2008

Staying Within the Margins: The Educational Stories of First-Generation, Low-Income College Students

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<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.5385>

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STAYING WITHIN THE MARGINS: THE EDUCATIONAL STORIES
OF FIRST-GENERATION, LOW-INCOME
COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

DIANE LYN COLE

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

Portland State University
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The abstract and dissertation of Diane Lyn Cole for the Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work and Social Research were presented July 11, 2008, and accepted by the dissertation committee and the doctoral program.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the dissertation of Diane Lyn Cole for the Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work and Social Research presented July 11, 2008.

Title: Staying Within the Margins: The Educational Stories of First-Generation, Low-Income College Students

This research addressed educational persistence among first-generation, low-income college students. The educational paths of 22 first-generation, low-income undergraduate students attending a large, urban university in the Northwest region of the United States were examined through a narrative framework. Half of the participants had persisted from year one to year two, and the other half left the university after their first year. Analytic procedures consisted of thematic qualitative coding, an analysis of student trajectories over educational histories, and the reconstruction of narrative stories. Data were used to examine: 1) How first-generation, low-income students understood and described their journey through their first year, 2) Reasons some students gave for leaving the university, 3) Meanings students gave to their experiences in college and how those meanings influenced future decisions, and 4) Differences between the stories of students who persisted versus those who left.

The first-generation, low-income students who participated in this study were individually diverse and took various paths through college. After prolonged contact, evidence of interrupted enrollment and transfer among colleges was shown for approximately half of the participants. The descriptive codes most frequently discussed were financial issues, aspects of self, and family. Students described motivations for college in terms of themes related to family, gaining practical skills, existential discovery, desire for the college adventure, and affirmation of personal attributes. Students left the institution as a result of academic challenges, external life events, financial difficulties, dissatisfaction with the college process, unclear goals or reasons for continuation, and a need to stay near family. Students who persisted in college indicated adequate pre-college academic preparation, social connection to the university, family support for continuation, adequate financial resources, and support from social and cultural brokers that helped them navigate college. Findings from this study suggest social class, financial, individual and family contextual variables be added to Tinto's (1975, 1993) classic model of student departure. Higher education policies suggested by data include partnering with families, reducing social class barriers and providing better information to students about the hidden costs of transfer and interrupted enrollment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several people have helped me over the years to accomplish this feat. They range from the person working down the street at 7-11, who regularly sold me ice cream and provided me with smiles weekend after weekend while I worked on this dissertation, to my five committee members who read draft after draft until the final product was completed. In these acknowledgements I thank those who have made a difference to my life and those who have supported the completion of this precious, heartfelt goal.

First, I would like to thank the 22 participants in this study for their candid disclosure of their lives. I appreciate their willingness to be part of this study and provide invaluable insight into the strengths and struggles of first-generation students.

I'd also like to appreciate my spiritual teachers, Reverend Hogen Bays, Dr. Chozen Bays and Dr. Larry Christensen for guiding me in this journey, never letting me quit, and reinforcing the perfection, wholeness and completeness of all beings – a message I hope to pass on to every student I work with in the future.

This work would not have been possible without my advisor and dissertation committee members. Thank you to Dr. Sandra Anderson, Dr. Pauline Jivanjee, Dr. Richard Hunter, Dr. Maria Talbott, and Dr. Robert Liebman. Every one of my committee members provided me with a tremendous amount of support, intellectual precision and encouragement. I am truly grateful for all of their hard work and willingness to serve.

I feel fortunate to have worked with two wonderful, close mentors, Dr. David Morgan and Dr. Maria Talbott. They believed in me when I struggled to find that belief within myself. Dr. David Morgan was instrumental in helping me through every step of this long journey, both professionally and personally. He is the most passionate student advocate I have ever met and a true friend. Dr. Maria Talbott's genuineness, intellectual acuity, and strength of character provided me with an impressive female role model for this process and in life overall. I thank them for the lessons they taught me that are not contained within books.

Several individuals at Portland State University also provided invaluable assistance. Dr. Peter Collier was helpful in many ways, including his instrumental role in helping me locate students for this study. Moshoula Capous Desyllas completed a tremendous amount of work by serving as my auditor. She also has been a good friend throughout these years. I also thank the Department of Social Work and the MSW Distance Option team for my employment during this dissertation.

This research was supported by the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) and the Lumina Foundation for Education through a fellowship award. I was fortunate to receive professional support and guidance from Dr. Kristen Renn, Tina Gridiron Smith, Dr. Laura Rendón and many leading educational researchers through this fellowship program. In particular, I am grateful for the mentorship and inspiration from Dr. Laura Rendón.

Finally, I want to thank my partner, friends and family for always believing I would succeed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many students leave college before graduating every year. It has been estimated that nearly half of the 14.7 million undergraduates at two and four-year institutions never receive degrees (Schemo, 2006). This costs universities, communities and society in a multitude of ways. However, perhaps the most severe and tangible costs are for the millions of students themselves, who walk away with their dreams unfulfilled. Many of them come from low-income backgrounds where neither of their parents finished college. First-generation, low-income students are most likely to leave college before graduation. The retention of first-generation, low-income students is therefore a crucial problem in American universities today. The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a thorough background of the issues facing first-generation, low-income students and present the methodology, findings, and conclusions of a narrative qualitative research study conducted with 22 current and former students at one large public urban university in the Northwestern United States.

Social Problem

Education has been long thought of as a vehicle for social and economic mobility in America. This is evidenced by the “American Dream,” which promises that hard work and educational advancement will be rewarded with upward mobility (Abowitz, 2005; Malveaux, 2003). Research on the relationship between higher education and income also supports this claim. The yearly census survey consistently shows that higher education is associated with higher earnings (Day & Newburger,

2002; Stoops, 2004). For example, in 2006, the yearly median earnings for males over 25 years of age with a bachelor's degree were \$61,168 whereas high school graduates earned only \$31,009 (US Census, 2008). The median earnings for women in these educational categories were \$39,450 and \$17,546, respectively. Over one's lifetime, this earning differential is compounded (Swail, 2003). In addition to increasing individual incomes, education also benefits society. College educated individuals tend to vote, volunteer, and participate in their children's education to a greater extent than individuals without college degrees (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Malveaux, 2003). While earning a college degree may be beneficial to all students, it is particularly crucial for first-generation students from low-income backgrounds who seek education as a way of becoming economically and socially mobile. Higher education provides these students with access to higher paying jobs and social opportunities that they may otherwise be unable to access without attending college.

Earning a college degree for first-generation, low-income students involves a unique set of challenges. For instance, they often enter higher education with several academic and non-academic deficits compared to their traditional peers (Thayer, 2000; Chen & Carroll, 2005). First-generation, low-income students tend to choose different institutions, have lower educational aspirations and attend college in different ways than non-first-generation students which makes them less successful in completing their educational goals (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). Many first-generation, low-income students also face cultural and social challenges when they break family tradition by attending

college (London, 1992; Rodriguez, 2003). All of these factors make first-generation, low-income students at greater risk for dropping out. When first-generation, low-income students are able to persist, however, their outcomes are similar to those of students from other family backgrounds. For instance, Choy (2002) found that first-generation college students who earn a bachelor's degree, despite the odds against them, have similar employment outcomes when compared with peers from college educated families. In order to help first-generation students reap these benefits, educators, researchers and social workers must understand the special needs of this population.

Significance of the Study

The retention of low-income, first-generation students is of relevance today for two reasons. First, although estimates vary widely, the number of first-generation students entering colleges is substantial. The proportion of first-generation students varies by institution type and may be changing due to rising tuition costs. McConnell (2000) summarized that approximately 45% of undergraduates in two and four-year institutions are first-generation students. Saenz and Barrera (2007) found that the percentage of full-time entering first-generation freshman at four-year institutions in 2005 was 15.9, which was a decline from 38.5 in 1971. Higher percentages of first-generation students are also concentrated at community colleges. Phillippe and Valiga (2000) estimated that the number of first-generation students attending public two-year institutions was approximately 60%. Choy (2001) reported that since 1995 approximately 34% of students enrolled at four-year institutions were first-generation

and 52% of students at two-year institutions were the first in their families to attend college. As data about the number of first-generation status of students becomes more readily available, estimates may become less variable. However, greater options for students about which institutions they attend could cause shifting numbers among institution types. Even the lowest estimates of first-generation student enrollment indicate these students make up a large part of our US higher education institutions today.

While one reason to understand this population is simply that they heavily populate our college campuses, another reason is they represent a population who, through education, are able to become economically and socially mobile. Education as a means towards upward mobility could be criticized as endorsing the conservative, American “bootstrap” ideology. However, giving educational access and support to people who have been previously excluded is also a way to redistribute wealth and power. In the current political climate, where structural changes in power and wealth are difficult to accomplish, if not impossible, this may be a backdoor way to slowly infiltrate.

Although in recent years significant gains have been made in helping non-traditional students access higher education, they lag far behind their traditional counterparts in the degree to which they persist and finish education programs. Thayer (2000) reported that while access was the main concern of educators in the mid 1960s, the chief issue in the 1990s and beyond has been retention. He also reported that students from low-income, first-generation backgrounds are the least likely to persist

to degree completion. Similarly, Swail (2003) maintained that when academic goals go unfulfilled, career realities such as lower pay, less security, fewer opportunities and dreams deferred or abandoned, unfortunately result. This indicates that first-generation, low-income students not only need help getting into college, they need support in staying there.

Relevance to Social Work

Supporting low-income, first-generation students by helping them achieve college degrees is relevant to social work. Education is a means through which individuals become empowered to take part in our society financially, socially and politically. Therefore, helping marginalized students get a postsecondary education is directly tied to social work's values of social justice, empowerment and equality. Secondly, higher education has been used as an intervention for several populations that social workers serve such as low-income individuals (Kazis & Liebowitz, 2003), people of color (Harrell & Forney, 2003), displaced homemakers, single parents (Richburg-Hayes, 2008), and at risk youth. Individuals from low-income, first-generation backgrounds include the populations that social workers work with most. One of the most long-lasting and empowering interventions social workers can encourage is education. Furthermore, education has the potential of not only helping individuals who are seeking a degree, but also has intergenerational impacts on families and communities (Beegle, 2000). Finally, first-generation, low-income students who attain degrees often enter fields in which they can give back to their own marginalized communities (Rodriguez, 2003). Therefore, social work has the potential

of becoming a stronger professional body if social work educators can attract and work effectively with low-income, first-generation students. By doing so, social work educators help build a professional force that is both competent and representative of the communities, families, and individuals with whom they work.

Throughout the history of social work, a primary aim has been to encourage economic empowerment among all members of society. While college persistence among some non-traditional student groups (women, some racial groups) has improved, low-income, first-generation students continue to drop out of college at high rates. There is also evidence that the college achievement gap between lower-income students and higher-income students is widening. Part of this is due to rising tuition costs and shifts in financial aid structures that burden lower-income college students at public four-year institutions most (Baum & Ma, 2007b). Ironically, this is happening within the context of a society dependent on a more educated labor force (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002). By ignoring the issue of retention among low-income, first-generation students, society is likely to become even more economically polarized.

Furthermore, apart from the individual losses that occur when this population fails to finish their educational goals, society also loses. Vernez, Krop, and Rydell (1999) asserted that the societal benefits associated with education might even exceed the individual benefits. For instance, Boswell (2004) reported that having a society composed of a more educated populous means increased tax revenue, greater productivity, lower crime rates and decreased reliance on government support.

