related to their depth of involvement, and finally academic performance is directly correlated to involvement.

Being involved in a FYE course incorporated all five basic assumptions of Astin's theory. Taking the course and partaking in a various activities took a great deal of psychological and physical energy. Participants were continuously involved in the course and the related activities. Involvement had both qualitative and quantitative components. The benefits to being involved in the FYE course were real, tangible and powerful. Students referred to the powerful impact that

the course had and how it connected them to both the college and the world around them.

Finally, the academic persistence and performance were related to the course, as students were held accountable for their actions and involvement in this and other courses.

This study adds to the body of research related to this theory, as it includes populations such as community college students, students of color, first generation college students and low-income students.

First Year Experience programs and courses have been studied for many years and seen as important components to a first year student's development. This study revealed some of the important components of the course that caused it to be impactful. Things such as strong mentoring relationships with the FYE instructor, exposure to a wealth of campus resources, interactions and collaboration with other students, self-expression through campus activities and finally a sense of connection and camaraderie with other students. All of these elements contributed to the student experience overall and were highly praised by participants. These elements are important to note and consider to be included in future FYE coursework.

This study also adds to the body of research related to First Year Experience Programs and the holistic impact they have upon a student's education experience. FYE courses and programs seek to support the whole student, not just the academic student. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of student involvement as a key factor in a student's educational journey, particularly affecting persistence and retention.

Empirical Literature

FYE courses. This study confirmed the findings of several researchers, including Jamelske (2009) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) in regards to the benefits of FYE programs and courses. First Year Experience courses are an important part of the higher education

experience as a whole and should continue to be included as a part of curriculum. The elements of FYE coursework that include opportunities for students to connect with resources on campus are especially important when trying to increase student persistence and retention. Higher education institutions should critically examine the content and delivery of their FYE courses to ensure that they are using current information and follow best practices in order to best serve their students.

FYE courses may vary from institution to institution based on the student population. In this particular study, community college students received specific information and experiences that helped them acclimate to their institution. Additionally, several students in the study participated in an FYE course that served a specific group of students with certain majors. Creating individual learning communities such as this particular FYE course for women in STEM careers creates a further level of development and camaraderie. This continued relationship building and development within the course can benefit the students' connection to their educational experience.

Participants in this student spoke highly of their experiences in their FYE coursework and recommended the course to other students. They noted powerful learning experiences as well as relationships that were built as a result of the course. Several students credited the course with keeping them in school when they wanted to quit. In particular, the instructors were powerful resources and guides to the students during and after the courses. The relationships built with campus faculty and staff, as well as the introduction to campus offices and resources contributed positively to their overall educational experience.

College campus diversity. This study confirmed the work of Engle and Tinto (2008) which indicated that diverse populations at colleges and universities struggle when it comes to

persistence and retention. Engle and Tinto noted that students are unique individuals whose specific needs should be identified and met (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Colleges and universities serve a wide variety of students from various backgrounds. Understanding students as individuals by building meaningful relationships with them is essential to making their educational experience the best it can be. A cookie cutter approach is not an effective way of serving students, as each one is unique in their own beautiful way. Embracing students for who they are and walking with them on the journey of who they aspire to be is an exciting adventure for educators. This adventure is a journey for both the educator and the student alike and can produce incredible experiences and insight.

In this research study, participants expressed how they grew as appreciated individuals while in the safe environment of the course. Using techniques such as reflections or journaling, students were able to ask themselves questions that they had not thought about before. They grew as unique individuals, realizing their purpose within the educational community. As a result of the course's appreciation and support of the diverse nature of students, they felt comfortable being themselves and exploring their individual plans and goals.

It is important to note that every educational institution is different and serves different populations of students. Creating a FYE course or program should be unique to that particular institution and the needs of its students and community as a whole. FYE programs should be as diverse as the students themselves and should be regularly evaluated to ensure that they are best serving the needs of the student population.

Retention and persistence of underrepresented populations. This study confirms the work of Napoli and Workman (1998) as well as Wilson (2016) who found that there are many demands and distractions that influence students while on their college and career journeys.

There is a distinct need for resources and relationships to improve the overall experience for underrepresented student populations. FYE courses provide the opportunity for students to make meaningful connections with campus faculty and staff as well as campus resources. These connections and relationships improve student retention and persistence. This is especially important in underrepresented student populations such as students of color, first generation students and low-income students. These students have much lower retention and persistence rates than their peers and are at risk of leaving school before completing their educational goals.