Similarly, Baum and Ma (2007a) found that the societal benefits of education also included lower rates of poverty and unemployment, better individual health, higher civic involvement including volunteerism and voting. When significant educational disparities in a society exist, all of society suffers. It is for this reason that social workers, educators, and policy makers should be concerned about the educational success of low-income, first-generation students.

Although a college degree is valuable to many individuals, low-income, first-generation students may have the most to gain by successfully finishing college. Graduates from non-traditional backgrounds report numerous benefits associated with their new status (Sanchez & Laanan, 1997). This research can also be used to help provide social workers with a long-lasting, empowering intervention that could dramatically change the lives of clients they work with. Education has been conceptualized by many researchers as a way out of poverty (Beegle, 2000; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). For example, the inverse relationship between the use of public assistance and education is clear. The more education one has, the less likely one is to have ever used welfare or public assistance (Baum & Ma, 2007a). Similarly, regardless of race, the share of adults living below the poverty level declines as the level of education attained increases (Swail, 2003). Higher education among some marginalized groups also has the impact of reducing racial divisions. Higher education gives social workers another tool with which to help equalize our society.

In fact, bridges between social work and higher education have started to emerge. Social work principles are also a large component of one of a newer ethnic

retention/intervention model by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) called the Family Education Model (FEM). This model bridges social work and education in order to create an educational theory for how American Indians' persistence is enhanced through having an outreach worker who can build relationships between the university and the American Indian culture. Models of attrition in higher education can benefit from social work principles. Together, education and social work can create best practices for retaining diverse populations of students.

Finally, more research on low-income, first-generation college students would inform our profession for our Bachelors of Social Work and Masters of Social Work students. Helping first-generation, low-income students stay in college shows that social work values the diversity of our students and is willing to look into what helps break down barriers that tend not to support diversity. Social work's dedication to working with oppressed individuals demands that we educate front-line social workers who can respond in an empathic manner. This means making a commitment to support students who are low-income, first-generation students from the beginning of their college experience until the end. The profession of social work benefits from understanding these students and schools of social work benefit economically as the ability to retain students translates directly to their benefit in budgets. High attrition rates drive up the cost of education through inflated tuition, fee changes, and increased consumption of public subsidies (Swail, 2003). Social work educators need to be active in helping their own first-generation students achieve.

Recent research in this area of social work education supports the importance of this research. After entering the keywords of “social work” and “first-generation student” in the social sciences databases Psych Lit, Social Service Abstracts, socINDEX, Sociological Abstracts, and the educational database of ERIC, only one article was found that specifically referred to first-generation students in social work. Hodges (2000) looked at first-generation college students in a baccalaureate social welfare program and found that first-generation students tended to be older, male, Hispanic, and to have parents who are not citizens of the United States. However, his study failed to find high rates of social isolation or academic deficiencies as the literature predicts. Hodges concluded his article by calling for more research in freshman-year attrition among first-generation students and the need for interventions to retain these types of students. His article suggests that research on first-generation students is timely and relevant for schools of social work.

Definitions

First-Generation College Student

According to McConnell (2000), “first-generation student” has usually been defined in one of three ways. The broadest definition of first-generation student discovered in her review was that neither parent had completed a college degree. Interestingly, this definition is used as federal eligibility guidelines for federally funded Title IV education programs offered to disadvantaged students (Gladieux, 1996). The second, most restrictive definition, used by several qualitative studies, was being the first person in the entire family ever to attend college (Rodriquez, 2003;

London, 1992; Filkins & Doyle, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999). However, the most common way first-generation students have been defined is students whose parents have had no college experience (McConnell, 2000; Ting, 2003; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Several studies examining first-generation college students have compared them with students who were not first-generation. However, recently researchers have created more refined comparisons by dividing parental education into several categories. For instance, Lee, Sax, Kim, and Hagedorn (2004) asked participants: “What is the highest level of formal education obtained by your parents in either the United States or a foreign country?” The response categories included: 1) junior high or less, 2) high school, 3) community college, 4) four-year college, and 5) graduate school. Similarly, the in a US Department of Education report, Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) defined first-generation students as those whose parents’ highest level of education was a high school diploma or less and compared these students against students whose parent(s) have attended some college, but have attained less than a bachelor’s degree and students whose parent(s) have attained a bachelor’s degree or more. Pascarella et al. (2004) used similar categories representing high, moderate, and low parental education.

Low-Income

Definitions of low-income also vary. Being from a low-income background is usually associated with first-generation status, however not all first-generation students are low-income. Several studies have reported significant differences in

parental or family income of first-generation students compared to those of non-first-generation students in income between these groups (Lee et al., 2004; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996). Other authors have reported low-income as yearly family incomes (for a family of four) of \$20,000 to \$25,000 and found that a high proportion of first-generation students fall into this category (Gladieux, 1996; Kazis, 2002; Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). Filkins and Doyle (2002) reported that low-income students receiving educational support through Title IV federal funding must have a per year family income of less than \$25,000.

First-Generation, Low-Income

Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) suggested that the link between parental education and socioeconomic status explains why first-generation students are less successful in college. However, Lee et al. (2004) noted that being first-generation could play a role above and beyond income factors. For example, according to a study by Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) first-generation students from low-income backgrounds have lower rates of persistence and degree attainment at both four-year and two-year institutions even when socioeconomic status was controlled for. This indicates that parental influence, in addition to income status, is an important factor in determining who persists in college. First-generation, low-income students are disadvantaged because they lack resources afforded to other students with more income, their parents cannot guide them through college with first-hand knowledge of the college experience, and they do not have parental role models for achieving degrees in higher education.

Social Class and Culture

Social class and culture are also important in discussions of non-traditional students. These terms arise in qualitative studies to describe the transition some first-generation students from low-income backgrounds experience as they move from familiar social and cultural settings to the new, unfamiliar environment of college. Social class is generally understood in terms of relative economic power among groups in society, whereas culture includes racial, ethnic, and religious practices. In literature on first-generation college students, class and culture are often considered together. London (1992), for instance, talked about cultural issues facing first-generation students in his discussion of working-class and minority students. Similarly, Borrego (2003) used the term “class culture” when she argued that higher education tends to ignore issues of social class identity in discussions of diversity. These conceptualizations are important to consider when investigating the issues of first-generation, low-income college students.

Defining social class is problematic and at the individual level it is rarely examined (Borrego, 2003; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Many Americans identify the United States as a classless society or simply a middle class, egalitarian society (hooks, 2000; Putten, 2001). Most often, educational equity has been studied through a race, ethnicity, income, or gender lens, while issues of social class were largely ignored (Beegle, 2000; Borrego, 2003; Goldrick-Rab, 2006). What does it mean to be from a low-income background and a first-generation college student? Assumed in the categorization of first-generation, low-income students are that there are differences in

the opportunities and experiences of these students that go beyond a purely economic measure.

In discussions of social stratification, sociologists often contrast social classes with caste systems (Giddens, 1991). Unlike caste systems, which are closed systems of social stratification individuals are born into, social classes remain open, allowing for both upward and downward mobility between the classes. Karl Marx (1964) defined class in terms of “modes of production.” Accordingly, he described three class distinctions based on what one could own or sell. Among these were owners of labor-power, owners of capital, and the owners of land. Weber (1968) expanded Marx’s conception of class, reporting that social position was not only dependent on wealth or money, but also depended on one’s group status. The social status to which one belonged could determine “social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges” (p. 305). Social status was determined by one’s “style of life.” Some of the symbols he included as revealing one’s style of life were language (including vocabulary and accent), social conventions and rituals of all kinds, patterns of economic consumption, understandings regarding outsiders, relations with outsiders, and matters of taste in clothing, food, grooming, and hairstyle (Weber, 1946 as cited in Beegle, 2000). These items define a group’s culture. Individuals who take on the culture and symbols become part of the status group, whereas those who fail to adopt status defining symbols of a social class will remain marginal or outside the group.

London (1992) noted first-generation students regard upward social mobility in different ways; once they become resocialized into a new status group, the meaning

and expression of status-group membership becomes important to them. First-generation students from low-income backgrounds may change how they talk, dress, behave, and what they believe to better “fit into” middle-class academic cultures. For some students, this can evoke what Sennett and Cobb (1972) termed “status incongruity” or discontent resulting from moving from the social class of one’s origin to a higher social class. Students who straddle class lines often describe living on the margin of two cultures without belonging to either of two distinct worlds (Putten, 2001; Rendón, 1996; Rendón, Jalmoro, & Nora, 2000).

Along with the idea of symbols that defined certain status groups, Weber (1968) also talked about how different classes resulted from the distribution of power within a community. Weber reported that those born into lower classes are prevented from accessing most of the opportunities for upward mobility. Weber linked social class to life chances, opportunities for income, and intergenerational mobility. He reported that individuals in upper and middle classes were privileged through education because they more easily could compete in the labor market compared to those from lower classes. As first-generation, low-income students attempt to get their college degrees, understanding how they transition into the academic culture will be important for keeping these students in school.

Dropout

Researchers define “dropout” in a variety of ways, but most commonly the term refers to a student who leaves college before the completion of his/her intended degree. Several issues, however, make this definition problematic. First, students take

varying lengths of time to finish their degree. Yet, because researchers follow students for a finite period of time, it is difficult to know whether a student has truly dropped out, never to return. Therefore, researchers usually limit their tracking of students to a specific length of time. Studies today generally follow students from term to term, year to year, or from the beginning of their enrollment until a five or six year estimated graduation point. Obviously, the determination of how long a researcher follows a cohort of students depends on his/her time, money and resources. Related to this is the fact that many students leave college for periods of time and re-enroll again. For this reason, researchers have had to pay greater attention to students' patterns of college attendance. Horn and Carroll (1998) looked at first-year students going into their second year of college, and then followed-up five years later with the same cohort of students. They termed "first-year persister" as any student continuously enrolled from the time he/she started in their first academic year and remained enrolled in the subsequent year, "first-year stopout" was defined as a student who interrupted his or her enrollment in the first year with a break of more than 4 months before reenrolling for their second year of college, and a "first year stayout" was a student who left in the first-year and did not return anytime over the next five years. These variations in enrollment have prompted researchers to study "patterns of attendance" or enrollment over time rather than categorizing leaving college as a discrete event (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Finally, the last difficulty in defining dropout is that students may transfer to other universities or colleges to finish their degree/s. Large national studies can sometimes locate transfer students in order to not categorize

them as dropouts, but this can be difficult for single institutions. Therefore, attrition rates in some studies could be inflated. Although “dropout” is used in various ways, the common element of all of the definitions is that they attempt to describe students’ leaving behavior.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this section is to review the literature that addresses first-generation college students from low-income family backgrounds with an emphasis on retention issues in higher education. To this end, several questions will be addressed:

- 1) How are first-generation college students different from non-first-generation students?
- 1b) How are first-generation, low-income students understood in the context of race?
- 2) How do the college experiences of first-generation, low-income students differ from their traditional peers?
- 3) What unique social and cultural issues face first-generation, low-income students?
- 4) What theoretical models inform the research?
- 5) What do we still need to know?

1) How Are First-Generation College Students Different From Non-First-Generation Students?