Participants in this study noted the challenges that they faced as they tried to persist in their educational journeys. Several first generation college students noted that they did not feel support at home because their family and friends did not understand their college experience. They would seek comfort and understanding from the support systems they had built their whole lives but because they were embarking on a new journey, these familiar sources of support were not able to understand their educational experiences. Support is important and when it is not found can create a sense of emptiness and frustration. It is essential to find some kind of outlet to be able to talk. These students found comfort in talking to other students in their FYE courses who had experienced similar emotions and experiences.

In a similar way, lower income students expressed the struggles that they had experiences trying to meet their basic needs, sometimes working several jobs in addition to attending school full time. They expressed challenges that emerged, especially balancing their schoolwork load with their responsibilities at work. The FYE course provided them with a supportive environment in which they could express their frustrations and come up with solutions to the balancing challenges that they were experiencing.

Students of color are an underrepresented population in higher education as a whole and this can create unique challenges on their educational journeys. One major challenge is that often there are not adequate educational mentors, faculty and staff that come from similar backgrounds. Representation matters. Seeing someone who you can relate to can provide much needed inspiration for students to persist, using a mentality of “if they did it, so can I!” Because these roles are lacking at times, it can provide a void that is needed to this particular student group.

In this particular research study, the community college studied actually has a majority population of students of color, as well as low income and first generation college students. This high concentration of these populations creates a unique opportunity to design programs and services specifically for these groups. In addition to traditional support services such as advising, tutoring and student retention offices, utilizing FYE courses as a platform for student support is an incredible opportunity to continue to support diverse student populations.

Implications

This study on the experiences of first year community college students, particularly low income, first generation and students of color revealed specific implications that can benefit those who are involved in higher education. This section discusses theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for educators at both the college and high school level, as well as general implications for society.

Theoretical Implications

The study was grounded in Tinto’s Departure Theory as well as Astin’s Theory of Involvement. These two theorists emphasized the importance of connecting with the college

community and these types of connections are part of the framework of FYE Courses. Those who are involved in higher education must understand the importance of student support and connectedness as they navigate the various barriers and challenges they face in college.

Tinto's theory is based around three major obstacles that cause students to leave school: academic difficulties, inability to reach academic and occupational goals, and failure to connect or stay connected to the social landscape of the school (Tinto, 1993). All three of these obstacles were apparent in the research that was conducted during this study. For educators to have a clear and holistic picture of their students' lives, they must realize that these students need assistance. They are crying out for a sense of belonging and connectedness. Especially when working with populations such as low-income, first generation and students of color, who are at a higher risk of dropping out, it is essential to make meaningful connections with these students and engage them in authentic relationships that help fuel them and drive them to persist.

Alexander Astin's Theory of Involvement shares valuable insight into student persistence and retention. The roots of the theory are grounded in the experiences of students in relationship to their persistence and retention in college. Astin's theory emphasizes the importance of student involvement in college and is based around three main areas of students' lives: inputs, environments and outcomes. It is essential for higher education professionals to consider the daily inputs, environments and outcomes that they provide to students.

Inputs such as the way in which faculty and staff speak to and interact with students have the power to change the motivation of a student in that moment. When a student goes to a person or office seeking advice, assistance or answers and is treated rudely or dismissively, they can become discouraged and frustrated, sometimes not trying again. Similarly, the environment that a student exists in is essential to student success. Does the environment embrace students of

diverse backgrounds? Does the environment provide adequate support to students in need? Does the environment provide the needed resources such as technology, student computer stations, adequate internet services, etc.? Do faculty and staff provide a warm and caring environment for students to grow and thrive in? Finally, student outcomes are essential to the strong support of students on their journey. What are the end goals? How is learning measured? How is student success measured? How are students tracked and accounted for and referred to services as needed? Higher education institutions cannot simply enroll students in courses, take their tuition money and then walk away. There are measures and outcomes that need to be performed to ensure that the institutions are providing the best possible experience to students with the final outcomes in mind throughout: timely graduation and exceptional career options.

This research study further supports the theories of Tinto and Astin and further supports the need to understand students as holistic individuals with a variety of different needs and challenges. A higher education experience is not simply academic; there are many other factors that affect a student's experience and understanding how to support and connect students to the campus community is integral to being an effective higher education institution.

Empirical Implications

Many participants implied that without the FYE courses, they would not have had the needed resources to be successful in their college and career aspirations. At the site of this study, FYE courses are not required for all students, so a valid concern may be that not all students are receiving the resources that they need to be successful. In order for all students to receive the valuable information from FYE courses, the institution would need to commit to requiring all first year students to take the course. Along with the requirement, the institution would need to commit to provide the needed resources such as faculty pay, training, facilities, etc. that are

needed for a widespread initiative. Funding and commitment are necessary to make sure that this coursework is implemented on a broad scale, thus sharing the positive implications and results with a larger number of students.

Practical Implications

Lastly, it would be beneficial to discuss practical implications based on the results of this study. These practical implications provide a plan of action for those involved in First Year Experience programs and courses to help increase student persistence and retention.

Higher education administrators. Leaders in higher education have an incredible responsibility to oversee the policies and procedures that directly affect their students. Decisions that are made on the administrative level have the power to dramatically impact the campus community as a whole. This responsibility provides the opportunity to implement student-centered policies and procedures that serve the student population in a supportive way that benefits both the students and the institution by increasing persistence and retention rates.

There are several recommendations that would be helpful for higher education administrators. First, according to the experiences of the participants in this study, FYE courses should be a part of every higher education institution. The narrative from the participants indicated an overwhelmingly positive experience in these courses, one that dramatically affected their educational experience in a positive way. Participants noted the positive benefits of the course and recommended that every student enjoy this experience in their first year of school, laying a strong foundation for support for their years to come.

Another recommendation for higher education administrators would be to ensure that the quality of the FYE courses and program implemented was high. Hiring engaging instructors to teach the coursework and evaluating them regularly is an essential role for higher education

administrators. It is important that not only are FYE courses offered to all first year students, but that the quality of these courses are high. Providing professional development and support to assist these instructors is essential to them flourishing in their roles. Specific training to work with various populations at each individual school is recommended. For example, if there is a high population of first generation college students at a school, providing professional development to help instructors better serve them is an important role of an administrator. Supporting instructor's attendance at local, regional or national conference is also an important part of helping them be well prepared to best serve the students. There are national conferences on the First Year Experience and other related topics and attendance at these events will help the instructors and the institutions alike stay on the cutting edge of First Year Experience programming.

Perhaps the most important recommendation for higher education administration continues on the topic of the institution's employees. Not only is it important that FYE instructors are engaging, but this responsibility carries over to faculty and staff in other offices and departments on campus as well. It is helpful to have an engaging and effective FYE instructor, but if students go to other classes or offices and are met with a lack of support, that does not support them holistically on their educational journey. The hiring of caring, competent faculty and staff who understand and embrace the specific population of the institution is essential to the cohesive, student-centered identity of the school. Consistency is essential. Students should be able to visit various offices and receive the same level of care, understanding and competency. It is the responsibility of the administration to hold all areas accountable in order to provide the best service possible to students.

First year experience instructors. First Year Experience instructors have a significant role in students' lives, not just to educate them academically but to support them as they acclimate to college life. This role should be understood and embraced to the fullest. A teacher at any level has the unique opportunity to pour into student's lives over the course of many hours and days. This opportunity gives FYE instructors the chance to positively impact students' lives as they embark on their first year of college. In many ways, these instructors may become like a family member, mentor or other important role in the student's life, especially if they are a first generation college student with little support at home.

An important recommendation for FYE instructors is to have a relevant, up-to-date knowledge of campus resources. Students will need to be connected with a variety of support services during the course and knowing what is available to them is important. Students will seek out their FYE instructor as an expert in the college experience and therefore it is important for them to be competent and have a working knowledge of the ins and outs of the institution. Important details such as location of offices, names of personnel, important dates during the school year, as well as campus policies and procedures are all essential components of being an exceptional instructor.

Another recommendation is the need for professional development. There are books, courses, conferences that help support FYE instructors, and it is important that instructors stay current on their information in order to best serve their students. Even within the institution, having collaboration between the various FYE instructors and perhaps in-house professional development is a recommendation in order to support continuity of information and an overall sense of being on a consistent page. Perhaps providing a workshop for FYE instructors that

highlighted the various campus resources would be a great addition to instructor preparation for a semester.

Overall, the recommendations for FYE instructors are to have a strong understanding of the campus community in order to be an excellent source of information and wisdom for students. Students need support to be successful and the role of a FYE instructor is a great opportunity to provide this support and assistance.

Higher education faculty and staff. There are many critical partners to the success of first year college students which include all members of a campus' faculty and staff. Students in an FYE course receive incredible inspiration and resources and this level of support should be experienced throughout the rest of campus as well. Whether it is visiting a financial aid office, meeting with an advisor or sitting in a class, all students should feel supported.