First-generation students are disadvantaged in several ways both academically and non-academically relative to their college peers. Terenzini et al. (1996) found that when compared to college peers, first-generation students tend to come from low-income families, be Hispanic, and have weaker reading, math, and critical thinking

skills. They also have lower degree aspirations and less involvement with peers and teachers in high school. First-generation students are also more likely to be female and older than other non-first-generation students (McConnell, 2000). In addition, some researchers suggest that first-generation students possess lower levels of knowledge about postsecondary admission and financial aid procedures (Vargas, 2004). However, a review by McConnell (2000) reported that these findings were mixed in the literature, and thus inconclusive. Still, several researchers note that many students from low-income, first-generation backgrounds do not follow the necessary pathways to make it to college (Astin & Oreguera, 2004; Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2001; Goldrick-Rab, 2006).

One of the most talked about differences between low-income, first-generation students and traditional college students is their high school preparation (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). Many first-generation and low-income students have less rigorous academic preparation in high school than traditional students. The more rigorous the high school academic curriculum of students, the more likely non-traditional students are to attain a bachelor's degree and the less likely they are to be required to take remedial coursework.

In a study conducted by Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001), a little over half of first-generation students who began college with the Core New Basic Curriculum from high school which included 4 years of English, 3 years of mathematics, and 3 years of science and social studies, obtained a bachelor's degree, whereas 81% of first-generation students who took a rigorous high school curriculum

(New Basics Core Curriculum plus science and 4 years of math) obtained a bachelor's degree. Mathematics, in particular, is often cited as an important predictor of college success, since first-generation students are less likely to take higher-level mathematics (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Harrell & Forney, 2003). Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001) reported that the academic rigor of students' high school curriculum was strongly associated with their postsecondary GPA, with the amount of remedial coursework they took, and with their rates of persistence and attainment. These researchers concluded that a rigorous high school preparation significantly closed the gap in performance and persistence between first-generation students and students whose parents had a college degree. Schemo (2006) echoed these sentiments in a recent article in the New York Times where she suggested that a large part of the reason why students fail to get their degrees, particularly at two-year institutions where first-generation, low-income students are concentrated, was due to a lack of preparation for college-level work in high school.

Vargas (2004) likewise reported that barriers related to first-generation status include a lack of knowledge of postsecondary education in general and of the admissions and financial aid processes in particular. First-generation students are also less prepared academically and more often fail to pursue college preparatory courses. Frequently, they delay enrollment in postsecondary education (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). First-generation students also may have less direct knowledge of the economic and social benefits of postsecondary education because their parents did not attend college.

All of these factors make low-income, first-generation students more vulnerable to either never getting in the college door or failing once they start.

Psychological barriers have also been noted. Hellman (1996) reported that first-generation students had a lower sense of self-efficacy. Lower self-esteem has also been reported (McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis, & Becker, 1991, as cited in Inman, 1999). On the other hand, students who stay in college, despite disadvantages, may be more resilient than predicted given their initial deficiencies. Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, and Terenzini (2003) found that after two years of college, first-generation college students attending a community college had greater gains in internal locus of attribution for academic success than students whose parents were either college graduates or had a moderate level of postsecondary education.

1b) How Are First-Generation, Low-Income Students Understood in the Context of Race?

Race and ethnicity are important to understand this population. A disproportionate number of students of color are first-generation, low-income students (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Therefore, understanding how the variables of race, income and parental education interact is crucial.

Although more African Americans and Hispanics are attending college and receiving degrees than ever before, they continue to be underrepresented among undergraduate bachelor's degrees (US Department of Education, 2007). In fact, even though enrollment in postsecondary education for Asian and white students is now similar, other students of color do not access four-year colleges to the same extent, nor

do they achieve degrees at the same rate (Swail, 2003). Overall, educational attainment levels continue to be substantially lower for African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians than for whites and Asians. For example, in 2003, only 11 percent of Hispanics and 17 percent of blacks in the U.S. population age 25 and older had attained at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 30 percent of whites and 50 percent of Asians (Stoops, 2004). The US Department of Education (2007) reported that for students aged 24-26, 66 percent of White students had completed some college, while 50 percent of their Black peers and 32 percent of their Hispanic peers had done the same. Additionally, while the overall rate of completion of a Bachelors degree for 25 to 29 year olds increased across all racial groups from 1971 to 2006, from 1996 to 2006 there has been a widening gap between the completion rates of White students compared with their Black and Hispanic peers.

Several researchers have reported a link between socioeconomic status and race or ethnicity (Swail, 2003). Some researchers note that, to a great extent, disparities among racial or ethnic groups can be accounted for by socioeconomic status and early experiences in schooling. Malveaux (2003) suggested that a primary social benefit of higher education was its ability to actually narrow some of the racial economic gaps that exist in our society. One example of this can be found in Tinto's (1993) synthesis of studies which looked at how racial differences in degree completion decreased after ability and socioeconomic status were taken into account. Specifically, he found that differences in rates of four-year degree completion among people of different ethnicities, but of similar ability and similar socioeconomic status,

were dramatically different from those between different ethnic groups overall. The overall difference in rates of four-year completion between white students and Hispanic and black students was approximately 23 percent. However, when ability and socioeconomic status were taken into account there was a 12 percent difference between white and Hispanic students and 10 percent difference between black and white students with similar attributes. About half of the differences in rates of completion between white and Asian students versus Hispanic and black students can be easily assigned to differences between their academic ability and socioeconomic status. Tinto (1993) further argued that differences in ability as measured by test scores could be more important than differences in socioeconomic status because ability scores would mirror differences in groups' prior educational experiences, which favor whites relative to blacks and Hispanics. Using similar data, Horn and Carroll (1998) found that there were no differences among racial groups who interrupted their enrollment from both 4-year and 2-year institutions, after controlling for variables such as academic integration, financial aid, attendance status, timing of enrollment, GPA, gender, work schedule, parental education, satisfaction, and socioeconomic status.

Although race appears to be a factor that compounds the barriers associated with first-generation status, it is likely that some racial differences emanate from other variables such as income and pre-college preparation. Race or ethnicity, at least for some groups of color, most notably Hispanics and African Americans, appears to be an added risk factor for college success for they are the least likely to persist for four

years in college or to earn a bachelor's degree (Stoops, 2004). In addition, they are also overrepresented among low-income groups. Beegle (2000), who analyzed interviews from successful college graduates, similarly contended that social class is often confounded with race. She reported that individuals from lower social classes tend to share similar challenges in higher education regardless of race. However, when she conducted focus group interviews with college graduates from poverty, individuals of color said that racial issues compounded the barriers they faced.

Like socioeconomic status, first-generation status is also associated with race (Saenz & Barrera, 2007). In addition to cultural or social barriers stemming from students' lower socioeconomic status, minority first-generation students face additional race/ethnic related barriers (Rendón, Jalmoro, & Nora, 2000; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). According to Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001), compared to first-generation and minority students, those students whose parents have a bachelor's degree have higher college entrance exams scores, take more rigorous high school coursework, have a higher GPA, are more likely to be white, enjoy a higher family income, take fewer remedial courses their first year in postsecondary education, are more likely to be continuously enrolled while working toward a bachelor's degree and are less involved in part time or full time work outside of school. In addition to low-income and/or first-generation status, barriers for minorities can include language and different cultural values towards formal education. Researchers have found first-generation status is most highly associated with Hispanic ethnicity (Horn & Carroll, 1998; Saenz & Barrera, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Differences in college enrollment and attainment have been associated with minority status. For example, Perna (2000) found that measures of social and cultural capital were more important in understanding the college enrollment decisions of African Americans and Hispanics than for white and Asian students. Furthermore, above and beyond racial and income differences there may be additional impacts of first-generation status. For example, Ishitani (2003) found that after controlling for race, gender, high school grade point average, and family income, first-generation students were 71 percent more likely to drop out of college than non-first-generation students. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that developmental education students who withdrew from college rated the presence of a hostile racial climate as an important reason for their withdrawal. Similarly, Ting and Bryant (2001) found that the level of acculturation for Native American students impacted their performance and retention in college. The higher Native American students scored on a measure of acculturation, the more likely they were to perform well and persist. Fischer (2007) found that students of color were less likely to leave when involved in social activities whereas this did not have a significant impact on White students. Stanton-Salazar (1997) hypothesized that to succeed in college minority youth must learn to decode the dominant culture and adopt multiple sociocultural values. This requires overcoming sociocultural, socioeconomic, linguistic and structural barriers. These findings taken together indicated that the impact of being a first-generation student may interact with race/ethnicity when cultural factors are examined.

In summary, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students lag behind their white counterparts in postsecondary degree achievement. One reason is that these racial groups are composed of a higher proportion of low-income, first-generation students. A second is barriers related to race. In their study comparing first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that race, class and first-generation status were all significant factors that had an impact on student persistence. Nevertheless, while there are larger proportions of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students falling under the category of low-income and first-generation student status, in absolute numbers, more white students are low-income, first-generation. The social and cultural adaptation that must occur for successful transition and attainment in higher education depends on several factors. While low-income, first-generation status is clearly associated with attainment, racial or ethnic differences may present additional cultural and social challenges related specifically to race that non-white students must overcome.

2) How Do the College Experiences of First-Generation, Low-Income Students Differ from Their Traditional Peers?

Low-income, first-generation students have a different pattern of college attendance than non-first-generation students from middle or upper income backgrounds. First-generation students are most concentrated in community colleges (London, 1992). They are more likely to enroll as part-time students and commute to school (Ting, 2003). They also have more dependent children, expect to take longer to

complete their programs, receive less encouragement from their parents, take fewer courses, spend fewer hours studying, and spend more hours working (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Furthermore, even when some pre-college variables, such as cognitive development, parental income, secondary school grades, sex and gender, are controlled for, first-generation students still complete fewer credit hours than non-first-generation students; take fewer courses in the natural sciences, mathematics, and the arts and humanities than non-first-generation students; have lower college grades than non-first-generation students; are less likely to join a Greek organization and work more hours per week than their classmates with college educated parents (Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003).

A large study by Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001) similarly found that when first-generation students enter 4-year institutions, they are more likely to attend public comprehensive institutions than research institutions, attend college part-time, work full-time during college, and have to take more remedial courses compared with students whose parents have a college degree. They also found that first-generation students had a lower first-year GPA. This persisted even after controlling for the rigor of students' high school coursework and college entrance examination scores.

However, among students who took rigorous high school courses or scored in the top quartile on their college entrance examinations, first-generation students had first-year college GPAs and remedial course taking patterns that were not significantly different from their non-first-generation peers. First-generation students were less likely to be enrolled continuously or to attain a degree at their initial post-secondary institution

than students whose parents had completed college. They were also more likely to have stopped out. Among students who took rigorous high school courses, the retention of students with parents who had a college degree was similar to first-generation students.

Similarly, in a study looking at first-generation students over time, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolnick, and Terenzini (2004) found that first-generation students compared with their peers with a high level of parental education attended less selective institutions, even when controlling for several pre-college demographic characteristics. Across the second and third years of postsecondary years, first-generation students continued to attend college differently compared with students with parents with high levels of postsecondary education even when controlling for pre-college characteristics like income, sex, and cognitive development. First-generation students completed fewer credit hours, worked more hours per week, and were less likely to live off campus. They were less socially integrated overall, but when students were involved in extracurricular activities at the college, they received positive effects on their critical thinking skills, degree plans, internal locus of attribution and preference for higher order cognitive tasks. These impacts were not found in students with highly educated parents. These conditional effects of social engagement with the university or college appeared to be the most detrimental to first-generation college students. Authors hypothesize that peer interaction is vital for building the cultural capital they need to succeed.

Despite differences in pre-college attributes and college going patterns, other researchers report that first-generation, low-income students make similar academic gains when they do persist. In a large sample of 4,620 students attending community colleges in Kentucky, Inman and Mayes (1999) found that first-generation students were more likely to be women, have dependents, and have a lower family income. However, while slightly fewer first-generation students (3% less) were enrolled after their first year, first-generation students who persisted had almost as many hours and had exactly equal GPAs after one year of college compared with non-first-generation students. Pascarella et al. (2004) also reported that despite the disadvantages first-generation students accrued to students by their selection of less selective institutions, first-generation students were able to make similar cognitive and non-cognitive gains as students with highly educated parents. For example, second and third year gains in writing and reading comprehension respectively for first-generation students were about the same compared with students with highly educated parents after controlling for pre-college characteristics. This is evidence that despite initial barriers, over time, first-generation students who continue in college are able to catch up with their peers.

3) What Unique Social and Cultural Issues Do First-Generation,

Low-Income Students Face?

Other researchers have looked at the experience of being a first-generation student living on the border of two cultures – the culture of their family and friends, and the culture of college (London, 1989, 1992, 1996; Rodriguez, 2003). These studies examine the experience of being first-generation through qualitative interviews. Some

researchers highlight the unique social and cultural challenges students face (London, 1992), whereas others identify resilient and supportive factors that help first-generation students overcome barriers (Beegle, 2000; Rodriguez, 2003).

London (1989, 1992, 1996) found that first-generation college students include a diverse population of individuals of different ages, with varied life experiences, and different reasons for attending college. London (1996) distinguished between two types of first-generation students. One type of student does not report being challenged by the college environment. They expect to exceed their forebears in education in order to maintain the same relative socioeconomic position. This has been a result of trends in the job market that call for a more educated work force. Another type of student London described was the first-generation student who does not expect to go to college. For these students, higher education represents movement into the culture of the "other." For many first-generation students, this transition results in the renegotiation of relationships with friends and relatives as they take on the symbols of the college and middle-class culture they become a part of. According to Hsiao (1992), family and friends who have no college experience may be non-supportive or even obstructionists. As first-generation, low-income students enter the college system, they have the added burden of negotiating new relationships and new cultural rules.

Rodriguez (2003) and London (1989) show that family dynamics are of primary importance for younger first-generation, low-income students. London (1989) reports that first-generation students often take on family role assignments such as the martyred parent and the parentified, achieving, or mediating child. For younger first-

generation students, these family role assignments coupled with the normal developmental task of separation during late adolescence and early adulthood create challenges for students who receive the conflicting messages to stay home and to achieve in the outside world. Many first-generation students are “delegated” into a double-bind: they are selected to accomplish unfulfilled missions for their parents, while simultaneously remaining loyal to them. This, according to London (1989), creates ambivalence, and may lead to the possible rejection of students by parents and other family members.

While low-income, first-generation students may be challenged by the movement from one culture to another, some have positive experiences prior to and en route to academic success. Rodriguez (2003) studied individuals who were the first in their family to attend college and went on to lead lives of activism. She identified several “academic-success-promoting factors.” One was being singled-out in a positive way to gain a “special status” in the family, often granted by uneducated family members. This is similar to London’s (1992) account of first-generation students who are “delegated” to achieve in higher education. In another study of first-generation, low-income students who achieved bachelor’s degrees, Beegle (2000) similarly found that 92% of the students she interviewed said they had been treated as special when they were children.

Another academic-success-promoting factor Rodriguez (2003) identified was “positive naming.” Positive naming occurred when someone who cared helped them develop their potential by observing characteristics which they connected to traits in a

profession, vocation or positive lifestyle. This helped individuals develop the confidence that they could be able to succeed. Ascending cross-class identification was also identified as an important success promoting factor. This occurred when students from a low-socioeconomic class were able to gain a deep understanding of what life is like at a higher class through interactions with middle class peers, educators, and community members. Academic-success-promoting factors are useful to inform educators and administrators what first-generation, low-income students need to thrive.

4) What Theoretical Models Inform the Research?

Theoretical Models

There are four types of research on first-generation, low-income students. Early on, quantitative research identified risk factors for large cohorts of students. These studies showed that many first-generation, low-income students come to college with various risk factors, attend college in ways that are less supportive of success, and depart before obtaining their degree. These types of studies explain student leaving behavior at an individual-level. A second wave of qualitative research looked at resiliency among students who had successfully completed college. While these studies gave some attention to the environment in which students thrived, they continued to focus on individual coping strategies. Third, interactive explanatory research showed how particular student characteristics interact with the institutional environment to produce successful (persistence) or unsuccessful (attrition) outcomes. The most well-known interactive theory of attrition is Tinto's (1975) sociological

theory. Finally, some qualitative research has focused on the cultural or social transitions many first-generation, low-income students undergo as they move from a familiar environment to a foreign academic one. Students who make these transitions may have to leave one culture to take on another in order to successfully attain their degree. These studies examine the problem of dropout from a sociocultural, constructivist perspective, considering issues of social class, race and gender. These four types of research are generally guided by different underlying theories.

Risk Factor Theory

Most research on non-traditional populations focuses on risk factors. As previously reviewed, these include both academic deficiencies, such as less rigorous high school preparation, lower initial entrance exam scores, and non-academic challenges, such as lower income, having dependents, attending less prestigious colleges and demographic factors that put them at risk (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Horn & Kojaku, 2004; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). Specific challenges related to low-income, first-generation status include a lack of knowledge about postsecondary education and financial aid, and receiving less support before and during college (Harrell & Forney, 2003). In general, low-income, first-generation students struggle because they 1) start college with certain disadvantages (such as poor pre-college preparation, and less academic ability); 2) attend different types of colleges (such as public, community, and commuter colleges); 3) attend college differently (i.e., part-time, working full-time, living off campus); and 4) struggle while in college in comparison to traditional

students (i.e., have lower GPAs, are less connected to the college campus). These differences culminate to produce poorer performance and lower rates of persistence.

Resiliency Theory

On the flipside of the identification of risk factors, some researchers instead have examined resiliency among first-generation, low-income students. This research parallels movements in social work and psychology such as social work's "strengths-based" orientation and creation of the positive psychology field. A number of researchers have focused on the positive aspects of individuals who made it through college despite having a number of disadvantages (London, 1992; Beegle, 2000; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Accordingly, many first-generation, low-income students were able to "beat the odds" against them by securing support through mentors, utilizing on and off-campus resources, and having personality characteristics that helped them survive their transition into higher education. Their ability to do this, according to some researchers, was based on their ability to be resilient in the face of limiting factors. Resiliency theories focus on protective factors that help individuals cope with adversity. Masten (2001) defines resilience as "a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (p. 230). She notes that defining resilience requires two judgments. Individuals deemed as resilient must have had a significant threat or risk to their development. In other words, there must be a current or past challenge that could impair growth or progress. Having a low socioeconomic status is a common risk factor that threatens optimal human development (Masten, 2001). Having parents with less

education is also a risk factor for not pursuing and succeeding in higher education. Resilience requires that the quality of adaptation or developmental outcome be evaluated as “good” or “okay.” In her review, Masten (2001) noted researchers in the field of resilience question whether resilience should be defined in terms of external adaptation criteria (such as academic achievement), internal criteria (such as psychological well-being) or both. Based on the external criterion of academic achievement, low-income, first-generation students who are able to persist in college against significant odds are thought of by some researchers as resilient. Beegle (2000) and Rodriguez (2003) noted special characteristics and abilities of college graduates from low-income, first-generation backgrounds using a resiliency framework.

However, researchers’ conception of resilience has changed over time. Early studies associated particular characteristics and traits with resiliency (Vaillant, 1993). More recently emphasis has been given to the social context in which resilient factors are promoted. For instance, Krovetz (1999) found that school culture, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher/administrator roles impact the development of resiliency in children. This suggests that resiliency may not be a non-malleable, stable trait. Instead the environment influences resiliency. To go one step further, an extensive review of the literature by Masten (2001) showed that the class of phenomena commonly associated with resilience actually arises from ordinary human adaptive processes. Longitudinal studies also suggest that opportunities and choices during one’s life course play an important role in the life course of many resilient individuals (Cairnes & Cairns, 1994). First-generation, low-income students who are

resilient and who are encouraged within an environmental milieu that supports their resiliency may be most likely to finish their degree. This research is supported by outcome data for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who attribute their success to supportive environments and/or extraordinary opportunities (Beegle, 2000; Crawford, 1999). In a similar fashion to previous studies on fostering resiliency, a recent paper by Green (2006) criticized an over reliance on deficit models applied to minority, low-income, and first generation college students. Instead, she urges a move away from this debilitating deficit towards a student-centered assets model. Creating change through a resiliency or asset model lens could foster more positive solutions and a strengths-base attitude towards these students.

Interaction Theories

Other research explains dropping out in terms of interactions between the student and their campus environment (Tinto, 1975; Metzner & Bean, 1987). The most often cited explanatory model of persistence comes from Vincent Tinto (1975; 1993). According to this sociological theory of student departure, students enter postsecondary institutions with several characteristics and predispositions. As an individual enters college, he/she experiences various interactions with the academic and social systems of the college he/she attends over time. While at their chosen institution, students develop academically and socially, which affects their enrollment decisions. Academically, students' performance in college, also called their level of academic integration, shapes their commitment to the goal of graduating college (goal commitment). Socially, the quality of students' social interaction with peers, teachers,

counselors, and school staff impacts their commitment to the institution. The level of students' academic and social integration refines their intentions and goals which ultimately impacts their decision about dropping out or staying.

Tinto's (1975) model informs several studies of retention. Ishitani and DesJardin's (2002) longitudinal investigation of dropouts using national data from the Beginning Postsecondary Data from 1989 to 1994 drew from Tinto's model to look at how specific factors impacted departure at different time periods in students' degree programs. Similarly, Terenzini et al. (1996) used a modified version of Tinto's model. They hypothesized that the pre-college traits of students would interact with the institutional context, which consisted of coursework and curricular patterns, classroom experiences, and out of class experiences to directly and indirectly impact learning outcomes. They found that first-generation students differed from traditional students in their pre-college characteristics and their college experiences. Furthermore, while first-generation students differed from their traditional peers in both entry characteristics and college experiences, the two groups (first-generation and non-first-generation students) made similar gains in the degree of math and critical thinking skills. Crawford (1999) conducted a large study of the Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOP&S) (for low-income students who are disadvantaged) from 12 different community colleges in California over four years. She found that compared to non-EOP&S students, EOP&S students had a significantly better average persistence rate. Approximately 87% of EOP&S students also had an average GPA of 2.0 or greater, compared to 81% of students who were non-EOP&S. The satisfaction

ratings for the program were also high. Crawford (1999) concluded that disadvantaged and minority students who are significantly involved in the college through academics and social activities were retained, which supports Tinto's (1975) theory that social and academic integration is a key component in student retention. Kennedy, Sheckley, Kehrhahn (2000) used Tinto's model to test whether they could distinguish persisters from non-persisters given certain academic, social, personal, and emotional attributes. They found that persisters were students whose GPAs improved during the year or whose GPAs were consistent with their expectations. Furthermore, students who persisted tended to report they had adapted academically. A large percentage of students who performed poorly academically persisted despite contrary predictions because of their successful social integration and feelings of fit with the institution.