In regards to supporting first year students, one recommendation to faculty and staff is the importance of a customer service mentality in all interactions. First year students are embarking on a new and sometimes daunting adventure and it is important that they are given the empathy and support they need. When students approach a faculty or staff member for advice, information or assistance, the demeanor is very important in order to help the student feel understood, valued and that their experience matters.

Taking the recommendations one step further, it is recommended that all faculty and staff receive professional development and training to help specific populations at their institution. In the case of this study, with high populations of first generation, low income and students of color, it is recommended that faculty and staff are given professional development opportunities that expand their knowledge of working with those students. Understanding things from a student's point of view can help them improve their interactions with students and start to see

things from their point of view to better serve them. Empathy and understanding are skills that are highly important when working with students, as each student has a story and an experience unique to them. Building rapport and relationships with students is necessary in order to have a cohesive, student-centered educational community.

K-12 administrators and staff. During the course of this research study, many participants expressed their frustration at feeling ill-prepared for college. Therefore, the recommendations of this study extend beyond higher education in an effort to inform and empower the K-12 academic community. By partnering in the efforts to support students, it will create a cohesive educational community that assists students as they transition to college and career opportunities.

As much as possible, K-12 administrators and staff should develop a strong knowledge base about the college application process and the college experience as a whole. It is not enough to get students in the door of college, there should be prior experiences and knowledge sharing opportunities to educate and empower students for what lies ahead.

School counselors and career counselors are important components of this process. Early college and career readiness interventions and activities help lay the framework for a successful college transition. Recommendations for these staff members include incorporating college and career readiness lessons into the general school curriculum. Taking college visits, or inviting college students to visit the high school and share these experiences are both ways of making college real to students. School counselors and career counselors should make sure that they know current information about colleges, as well as other college related processes such as standardized testing, GPA requirements, essay requirements, etc. Having a current knowledge of

information and regularly sharing it with students can help students to feel supported in their college application process.

K-12 administration are vital to helping prepare students for their first year of college. In particular, it is important that administration create a culture of college and career readiness with high standards and aligned curriculum so that there is a seamless transition between K-12 and higher education. If there is not alignment with coursework, unfortunately students enter college behind academically, which hurts morale as well as their educational timeline due to having to take additional foundational coursework. K-12 administration are also recommended to develop relationships with local colleges and universities and meet with them regularly. These relationships will help K-12 administrators to have a better knowledge of various workforce trends, available programs and majors and what can be done to help streamline the process of getting students into programs that best suit their interests and goals.

In addition to the counselors and administration, teachers and staff members are an essential part of the college and career readiness process during the time in K-12 schools. Many of the staff members attended various colleges and universities and by sharing their stories and experiences with their students, they provide a wide range of ideas and options for these students. Everyone had a story and there is power in sharing it, especially with future generations. Cohesiveness of any organization is important, but especially within educational settings, they opportunity to collectively send positive messages of empowerment and guidance cannot be understated.

Overall, the recommendations from this study focus on providing a coordinated range of support services to students as they navigate their educational journeys. Starting during their K-12 educational experience and extending into their first year of college and beyond, it is

important that all members of an educational institution be equipped and inspired to give students the support that they need. Well-supported students stay in college. Every effort must be made to make sure that students receive positive, empowering messages of hope and encouragement from the educators in their lives. This support is essential to their success in school and in life.

This study shed light on several areas which previously had not been combined in one research study. Understanding the lived experiences of community college students, particularly students of color, students receiving federal financial aid and first generation college students during their critical first year is an important aspect of education that should be paid close attention to. Additionally, this study focused on the lived experiences of the aforementioned students in regards to FYE Programs and coursework. Understanding their thoughts, comments and critiques of their educational experience are helpful to continue the body of research in this area. More research should be completed to expand the understanding of this topic.

Delimitations and Limitations

In any qualitative research study, there are delimitations and limitations that must be addressed. Delimitations are choices that restrict the study to be designed in a way that would assist in answering the research questions. The main delimitation in this study required that the participants be first year college students. This qualification was necessary to answer the research questions, which specifically pertained to FYE programs and coursework. It was essential to student first year college students in order to understand First Year Experience programs and courses.

Another delimitation was that students were from three specific groups: first generation, low income or students of color. These groups were chosen because they addressed the specific

research questions, in relationship to persistence and retention. I wanted to focus on these three groups, because they have lower levels of persistence and retention than their peers and I wanted to further explore the experiences of the participants during their FYE course in relationship to these measures.