Although Tinto's (1975) model is useful in showing researchers what variables might be important for persistence, researchers have criticized his work for being outdated and not- applicable to non-traditional student populations who may have a harder time being socially integrated into the college system (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Metzner & Bean, 1987). Specifically, Metzner and Bean (1987) maintained that Tinto's model relied too heavily on socialization to explain attrition, particularly for non-traditional students who generally did not integrate fully into the college system. Non-traditional students, according to their model, were students aged 24 or older who resided off-campus, commuted, were part-time, were not engaged in college social life, and were focused on courses, certificates, and degrees. Their model holds that a student's dropout decision is primarily based on four sets of variables: 1)

academic performance; 2) intent to leave, which is influenced by psychological outcomes such as satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress; 3) background and defining variables, primarily high school performance and educational goals; and 4) environmental variables such as finances, hours of employment, and family responsibilities. Bean and Metzner (1987) hypothesized that there were two important compensatory effects that impact students' decisions to persist or leave college. The first effect is from the combination of high academic success and positive psychological outcome from school. When students had low-levels of academic success, non-academic support could compensate. The second effect on decision-making comes from the strength of a student's support from outside college. It was hypothesized that for non-traditional students, environmental support was more related to retention than academic support. Therefore, students with strong environmental support would persist even if their academic support were weak, whereas strong academic support would not compensate for weak environmental support. While Bean and Metzner's (1987) model adds to our understanding of factors, Tinto's (1975) model has more empirical backing.

Some researchers studying non-traditional students have supported Bean and Metzner's (1987) theory. For instance, Ogletree (1992) looked at students leaving Chicago Urban University prior to graduation. A random sample of 100 students was contacted by either a mail or telephone survey. The response rate was 61%. The study used a 54-item question interview/survey instruments that examined the student's satisfaction with the university/student services and the reasons they left school. A

majority of students were satisfied with most university/student services. The lowest satisfactory ratings were for financial aid, faculty advisement, admission services, registration procedures, and faculty competence. Reasons for leaving the school included dissatisfaction with grades, high tuition and fees, family responsibilities, insufficient financial aid, and personal problems. Interestingly, these researchers concluded that dissatisfaction and frustration with university programs and services may have been more the result of the student's personal difficulties and academic unpreparedness than the university. Cunningham (1997) looked at factors influencing attrition and retention at Pennsylvania College of Technology. A survey was conducted for the 437 students who were enrolled in spring 1996 who did not graduate or enroll in Fall 1996. They found that the retention rates of low-income and minority students (not including Asian students) were lower than for whites. About a third of the students sampled said they had achieved their objectives, 17% cited personal or family reasons for leaving, 12% transferred, 10% cited tuition and other costs.

A study by Wlodkowski, Maldin and Campbell (2002) used a mailed exit survey to look at why adult students left after one year of study at two universities (one with an accelerated program and one with a traditional program). For both programs, although specific percentages differed, the top reasons associated with early exit had to do with family and work conflicts. However, two of the top reasons not related to family or work conflicts for adults included a lack of money and the inability to obtain sufficient financial aid. When asked about what could have supported their continued enrollment they mentioned weekend classes, lower fees,

better advising, a higher quality of teaching, and better interaction with their peers. Additionally, many adult students said they didn't feel like they fit in with other students because of their age. These research studies support Bean and Metzger's (1987) model that, beyond academic and social integration, environmental influences also impact attrition, particularly for non-traditional students.

More recent work trying to modify Tinto's (1993) theory has come from cross-cultural research about minority students. Guiffrida (2006) added three new aspects to Tinto's (1993) work. First, he suggests that home social systems may be important throughout college experiences, particularly for minority students, who may get cultural needs met by staying connected to family. This is in contrast with both Tinto's (1993) and London's (1992) work that suggests students must "break away" from their previous social system to become "integrated" into the new university system. Instead, Guiffrida (2006) asserted that new connections with university academic and social systems can be made without losing previous connections. He concluded that both home social systems and college social systems help students' fulfill the cultural needs of minority students. Guiffrida (2006) also used research and theory from cross-cultural psychology to look at how cultural norms, whether collectivist or individualist, impact what motivates students. He proposed that minority students, who might operate with more of a collectivist orientation, may be motivated by non-majority needs (such as relatedness). This, he asserts, could result in these students being at a greater risk for academic under-achievement and attrition. Whereas students who adopt internalized individual cultural norms (such as the valuing of autonomy and

competency) and extrinsic motivation (such as valuing a high GPA and recognition) may be more likely to succeed in a university system that supports individualistic values. Although more research needs to be completed to test Guiffrida's (2006) modifications, his additions help conceptualize additional factors that may be involved in departure decisions for non-traditional students. A schematic of Guiffrida's (2006) modifications of Tinto's model is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Guiffrida's (2006) recommended changes to Vincent Tinto's longitudinal model of student departure.

To conclude, Thayer (2000) has noted that Tinto's (1975; 1993) model, as well as others, have in common the idea that students bring characteristics, experiences, and commitments to college. Students' interactions with the institutional environment serve to form and re-form student attitudes, behavior, and commitments. Thayer suggests that institutional policies that attend to the problem of student entry characteristics will focus on the selection process. Institutions concerned with how the student is supported by the institutional environment after entering college will focus on improving the learning environment, increasing the quality of student support systems, enhancing images of institutional prestige, and raising student expectations for performance and benefit. Thayer holds that the greatest gains for retention efforts will address both the student selection process and the learning environment. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that at 4-year institutions, 76.5% students from first-generation backgrounds continued from their first to second year, whereas 82.2% of students from continuing generation backgrounds persisted. These findings suggest that support for first-generation, low-income students should focus on individual preparation for college and institutional supports once they arrive with more support given early in their academic career.

Postmodern Theories

Postmodern and critical theories underlie qualitative research that looks at how structural barriers must be overcome to go to college. Beegle (2000), for instance, used social class theory formulated by Weber (1946) to examine the perceived challenges and success factors for college graduates raised in poverty. She found

college graduates from poverty backgrounds were able to increase social networks, secure supportive relationships, understand the link between a college degree and a better future, and learn the social and academic behaviors from other college students. These students reported crossing class barriers with help from mentors who were pivotal to their success. Similarly, London (1989, 1992) described how students who left the background in which they were raised struggled to take-on the new academic culture into which they were entering. Their ability to “renegotiate” previous relationships was believed to be pivotal in adapting to college.

Ting and Bryant (2001) found that cultural variables enhanced predictive models of college performance and retention for Native American students. The study found that while high school GPA was a significant indicator for academic success in the first year of college, the level of acculturation of the Native Americans also was a significant factor in predicting academic performance and retention. Wallace and Able (1997) interviewed 20 at risk students from various college support programs. Researchers found that a primary role of mentors was to help students cross cultural borders. Cultural barriers students often face stem from social class and ethnic divisions in our society that assume higher education is reserved for certain segments of our society.

Other qualitative researchers use sociological concepts of social and cultural capital to describe how knowledge about college and the value placed on obtaining a college education, influence college enrollment decisions (McDonough, 1997 in Perna 2000, Beegle, 2000). Like human capital and physical capital, social and cultural

capital are resources that may be invested to enhance profitability (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and productivity (Coleman, 1988) and to facilitate upward mobility (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Social capital consists of information-sharing channels and networks, social norms, values and expected behaviors (Coleman, 1988). Cultural capital is the system of factors derived from one's parents that defines an individual's class status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The definition of social and cultural capital as applied to first-generation, low-income students reveals that as students move from their lower-income social class into a middle social class environment, they make connections with resources, individuals, and social networks that create opportunities for upward social mobility. Conversely, when low-income, first-generation students are disconnected from middle class social networks, they cannot acquire the benefits afforded by membership in this group.

In a qualitative study of educational attainment among African American and Mexican American valedictorians, Arnold (1993) found that racial, class, and gendered social structures and cultural norms restricted the educational attainment of minority students he interviewed. Saunders and Serna (2004) identified three types of students. Students who were able to create new networks (e.g., increase their social capital) and maintain old ones were the most successful, followed by students who were able to rely on old networks, but struggled creating new ones. Those who chose not to maintain old networks and could not secure new ones had academic and personal problems. In addition, a review by Dika and Singh (2002) examined the relationship between social capital and educational achievement. In the majority of

studies they reviewed, social capital was positively correlated with students' achievement. The ability of first-generation, low-income students to thrive in college may depend on how well they are able to join the academic culture and/or secure a supportive network.

5) What Do We Still Need to Know?

Researchers know from qualitative studies that the cultural context of college going experiences is of particular relevance for first-generation, low-income students who cross class and for some racial barriers to finish college. This study does two things to advance current research. First, it seeks to add to our understanding about the specific population of first-generation, low-income students, for whom retention efforts are most needed. Second, unlike previous studies, this research asks students in an open-ended way what factors were most salient in making the decision to leave college, and subsequently, what does leaving college mean to them? Knowing all of the risk factors in the world still does not provide a complete understanding of phenomenon of leaving college. For that, we must go to the students for answers.

Although research has provided academicians and university administrators with several ideas about what variables are associated with college attrition, such as individual demographic factors, certain patterns of enrollment and attendance, and a lack of social and academic integration, there is still little information about the stories of those who leave. Some studies, as previously mentioned, do look at leaving behavior, however, these are generally large, quantitative studies that use closed-ended questionnaires and do not focus specifically on the challenges for low-income, first-

generation students (Cunningham, 1997; Lee, 1996; Ogletree, 1992; Theeuwes, 2006; Wlodkowski, Maldin & Campbell, 2002). Most qualitative studies, on the other hand, have interviewed first-generation, low-income students while they were attending college (London, 1992; 1996; Richardson & Skinner, 1992) or after successful completion of their degree (Beegle, 2000; Rodriguez, 2003). While success stories have been often researched, the voices of those who do not make it have been left out of the discourse on this topic. Ironically, these are perhaps the most important voices to hear if targeted institutional improvements are going to be made. The survivors who make it against the odds will continue to persist, but what about students who come to college with the greatest intention of earning a degree and leave empty handed? What was their process and is it preventable? Very little research has given voice to these underrepresented individuals. Specifically, there was only one dissertation in which the researcher specifically intended to do qualitative work with students who had dropped out.

Dropout decisions vary across types of campuses and over time as the student body changes. Therefore, the focus of this research was to examine individuals who are making the decision to drop out or to stay, the process of doing so, and what primary factors are involved in their decision within the context of their college campus. What were their journeys as they decided to go to college and what happens after they got there? Can aspects of Tinto's (1975) model still be applied to low-income, first-generation students attending an urban college? What are the messages that students get about higher education and what are the messages they get about

leaving? Are cultural, academic, social or psychological aspects influencing their decisions about staying or leaving? How are they connected or disconnected from the institution? What are the stories that students tell themselves about leaving or staying?