A delimitation of this study was that only students who had persisted to their second semester were included. Students who left the school or did not persist were not included. This decision was made because persistence and retention were two of the main areas of study and thus the experiences of those who persisted until their semester were included in the research.

A final delimitation was that community college students from one particular public community college in the Northeast United States was included in this study. This location was selected because of available access to the students for research purposes and also because there was a large population of first generation, low income and students of color. This allowed access to recruit the needed number of participants who met those criteria.

Besides delimitations, this study also had limitations that should be mentioned for the sake of future research regarding this topic of FYE courses and the relationship to retention and persistence. One limitation was that the results reported in this study are predominantly from a female perspective. Out of the 8 participants, only one was male. If more male participants were involved in this study, there could be wider variation in the students' perceptions of FYE courses and a more balanced perspective between the genders would have been included. When I contacted students to participate in this study, there were other men that I contacted but John was the only male that volunteered to participate in my study. Another limitation was the number of participants I could recruit for this study. I would have had more data to help answer my research

questions if I had 10 participants, but I was only able to recruit 8. If I had not been pressed for time to complete my study, I would have contacted more students to recruit two more students

Recommendations for Future Research

It would be beneficial to add more information to the literature regarding FYE courses because there are many who are involved in FYE programs and courses that could benefit from more research that explores the experiences of first year students in FYE courses.

Recommendations for further study must include more qualitative research to explore and to understand the experiences of first year students in FYE courses. One recommendation is to conduct a case study of a specific FYE course taught by one instructor in order to go more in depth with examination of items such as instruction methods, demeanor, teacher experience, etc. An instructor with high reviews and a positive reputation for student success could be identified in order to provide rich information in the case study. It would be interesting to investigate the specific techniques and practices that this instructor uses in order to keep their students motivated and engaged. This would provide helpful information on possible best practices in regards to working with and teaching first year students.

In addition to case studies, ethnographic research is needed to understand the experiences, values, and culture of FYE courses and the students in them. This type of research would provide a rich understanding of the experiences of first year students in FYE courses and continue to build upon the body of research that exists in this area.

Future research on first year students could also be explored through grounded theory research. The purpose of grounded theory is to discover a theory that could explain certain practices or experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). This type of study describes the

experiences of participants in a way that would provide more essential information to best inform practice.

Besides recommendations for future research and specific research designs, there are several practical recommendations that would extend this research study. One recommendation is to extend this current research study to other areas in the United States to discover how students in other areas would respond. This study took place in the Northeast region of the United States. Repeating this study in other regions like the Southeast or Midwest would provide other perspectives about first year students and FYE courses. It would be interesting to understand the experiences of first year FYE students across the United States and how their experiences related to persistence and retention. Another recommendation is to expand the research to include different types of higher education institutions. This research study specifically took place at a public community college, so expanding the research to other types of schools could extend the scope of findings and add to the body of research as a whole. A final recommendation would be to expand the research to include other populations, particularly other marginalized groups at a high risk of leaving school. All of these recommended future research ideas would add to the body of literature in regards to various topics such as FYE, first year students, underrepresented students, persistence and retention.

Summary

This study examined the lived experiences of eight first year college students at a community college in the Northeast to understand their experiences in a FYE course in relationships to persistence and retention. Data collected through questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group interview provided information that the participants perceived that their experiences in a FYE courses were positive, empowering, inspiring and ultimately

contributed to them continuing on in their college careers. Participants spoke very highly of their experiences in the course and highly recommended the course to other first year students.

After examining the lives of the 8 students, I was inspired by their stories of struggle and triumph. Their college journeys were unconventional and getting to know more about them was an honor. Every student has a story and learning more about each of theirs inspired me on a whole new level. These students faced unspeakable obstacles and still they persisted. Sometimes with very little support or hope, they pushed forward with their goals in mind. They are incredible individuals, each with a unique perspective on life and on their educational experiences.

The study revealed the importance of support and connections in higher education, particularly in the first year of a student's experience. Setting the framework for a strong foundation is essential to building upon that in semesters and years to come. Connecting students with needed resources and support services gives them a sense of comfort as they navigate the educational landscape. Receiving this type of support in their FYE courses helped them persist and not give up on their hopes and dreams. Listening to them and experiencing the incredible strength of will and spirit that they have inspired me to keep pushing as an educator. At times educators can feel as though what they do doesn't matter, but through this research experience I realized that it certainly does. These students' lives were forever changed by the positive interactions that they had with inspirational educators during their first year of college.