Summers (2003) reviewed attrition research at community colleges. She found that most studies focus on a single variable or a set of variables and their relationships with student attrition. She called for more qualitative research in order to understand the reasons, intentions and motivations behind overt behaviors. Qualitative studies of attrition may be more helpful in uncovering these intrapsychic aspects of leaving behavior. Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Campbell (2002) also noted that little has been done to improve the success rate of adult students because little information is available about why these students choose not to persist. With such a large percentage of individuals failing to graduate, a comprehensive look at this problem directly tied to the students themselves is important. It may be that no university can be all things to all people and therefore attrition is a necessary evil of higher education, however currently, since we are not asking this population in particular, we have no way of knowing this. London (1996) also called for a look into the retention of first-generation students as he concluded

There are no categories in attrition statistics for the number of students who leave campus because they are unprepared to negotiate such a maze of uncertainties [the renegotiation of relationships with family, friends and themselves that many first-generation students must face] (p.13).

Unlike previous quantitative studies on first-generation students, the aim of this study is to take more than a snapshot picture of students' lives, and identify more than a risk factor or two. It is not enough to assume that first-generation, low-income

students simply lack the essential skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college, or experience certain barriers that make life difficult for them. This is too simplistic, because lives cannot be understood separate from the rich contexts. Some researchers concur and, in attempts to arrive at a deeper understanding of first-generation students, have drawn on qualitative methods (London, 1992; Rodriguez, 2003). Recent dissertations on this topic have also favored the use of qualitative methods (Barrington, 2004; Calkins, 2005; Skulley, 2004).

Common features associated with qualitative work include an emphasis on naturally occurring events in the field, richness and holism that nest phenomena in context and illuminate the complexity of real life events, and dedication to data collection that occurs over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These qualities make qualitative research designs powerful in uncovering the meanings individuals give to events in their lives (van Manen, 1977). The purpose of this research is to describe and understand the perspectives of first-generation, low-income college students and the decisions they make about their education. Only through in-depth engagement with these students can the educational life paths and meanings they ascribe to events in their education be fully understood.

Research Questions

We are guided and shaped by not only what has objectively happened to us, but also what we think about what has happened to us. This meaning building process is evident in the stories first-generation, low-income students tell us about their lives.

This study will address the problem of attrition among first generation, low-income students with the following research questions:

- 1) How do first-generation, low-income college students describe their educational journey through their first year of college?
- 2) What meaning do first-generation, low-income students make of their experiences in college and how do these meanings propel them to make particular educational decisions about their future?
- 3) What are the reasons some first-generation, low-income students give for leaving college after their first year?
- 4) Are there any identifiable differences between the stories told by first-generation students who continue college after their first year and those who do not?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Narrative Research

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) define narrative research as any study that uses or analyzes narrative material. Types of narrative research include life histories, biographical studies, oral histories and narrative inquiry (Riessman, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002). The term “narrative” has been defined in a vast number of ways by researchers. Polkinghorne (1995), for instance, distinguished between narrative as prosaic discourse and narrative as story. Narrative as prosaic discourse refers generally to discourse that consists of complete sentences linked into a coherent and integrated statement; it includes most forms of natural speech. Narrative as story, is a specific type of discourse where events and actions are brought together by a plot. In the context of narrative research, most investigators talk about narratives as having storylike features, similar to Polkinghorne’s latter definition.

Chase (2005) reported that narrative researchers employ research terms with flexible meanings, which includes the term “narrative” itself. She stated that narratives can take one of three forms: a short topical story about a particular event and specific characters, an extended story about a significant aspect of one’s life, or a narrative about one’s entire life. In addition to content, researchers have also defined narratives by their component parts. For example, Merriam noted that all narratives refer to the study of “first person accounts of experiences that are in story format having a

beginning, middle, and end” (2000: 286). Other researchers stress temporal order in their definition. Riessman (1993) noted variation among researchers’ definitions of narrative in terms of temporal aspects. Most restrictive, she said, was Labov and Waletzky (1967) who suggested that narratives follow a chronological order in which events move linearly through time. Riessman (1993) argued their definition was biased towards a Western, white, middle-class idea which assumed time moves forward in a linear fashion. She contrasted Labov and Waletzky’s definition with Young (1987) who argued that events are sequentially ordered in narratives, but may not be necessarily chronological, and Michaels (1981) who proposed that some narratives are actually sequenced thematically, rather than across the dimension of time. In general, most scholars treat narratives as distinct units which have clear beginnings and endings that are detachable from surrounding discourse (Riessman, 1993). In other words, narratives, unlike other forms of discourse, are both ordered and sequential (Riessman, 2002).

Narrative can also refer to a family of methodologies. For example, Clandinin and Connelly (1990) noted that narrative refers to both the structured quality of experience to be studied or story, and the patterns of inquiry for studying the story. In this way, narrative is both phenomenon and method. Similarly, Polkinghorne (1995) distinguished between two types of narrative inquiry. The analysis of narratives describes a research method in which the data consist of narratives or stories, and the analysis produces paradigmatic typologies or categories. He contrasted this with

narrative analysis in which data consisting of actions, events, and happenings, is used to produce stories (e.g., biographies, histories, case studies).

This study asked participants for their educational histories from which emerged themes and meanings, both within and between groups of students, in order to more fully understand the educational journeys of first-generation, low-income students. In this way, this was a study of narratives. I asked students for their personal educational stories to purposefully privilege their voice and deeply understand how they made decisions because I believe that higher education researchers have historically made assumptions about why students continue or leave institutions based on simplistic demographic data. I asked students to take me through their lives in a sequentially time-oriented fashion. I thought that by guiding me across their lives linearly, I would be able to understand them now, given the context of their unfolded past.

Analytic Typologies

Narrative researchers classify types of analytic strategies in various ways. Merriam (2002) reported that the three most common methodological strategies used for analyzing narratives include biographical, psychological and linguistic approaches. In the biographical approach, stories are analyzed in terms of issues such as gender and race, family of origin, life events, relationships, and turning point experiences (Denzin, 1989). A holistic approach that looks more at the personal experiences of individuals, in terms of their thoughts, motivations, and feelings they use to make meaning of their life, is known as a psychological approach (Rossiter, 1999).

Linguistic approaches, such as those utilized by Gee (1991) and Labov (1982), tend to focus on the linguistic construction of the stories interviewees create.

The most common analytic strategy for narrative researchers is to focus on meaning or content. Some researchers tend to be more interested in how something is communicated and focus on how discourse is structured. A third category of narrative research concerns the social context in which narratives are performed (Mishler, 1995). These researchers may focus on how individuals “do narratives” in everyday life or be more inclined to examine the function of narratives in transforming culture and social movements.

Finally, Lieblich et al. (1998) held that analytic strategies could be best described in terms of a four-dimensional matrix of four types of narrative research: holistic-content, holistic-form, categorical-content, and categorical form. The first pole, holistic versus categorical, refers to the unit of analysis the researcher is working with. The second pole refers to what part of a text is attended to, the content or form. The first pole asks how the narrative will be analyzed and the second pole asks what in the narrative will be analyzed. Lieblich et al. (1998) described specific examples of each type of analysis given the analytic strategy and suggested that the method of analysis should be ultimately guided by the research questions.

For this study, students were asked for their educational histories and with attention to their decision making processes. Students gave a biographical account including their family origins, cultural contexts, educational events and turning points in regard to their educational life stories. In addition, some psychological factors were

also examined such as their motivations and how they coped throughout various transitions in their lives. Obtaining educational narratives using these biographical and psychological approaches helped capture rich meaning leading to an understanding of how students moved through their lives and made educational decisions along the way.

Why Use Narrative Methods?

Narrative analysis is well-suited for this research for several reasons. First, individuals give meaning to their lived experience and construct identities through the creation and telling of life stories (Berger & Quinney, 2004; Riessman, 1993). For example, a frequent theme was what it meant to be the first person in one's family to go to college. The stories we tell about our lives reveal how we see ourselves in relation to the world around us. Personal narratives let the researcher construct the world as respondents see it. When attempting to understand how an individual experiences their life and self, narrative practices are a powerful tool.

Another important reason for narrative methods is that, unlike quantitative studies that attempt to isolate independent variables, narrative work illuminates complex interactions and intersections between race, class, gender, and other multiple identities. This is helpful to more fully understand the messy and complex aspects of human behavior. Since many first-generation, low-income students cross both race and class barriers in their entry to higher education, narrative inquiry seemed suitable to address their multifaceted issues. Narrative research strategies preserve the meaning of experience in context. Existential questions such as: 1) Where should I go in my

life? and 2) Who am I? are embedded within the educational stories of students' journeys. How these stories are conveyed shed light on the process of sorting out these larger life questions. Since events are not divorced from the rich blanket that surrounds individual lives, narrative work preserves real world complexity.

Sampling Strategy

Study participants were obtained from a previously assembled sample of first-generation, low-income freshman-level (students having less than 45 credits) degree seeking, students between 18-30 years of age who were enrolled at Northwestern Urban University in the Fall 2005-Spring 2006 school year and received a federal student aid grant. In this study, a first-generation student was defined as an individual for whom neither parent had completed a 4-year college degree and "parents" were considered any primary caregiver(s) the student had identified as their parent(s). The pool from which participants were selected came from a previous study that defined "first generation student" by the USA Government's Educational Opportunities Program definition of those with neither parent having completed a four-year college degree in the US by the time that student entered college.

Specifically, a list of students with the above mentioned criteria was obtained from a special program at Northwestern Urban University for first generation students. The program was a federally funded research project that offered support to new freshman level, first-generation, grant-receiving students. The year-long program was designed to help this population of students respond competently to their professors' expectations and learn successful student strategies. In the Fall term of 2005, eligible

students were assigned to one of three treatment groups. One group received mentoring services and a web-based student resource. The second treatment group received only the web-based resource, and a control group did not receive any services from the program for first-generation students.

This research drew participants from the control group who attended NWUU during Fall 2005 through Spring 2006 and did not receive any special services from the special program for first-generation students. From this list of students the institutional research office at Northwestern Urban University sent 135 letters inviting students to participate in this research project (see Appendix A). Potential research participants were invited to call the primary researcher to learn more about the research project and schedule an appointment for an interview. Twenty-two student interviews were conducted with 11 continuously enrolled students and 11 students who attended NWUU from Fall 2005-Spring 2006 academic school year, but did not return Fall 2006. Interviews were conducted over the Fall 2006 and Winter 2007 quarters. All of the participants were informed about the nature of the study (see Appendix B). The probability of this second group of students having left NWUU purely due to academic concerns was thought to be somewhat low as they would have experienced one full year of higher education before deciding to leave. So, the entire sample consists of a mix with half appearing to be “persisters” and half possibly being “leavers.”

Description of Northwestern Urban University

The motto of Northwestern Urban University (NWUU) is “Let Knowledge Serve the City.” NWUU’s mission is to “enhance the intellectual, social, cultural and economic qualities of urban life” by providing access throughout the life span to a quality liberal education for undergraduates and an appropriate array of professional and graduate programs especially relevant to metropolitan areas. At the commencement of this study, NWUU served approximately 22,000 students on its main campus with approximately 17,000 students at the undergraduate level. The students interviewed in this study belonged to a freshman class numbering approximately 1,500. Their freshman entering class was 47.2% male and 52.8% female with 62.5% white, non-Hispanic students, 29% students of color/international students, and 8.5% students who declined to respond. The average age of an entering freshman was 19. Northwestern Urban University is generally regarded as a commuter institution, however, in recent years there has been a small expansion of various types of student housing and student dorms. During the year students were interviewed, a total of 230 first year students lived in various types of on-campus housing.