Connections matter. Relationships matter. Students mentioned this over and over again during the study. Hearing this inspired me on a whole new level to continue to develop meaningful, supportive relationships with students, especially during their first year. The guidance, information and encouragement that students receive helps them press forward,

sometimes through huge adversity. For myself and for educators everywhere, it is important to remember that the little things are the big things: the smiles, the greetings, the cups of coffee, the encouraging words, the staying late, the coming early, the words of wisdom. It all matters. It all changes lives.

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APPENDIX A

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 22, 2018

Joanna White

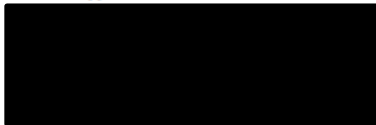
IRB Approval 3177.022218: A Phenomenological Study Examining the Experiences of First Generation, Low Income, and Students of Color in a First Year Experience College Course, Related to Student Persistence and Retention

Dear Joanna White,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.

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APPENDIX B

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
2/22/2018 to 2/21/2019
Protocol # 3177.022218

CONSENT FORM

**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST
GENERATION, LOW INCOME, AND STUDENTS OF COLOR IN A FIRST
YEAR EXPERIENCE COLLEGE COURSE, RELATED TO
STUDENT PERSISTENCE AND RETENTION**

Joanna White
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study about first year college student participation in first year experience courses. You were selected as a possible participant because you are 18 years of age or older, you are currently enrolled in college, and you took a first year experience course in the summer of 2017 or the fall of 2017. We are specifically looking for students who meet one or more of the following criteria:

1. Are the first in their family to go to college
2. Identify as a student of color
3. Receive Federal Financial Aid such as the Pell Grant, thus identifying as a low income student

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Joanna White, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of students enrolled in First Year Experience (FYE) courses who then persist to the following semester and remain enrolled at the college. We are specifically looking to better understand the experiences of first generation, low income and students of color.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Individual video and audio-recorded interview, lasting approximately 30 minutes.
2. Video and audio-recorded focus group lasting approximately 60 minutes.
3. Online questionnaire, lasting approximately 30 minutes.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. A potential benefit to society would be to provide relevant information regarding student retention and persistence, particularly with first year community college students. Information would be especially helpful for first generation students, students of color and low-income students and could inform future decisions on how to best assist these populations.

Compensation: Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants who complete all activities described above will each be given a \$20 Amazon.com gift card.

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
2/22/2018 to 2/21/2019
Protocol # 3177.022218

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Manchester Community College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Joanna White. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact [REDACTED].

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

Each interview will begin with the following icebreaker questions: “What inspired you to go to college?” and “What is your favorite class so far and why?”

The interview guide will include the following eleven guiding questions:

1. What were your first impressions of your FYE class?
2. Did those impressions change throughout the semester?
3. What were the most important topics covered in the FYE class?
4. What are some obstacles you faced your first semester?
5. How did you overcome those obstacles?
6. Were there any lessons or information from your FYE class that helped you overcome those obstacles?
7. Why did you return to school this semester?
8. Did anything in your FYE class experience play a role in that decision?
9. Based on your experience in FYE, what advice would you give to incoming freshmen about to start FYE?
10. What were your favorite things about FYE class?
11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about FYE?

APPENDIX D

Focus Group Questions

The focus group will begin with two icebreaker questions:

1. Describe your college experience in two words.
2. Why did you choose those words?

The focus group question guide will include the following ten questions:

1. Who in particular has had the most influence on your college experience thus far?
2. What obstacles have you faced in college so far?
3. When you face an obstacle in college, what do you do to overcome it?
4. Are there any particular techniques, skills or methods you use to address the obstacle?
5. Why did you decide to return to college this semester?
6. During your FYE course, did you learn about particular resources, information, and activities on campus? If so, which ones?
7. Since beginning FYE, have you utilized any of those resources, information, or activities? If so, which ones and how so?
8. Have you joined any clubs, organizations, or social groups on campus? If so, how did you learn about these?
9. Would you recommend FYE classes to others? Why or why not?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about FYE?

APPENDIX E

Questionnaire Questions

1. What was your favorite topic covered in FYE and why?
2. What takeaway messages do you have from your FYE class that you will apply to college and career?
3. What campus resources did you learn about in your FYE class?
4. Have you used any of these resources since taking the class? If so, how often?
5. Are you a part of any campus clubs or organizations? If so, which ones and who told you about them?
6. Why did you decide to return to school this semester?
7. Did anything from your FYE class influence that decision?
8. What advice do you have for future FYE students?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about FYE?

APPENDIX F

[REDACTED]

12/21/17

Joanna White

[REDACTED]

Dear Joanna White:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled "A phenomenological study examining the experiences of a first generation, low income and students of color in a first year experience college course, related to student persistence and retention," I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [REDACTED]

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

- Data will be provided to the researcher stripped of any identifying information.
- I am requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

APPENDIX G

Significant Statements and Related Formulated Meanings Across Participants

Significant Statement

...time management. I had a job that was a lot time consuming and I put off homework and when I did that I would screw myself over because I was so far behind. But when I stopped working at my job I just kept sleeping all the time and I still don't get on time. So also a personal problem that I'm trying to work on.

Some of the obstacles would be school, life, and work. Because I work at 4 in the morning, and then I come here, than I'm here until 7 which is passed my bed time if I want to get 8 hours and wake up at 3 in the morning and get ready, and my job is exhausting and I'm on my feet all day and I get to class and I just want to sleep. There's that, finding time for homework, just like time management is really hard. And commuting as well, is a pain. Because I have to take the bus, and sometimes the buses don't do what they're supposed to and you get here 20 minutes late and it's not your fault, you caught the bus on time.

Formulated Statement

Managing time as a college student is challenging, as it often involves outside commitments as well.

There are many obstacles to college student success such as outside jobs, transportation and self-care needs.

I think one of the biggest obstacles has been learning about college itself, because being a, what's it called, a first generation student? My parents didn't really know much about how it works so that has been a process over my semesters here, just kind of understanding who to ask for help and also how to ask for help, and figuring what I needed help in. In addition to that, self-doubt, which is I think is probably related to that, in a way, was also an obstacle. Like building confidence was something that I needed to do before I could do the things that I'm doing now.

Usually I reach out to an Advisor that I trust, and thankfully I have a collection for them, for appropriate situations and stuff. Definitely that, staff on campus, but also sometimes, if I have people that I know like friends, or peers on campus, just spending time. Definitely keeping myself on campus, that obstacle of it being balancing life and school can be difficult but I think dealing with it doesn't help if you keep avoiding it.

Especially from the FYE class, having a planner was definitely a big thing. And one of them I actually learned to use, so I actually got to make my own and decorate it all the time, and always be in it. I keep track of my schedule, keep track of appointments, keep track of my money spending habits, how much I'm saving, my hydration, my food. I keep everything in that planner, and it's really helped me out a lot, because now I'm not like, "oh, I had an appointment 3 weeks ago." That's definitely a skill that has helped me out.

Lack of college knowledge is a large barrier to student success. Another barrier is self-doubt.

A campus support system consisting of faculty, staff and students is essential to student success.

Using a planner and other time management tools help students balance their demanding schedules and obligations.

One of the things we worked on a lot in our FYE course was defining success and making your goals clear, and when we did that, I learned that academics are really important to me and that my goals that I have to get a Bachelor or whatever were important to me and my identity so with that being said, I don't know why I wouldn't come back to school.

I learned about the academic support center, and used that quite a lot. Especially the writing center, because the tutors there are very helpful, informative, and I do -- it helps me get a better grade on my paper and helps me understand how to organize a paper and what needs to be included, and that stuff so the academic course center was very helpful in my first center, and I use it a lot.

One of the first classes, our teacher had us do a scavenger hunt in the library and we learned about the group study room where you can go online and book a room up to like 4 to 8 people, or just two people, and I ended up doing that for group sessions or in a group project. It was actually the studying which was very useful in keeping us focused on getting the work done.

In the FYE course, goal setting as college students was imperative.

In the FYE course, students learned about resources such as the academic support center, which helped their skills and performance as students.

In the FYE course learned about library resources and used them as needed in future courses.

Some of the resources I learned about was the Disability center. It's not just for learning disabilities or something like that, it is also for mental illnesses, and it's actually saved me a couple weeks ago, to be honest, because I had a mental break down after math class. I went down there and was like, "listen, talk to me or I'm going home and doing a bad thing." So there very helpful and helped me realize, "hey you're world is not falling apart as badly as you think, and you can still get to class."

The most valuable thing that I have taken away is that student confidence, and that now I can say now that it is really crucial that you know especially in their first year, that student gets that experience and I think it will make college a lot easier in the long run.

It builds a support system, right off the bat. So you can always go back to them and branch out because I think support systems in your first year are crucial.

They provide you with the resources, you build a support, you build your own self confidence up, you learn all these different skills like how to study. You might have been an A plus student in high school, but in college it's a whole different world. You are really responsible for your own stuff and you have to be on top of your game and also you build a community with that class, you've learned so much about these people and so you are always going to have the community which is really important.