Northwestern Urban University has a unique general education curriculum for undergraduates, with tightly structured clusters of courses with an interdisciplinary thematic approach. In the first year, students take a year-long course that introduces them to different modes of inquiry and attempts to prepare them for advanced classes and their major. Freshman general education courses are taught by a faculty team and each faculty member is paired with an upper division student or a peer mentor who

leads smaller inquiry sessions for students. Peer mentors participate in the main faculty-led class sessions and lead a mentored general education co-requisite course. During the mentoring sessions, students learn basic computer, research and writing skills. Students take sophomore-level gateway courses, which lead into a thematically linked, interdisciplinary cluster of upper-division courses. After taking three upper division courses in a cluster, students complete their undergraduate general education requirements with a senior capstone course which is a community-based learning opportunity for students that is linked with classroom instruction. In addition, NWUU undergraduates complete a major and some elective classes.

Instruments

Qualitative interviewing captures how people understand the world in which they live and the culture they create (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This makes personal interviews a good strategy for collecting student stories. An in-depth, semi-structured interview format was chosen so that the researcher and participant were able to build rapport and develop trust. The interview guide contained open-ended questions asking participants to describe particular times in their lives including now, growing up, deciding to attend college, life in college and projected future (see Appendix C).

Data were transcribed verbatim from audio-recordings of interviews. Ochs (1979) noted that theory should drive decisions about the detail of transcription. Since the analysis of text was primarily content driven, the transcription of the data included pauses, non-lexicals, and emphasized words, but false starts and the length of time between pauses was ignored. Probes were used to ensure thorough coverage of the

potential factors that could be involved in the educational lives of first-generation students.

Data Analysis

Most important about narrative analysis is that there is not just one way to do it. As Elliot (2005) surmised "...there is no standard approach or list of procedures that is generally recognized as representing the narrative method of analysis" (p. 36). While it makes narrative research flexible and creative, it is frustrating, because there is no standard practice for doing this type of work. Although narrative methods can be viewed and applied through different paradigmatic lenses, commonly narrative work falls within an interpretive framework (Denzin, 1989; Riessman, 1993). An interpretive paradigm views "reality" as socially constructed (Rodwell, 1998). Accordingly, subjectivity is inherent in any research undertaking that is conducted in relation to people or the social world relationships are complex and fluid (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Interviewees who tell their stories to researchers construct their life. In this way, the researcher acts as the primary tool for uncovering the created lives of their participants. The text in this case becomes the source of entry into the world of others. Analysis is an inductive process. The current work draws from methods used by several narrative researchers and is guided by the research questions asked in this study.

Each analytic strategy provides a particular lens through which narratives are viewed and dissected. The primary goal of this study is to understand "what" is happening in the lives of students as well as the context that surrounds decision points

in their lives. A second goal is to consider “how” first-generation students give meaning to experience and construct educational stories. An analytic framework appropriate to these goals would be capable of illuminating both the content and form of students’ stories.

Given these aims, a few analytic techniques were utilized to uncover how students’ lives move across time and what happened on their journey. Specifically, key themes uncovered by a thematic analysis were examined to determine the most salient issues facing first-generation students. Second, a data display, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) was constructed for each story. The purpose of the data displays was to look at patterns within and across stories. Finally, a story summary informed by Denzin’s (1989) biographical method and Vegdahl’s (2002) work was constructed for each participant to: 1) reduce the large amounts of data into manageable components, 2) highlight the most relevant text in discovering answers to research questions, 3) preserve the contextual elements of student stories in a holistic way, and 4) make it easier to see similarities and difference among cases. These summaries were used as data to answer research questions. Each analysis technique is described in detail.

Thematic Analysis

After several close readings of the interview transcripts, open coding procedures, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), were performed for the 22 interviews using Atlas.TI 5.2 Software. Open coding consisted of naming and categorizing phenomena through a close reading of

the data. A list of descriptive codes which emerged during a pilot study of first-generation, low-income students was used as a starting point for coding categories. Additional codes were added as they emerged from the data. These codes labeled events, processes, time periods, relationships, theoretical concepts from the literature and important quotes within the stories. Data were coded using a line-by-line technique in a constant comparative method where appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The process of constant comparison is one of the central tools used to develop codes. In this procedure, as incidents are noted and compared against other incidents for similarities and differences. This allows incidents to be grouped as well as differentiated. Though I attempted to group codes under larger thematic categories, this became challenging because codes seemed to span different time periods of the individual's life and therefore could not be easily grouped under specific themes or categories within a distinct period of time. In addition, the discrete coding procedures seemed to remove important sequential relationships and holistic content. I followed Vegdahl (2002), who started her narrative study of women leaving welfare with open-coding, but she abandoned the technique after deciding the method failed to provide a holistic understanding of women's stories. In this study, coding for all the interviews was completed as a way to both become familiar with the data and identify important descriptions of the text. Although getting to higher levels of abstraction from using a coding technique was not fruitful, the coding was helpful in identifying what topics students' stories included.

After attempting to bring codes together under coherent themes, I examined the list of code frequencies. It became apparent that three primary descriptive codes were most frequently talked about within the interviews. These were the codes of “financial”, “family relationships”, and the more abstract code of “self.” In order to check whether students consistently talked about these topics most frequently each interview was examined for their first, second and third most frequent descriptive codes. Even when looking across participants, these three codes were consistently discussed most often. Hypothesizing that students talked most about what was important to their story, quotations under these coded topics were extracted and examined for common and divergent themes among and across stories. From emerging themes discovered within text, it was possible to categorize student stories and show how themes related to student experiences.

Analysis of Holistic Form

While thematic analysis is helpful in illuminating key events, environments, attributions, and evaluations, the primary advantage of narrative work, unlike other qualitative methods, is the ability to look at interview data holistically within the context of an individual’s life story. In order to get a more complete sense of the data, a thematic analysis was only a starting point. This study also attempted to build up from decontextualized themes in order to examine how individuals constructed their story and look at how their life experiences over time affected their future behaviors and beliefs.

A useful analytic technique, discovered during pilot interviews, was to build a within-case data display for each participant (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It was hypothesized that construction of data displays would help to look at the life course of each interviewee and extract similarities and differences between groups. By looking at the pictorial representation, an attempt to look over time and/or topically what occurred within individual's educational course was made. The first step of this process was to break apart life events and organize them chronologically. While some researchers (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004) have chosen to be more open-ended and ask interviewees in one sentence to give their story (the beginning and end points are then selected by the interviewee), some researchers have imposed more structured questions (Vegdahl, 2002) and others have asked for specific information for individuals to story their life into chapters, significant scenes, high and low points, characters, etc. (McAdams & Bowman, 2001; Sanderson & McKeough, 2005).

A more structured approach was chosen for this study, in order to lead interviewees to purposefully reflect on time periods relevant for understanding educational trajectories. These time periods were guided by literature on first-generation students and chosen to obtain a full account of educational histories. A within-data time-ordered matrix display for each of the 22 students was created to help recognize patterns, themes and relationships between variables over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data displays that were created consisted of grid displays with columns labeled Early Experiences, High School, Before NWUU, During NWUU, Current/After NWUU, Future, Follow-Up (i.e., one year post-interview) and rows

consisting of the topics of Social Environment, Material/Physical Environment, Cultural Influences, Academic Experiences, Behavior Towards Education, Attitude Towards Education, Financial Aspects, Aspects of Self, Relational/Family Environment, and Aspirations. This technique was moderately helpful in exploring the data. Given the number of participants and the large amount of data it was difficult to develop systematic findings across cases. However, the technique allowed me to identify pertinent topics.

In thinking more carefully about analyzing data through a narrative framework, instead of using data displays, a timeline trajectory was constructed for each individual to more easily identify life events sequentially over time (see Appendix D).

Trajectories were built using events that happened in the participants' life and the context in which these events were encased. From the life stories I logged key events and contextual factors in text boxes and arranged along a time sequence. Quotations were extracted from interviews within the time periods selected during the data display procedure and arranged sequentially along the dimension of time. Then, key events and contextual factors were summarized on individual text boxes and arranged along a trajectory with the horizontal axis being time and the vertical access representing a student's movement towards the highest level of education. Arrows representing a timeline linked each event or contextual factor(s) over time and were positioned either up or down depending on whether the event or factor impacted the students' path towards the highest level of education. If the event or factor moved toward the highest level of educational aspiration, then the arrow was pointed up and

if the student moved away from or towards a lower level of educational aspiration, the arrow was pointed downward. The degree to which the arrow sloped up or down was determined through a combination of the emphasis the student placed on the event in driving them towards or away from their original aspiration, and the researcher's understanding of how much the event impacted the students' forward motion through college. When contextual factors did not significantly drive the student in one direction or the other, but seemed to be important for understanding the students' journey, textboxes were turned upright and "hovered" over the timeline at the period of when the contextual information was relevant. From this analysis, turning points and the overall trajectory movements of students' journeys could be observed, and major events driving students towards and away from college were captured. Four trajectory patterns emerged. These trajectories were used as a guide to write abstractions of cases.

Analysis of Form and Content

A common step in the process of analyzing narratives is to formulate an extraction of each case (Denzin, 1989; Lieblich et al., 1998; Vegdahl, 2002; Ginsburg, 1989). By reducing long interviews into manageable data sources, researchers can examine the form and content of individual stories. This helps researchers explore individual stories and pull out the most relevant and salient data. Like the previous method described, it also is useful for looking at similarities among and across cases. Individual story summaries can also be used to highlight "prototypical" cases (Ginsburg, 1989). How investigators utilize this technique is important to understand.

In Denzin's (1989) interpretive biographical method, the first step is selecting an objective set of experiences in the participant's life that is connected to various life-course stages (i.e. childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, etc.) or life-course experiences (i.e. birth, school, marriage, etc.). Next, contextual information is gathered during a narrative interview (or other strategy) that asks the respondent to provide a story about his/her life, expanding on various sections to theorize about past events. These life narratives or stories are carefully read and interpreted. Then, narrative segments and categories within the interview-story are isolated. Patterns of meaning and experience are sought and the individual's biography is reconstructed including contextual factors that have shaped his or her life. An analytic abstraction of the case is written that focuses on: 1) the structural processes in the subject's life, 2) theories that relate to these life experiences, and 3) the unique and general features of the life. This process is repeated successively for every case and comparisons between cases are made. Finally, theoretical generalizations can be developed.

Similarly, Lieblich et al's (1998) discussion of holistic-content analysis creates an abstraction of an interviewee's story using an interpretive method which helps the researcher understand the story in a holistic manner. Their process consists of a series of steps including: 1) reading the material several times until a pattern or foci of the story emerges, 2) writing initial and global impressions of the case, noting exceptions to the general impression and unusual features of the stories, 3) deciding on a special focus of content or themes that is followed throughout the story, which is generally distinguished by repetitions that come up in the interviewee's story, 4) colored

markers are then used to mark the various themes in the story, reading separately and repeatedly for each one, 5) each theme is tracked throughout the story and conclusions are drawn. Special attention is given to where themes appear for the first and last times, the transitions between themes, the context for each theme, and their relative salience in the text. In this method, the researcher pays special attention to episodes that contradict the theme in terms of content, mood or evaluation by the teller.