In the FYE course, students learned about resources such and counseling and disability services, which they used when they were in a future crisis.

After taking the FYE course, student confidence grew and was appreciated during their college journey.

The FYE course builds a support system.

The FYE course provides resources, a support system and boosts student confidence.

Time management, for sure. That was such a huge, huge thing because I mean, like last semester I was taking five classes and I was working a full-time job. So I was just like, "I don't understand how I'm doing this." And I ended up having to drop some classes, and it was kind of ... I was disappointed in myself, but it needed to be done. And that was another thing that was covered in the book, where, yeah, we have our struggles, we have our failures, but not to take those failures and see them as such. It's more like seeing them in a different light and using them as an opportunity to grow from it. So yeah, that, time management, keeping a planner, touching upon procrastination, all of that.

FYE definitely pointed me in the right direction of, "Hey, you have tutoring here, you have this here, you have that here, this is how you should talk to your professor if you are struggling. Don't just blame it on the professor for being crappy. Take it upon yourself and you need to work it out because this is your grade, not the professor's grade.

In the FYE course, students improved time management skills and learned how to live a more balanced life.

The FYE course provided students with campus resources and empowered them to use them as needed.

There's a chapter in the book in regards to accepting responsibility. And that particular chapter helped me a lot because I was one of those people that's like, "Oh, he's just a dumb professor. He doesn't know what he's talking about. Oh, it's this person's fault, it's that person's fault." And I had to sit back and say, no, these are my grades. This is like I have to work for this and I need to figure out a different way to do that. And whether it be when I sign up for classes, looking at Rate my Professor, see what other people say, or if I do get stuck with a tough professor, going up to them and explaining situations and that I don't understand things and working with them. And if that still doesn't work, then I just have to keep going and figuring out other ways.

The book was beneficial, your professors are beneficial, and the community ... it's gonna stick with you, and you learn so much about each other that you're gonna ... If you create that bond your first year, your first semester, when you see those faces again and again, you're gonna be able to help each other out more. Like this person might be taking this class and you're not taking it, but they can go and help you with your research and it's just ... It's a really helpful class.

The FYE course emphasized personal responsibility in students.

The FYE course was beneficial, creating support networks to build a strong foundation for future success.

...most important topics I would say were time management, which is the key to college success, and to constantly always ask for help, whether it's a counselor, an advisor, or even your professor, or even a peer student as well. Those were topics that I felt were very valuable and important in the course, especially time management, because you don't want to take, or do an assignment that's due a certain day and you start it maybe a few days beforehand. You always want to make sure it's a week or two in advance.

We spent a lot of time on personal responsibility, and self-care, and things like that. Probably the most fundamental thing about the whole course that we were focusing on was defining success for ourselves, which coming away from the class now, I can say that I think everyone should take the time to try to figure out what success means to them. As a college student, it's really easy to feel like you're not living up to the standards. You have to define what your standards are before you can start judging yourself in that way. That was pretty important to learn.

Definitely stress relievers and how to manage stress. I'm lacking this semester without it but I went in. I had a very stressful first semester and that's when I took it so I thought that helped me a lot with the stress. And time management, I feel like I'm still lacking in it a bit but at least how to help it.

Time management and asking for assistance are two important skills for college students.

Personal responsibility and self-care are essential tools and skills for college students.

Stress relief advice and techniques are essential parts of college success.

I've learned my faults because of the journals and I feel like other people would just do them just to get it done because they have other work to do, but when I invested my time into them, I realized where I was going wrong and where all my time was being taken up not usefully. So I had to change that in which I would've never known if I didn't really sit down and take the time to do it.

My family and how I motivate them to be better. Like my younger siblings, you know, that since I'm in college, that they're going to follow my footsteps. And so just talking about that is just kind of, like, you know that there's people also counting on me to get it done since I'm one of the first in the family, so, you know, get it all done.

Every class is ... he's like a motivational speaker. It was just, like, saying, "You can do it." That, "You can achieve your goals." That, "It's just putting in the work." That, "It's just going to get you far." And not letting distractions get to you, or, "No matter how hard it gets, it's still up to you to get it done." Because if it was easy, everyone would do it.

Take the class because it definitely helps you and ... Like, I wish I could have took it again this semester, because I think it would have helped motivate me again.

Self-reflection through journals in the FYE courses helped students better understand themselves as students and human beings.

Families motivate students to work hard in their studies, to be a good example.

FYE instructors serve as a source of inspiration for students.

The FYE course is beneficial and students would take it again.