Vegdahl (2002) also reduced her qualitative interviews to summaries. She summarized the stories by women about how they got off welfare by asking investigative questions of her data such as: 1) what was the point of the story, 2) what were the primary repetitions, 3) what personal strengths are revealed in the story, etc. These narrative questions helped her to compare stories using common criteria and to look at stories as a whole. Going back to all the notes she had used in the research process, along with the women's interview, and the answers to her narrative questions, she was able to create a concise 3-4 page summary of stories that had some consistency. With her constructed story summaries, she was able to answer her initial research questions with data from women's stories.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of first-generation, low-income students over time through their eyes, and to examine how they make sense of their educational experiences. The most appropriate method would illuminate both the sequence of events, contextual information around their experiences, and the meaning they attribute to experiences. Denzin (1989), Lieblich et al. (1998) and Veghdal (2002) all have in common the method of attempting to get an

abstraction of the case and then looking through the cases for similarities and differences. Denzin (1989) is particularly attuned to contextual social factors in his analysis style, whereas both Lieblich et al. (1998) and Veghdal (2002) take a more personalized approach, describing the individual within his/her immediate social world. Ginsburg (1989), an anthropologist, illuminates how women's narratives are shaped by cultural, political, and historical events during the course of participants' lives. Similarly, in Riessman's (1990) study about divorce narratives, she acknowledges the idea that narratives collected about divorce at any other time period would have been dramatically different.

This study followed Veghdal's (2002) method of asking interrogative questions of the text. This process was abandoned in favor of condensing stories using a timeline oriented approach in order to further reduce large amounts of data. Key events were summarized with careful attention paid to the students' immediate relationships, environment, and any relevant larger context (e.g. ethnicity, social class, culture) evidenced in students' stories using Denzin's (1989) work as a guide. Finally, individual stories were organized systematically into narrative segments: 1) title of educational story given by student with explanation; 2) current context of the interviewee and early background; 3) how and why students choose to attend NWUU; 4) student experiences at NWUU; 5) the student's process of leaving NWUU (if applicable); 6) aspirations and the student's plan in two years; and 7) short follow-up one year after the interview. These summaries were constructed primarily by

paraphrasing what interviewees said and bringing in short quotes in when possible while valuing conciseness.

The next step was to frame what was learned in terms of the research questions. The research questions appeared to succinctly pull together the results from the various analytic techniques and highlight specific findings. Research questions were answered by thinking about each of the 22 stories that had been written. In addition, a reflective log was helpful in thinking deeply about how the questions could be answered. Key quotations from student stories were also used to illustrate points that were made in drawing answers to the research questions together.

The final results of the analysis included several products: 1) 22 condensed individual stories, 2) 22 educational trajectories, 3) discussion of the three most frequent codes, and 4) answers to research questions drawn from the 22 stories. The aim of analyzing and presenting students' stories in a variety of ways was to help readers more fully understand the strengths, weaknesses and barriers for first-generation, low-income students as they move through their lives.

Quality Control Assurances

Several measures were taken to assure the quality of the research. While good quantitative studies ensure internal and external validity, reliability and generalizability (Thayer, 2001), qualitative researchers must judge the rigor and trustworthiness of their work through alternative means. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have noted several procedures to check the quality of qualitative work. These include considering a study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In

this study, the rigor-checking methods included member checking, triangulation interviewees, and peer review. In addition, both a reflective journal and an analytic log were kept for the purpose of creating an audit trail detailing analytic decisions that were made and reflections throughout the study. An external auditor was used who was given a selection of raw interview data, 22 individual summarized student stories, the qualitatively coded interviews and coding scheme, the reflective journal and analytic log, the thematic analysis, the 22 individual trajectories, and the results of the four research questions. These procedures helped ensure that the information provided by students was accurately portrayed and able to be confirmed by experts, and that the results of the study were credible and dependable given the analytic procedures described and applied to the data.

Member Checking

For the member checking process, all students were sent both their transcribed interview and a summary of their story. They were asked to make comments, suggestions, corrections, and elaborations given their data. Although data were given to all of the participants, a more extensive review of the data and member checking procedure was completed with a theoretically selected sample of six interviewees who were willing to meet again and go over the results from their data in a detailed fashion in person. This process was enjoyable and revealing. Students, for the most part, made slight revisions to their stories and agreed with the findings that were supplied to them. Most of the time, interviewees changed small details about their stories or revised the sequence of events from what I had understood them to be. More illuminating than the

verification of the accuracy of their stories was the way the stories became more richly couched in the students' lives over time. Not only were students able to see what became of their words, but they were able to reflect on what they said over a year ago and assess how their experiences, perceptions and realizations had changed. For example, one student who had left college and not returned had talked about experiencing physical pain during her interview a year earlier. At that time when she was asked about her future aspirations, she focused on the near future. She talked about wanting to get a job with insurance, with later plans to go back to college. She had lived with a genetic physical problem that caused her pain for years and had dealt with being underinsured for most of her life. In our member checking meeting, she said that it was "spooky" to read her words, because it turned out that the pain she talked about in our interview a year ago was actually the slow development of a bone cancer. Luckily, she had been able to move on and get a job with benefits after the diagnosis, although the job was still a lower-wage service sector position. She was also hopeful about re-starting college the next academic year, but had to prioritize her health in the near future.

It appeared as though students who came back for the detailed member checking process enjoyed seeing their growth and felt interested in the study in general. Students were grateful that the study had been done and that they could be a part of the process. This increased enthusiasm was found across the participants and appeared to have resulted from seeing their story in the larger context of the research process. The results of the member checking process revealed that most students had

kept going forward in whatever way made sense to them. One student in the study who had remained at NWUU from the time of her initial interview to the follow-up was making plans to leave in order to go to a different university that had some better opportunities for her athletic career. Most students were on the same course at the time of the year follow-up, with some shifting between schools. Few path changes occurred for students between the time of the year follow-up and the member checking procedure. When students suggested minor revisions of their stories, the member checking process strengthened the findings.

The most challenging part of the member checking process was sharing my interpretations with participants when these interpretations could have been viewed as unfavorable. Despite my hesitancy, students agreed with my perceptions. This showed that the assessment I gave of their data was, at a minimum, fair and accurate or trustworthy. Although an extensive, in-depth member checking process was not completed with every single participant, the checks that were done ensured qualitative credibility for the procedures I used to arrive at conclusions. With these participants, three substantial contacts were made across more than a year. During this time their data were clarified, given back, revised at their suggestion, and discussed between us. This process supported the reliability or dependability of the research over time and also supplied me with the ability to provide a “thick” description of the research context as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Triangulation Interviews

Another procedure to increase trustworthiness of the data in this study was the utilization of triangulation interviews of university staff knowledgeable on the subject of first-generation, low-income students. Specifically, the Director of the university's specialized support program for first-generation students, the Program Manager of that program, the Director of Undergraduate Advising and Support Center, the Director of Student Support Services Educational Opportunity Program, and the Director of Institutional Research and Planning were all approached for interviews (see interview guide in Appendix E). The information collected from these experts about their experiences with first-generation students added credibility to the findings revealed from students.

The triangulation interviews were helpful in corroborating the information present in the student interviews. Experts were able to identify both the strengths and the struggles that first generation, low-income students experienced at Northwestern Urban University. Generally, triangulation interviews confirmed the issues that students talked about in their interviews. Almost all of the triangulation interviewees had some knowledge based on experiences working directly with first-generation, low-income students. One interviewee worked with students who struggled academically and therefore couldn't tell which students may have been first-generation, low-income, but knew that some of the students she had worked with fit into that demographic category. In addition to confirming what students had said, expert university staff and faculty also provided information that students could not.

Differences between the triangulation interviews and the students' interviews emerged as a result of the experts' wider lens.

Peer Review

Several peers reviewed the data and the study's findings throughout the process of the study. Peer group presentations were made as the data were being both collected and analyzed. At various times throughout the year, excerpts of data along with the analytic strategies utilized in the study and findings were presented to a group of doctoral students in a dissertation research study group. These students asked questions, gave feedback and provided their insights as what to do next throughout the research process. This provided checks and balances about whether my conclusions made sense and whether the analytic strategies fit the theoretical paradigm of qualitative research through a narrative lens. Often, this group was used to provide corrective feedback as I went from one step to the next.

Another peer checking procedure included working independently with an expert on qualitative research who had done focus groups with first-generation, low-income college students. This was very helpful in terms of providing instruction on the analytic techniques that I tried and modified through the process. This support helped me locate relevant analytic procedural directions and also served as valuable technical support for using Atlas.TI 5.2. He also spent time looking at the codes that I was creating and the quotations under the most frequently identified codes. This peer was able to come up with questions about why I was finding what I had found and was invaluable with helping me to rise up from one level of analysis to the next by

suggesting the abandoning of analytic procedures that did not seem to move the project forward.

Finally, several members of my dissertation committee, although not peers, regularly looked at my work. They gave analytical instruction and were helpful in providing specific feedback on findings that emerged. During the analysis period I wrote up conclusions regularly about what I had found and various members of my committee gave editing and analytic feedback. This process shaped the work and also provided a mechanism for insuring the quality of the work as I continued writing.

Audit Check

The auditor was chosen based on her ability to provide an honest and rigorously detailed audit of the current study. She also was comfortable in the area of qualitative research and had worked on several qualitative projects. The auditor also had a good understanding of narrative methods and experience in coding procedures. Originally, for the audit check I supplied the auditor with all of the 22 raw interviews, the 22 individual summarized student stories, the 22 qualitatively coded interviews and the overall coding scheme, the reflective journal and analytic log, the thematic analysis, the 22 individual trajectories, and the results of the four research questions. The auditor starting piecing together my line of inquiry starting from the individual interviews to the answering of the research questions. After the first interview was completed, it was decided a portion of interviews selected by her would be audited in totality and then the individual trajectories along with the study results of the entire

study would be read. This decision was made in order to be able to do a thorough check of the data, but still be able to finish the process in a timely fashion.

The auditor supplied useful feedback at every point in the analysis. She gave comments related to the interviewing technique to the structure of the results section. Generally, she had very positive comments about the study and believed that the study was done in a thorough, rigorous and conscientious manner. She specifically commented on my interviewing technique which she thought was conversational. This allowed flexibility and the ability to follow-up with interesting things participants said. She agreed with my conclusion that there was a wide range of diverse experiences talked about by students. She said my analytic techniques were able to capture a lot of the diversity and suggested that I go deeper in my discussion into some of the topics of gender, class, spirituality and culture to explicate and illustrate the complex nature of the data. The auditor also verified most of the codes I had assigned and noticed a few places where she would have added and/or deleted codes.

The auditor confirmed most of the findings from the study. In areas where she did not see how I came to a conclusion she was able to follow the reasoning for my conclusion and had me explicate my path of reasoning more clearly in the writing. She also thought that I could have applied the thematic analysis more loosely and instead of grouping individuals, talked about patterns of student behaviors or characteristics that emerged in the data. However, she thought that the primary conclusions were discussed in the answers to the research questions. Suggested changes by the auditor

included editing revisions, adding codes, providing more in-depth description in certain places, and adding justification for different procedures.

Locating Myself as a Researcher

Like those I interviewed, I come from a first-generation, low-income background. While this position afforded me first-hand knowledge of the challenges facing this population of students, it also had the potential of distracting me from alternative truths. On one hand, I was more sensitive and in tune with what students revealed as their experiences in higher education as an “outsider.” On the other hand, after answering my own interview questions, I realized that my experience seems far from what I would consider a typical non-traditional student’s to be. I felt in some ways, in a category between the stereotypical portrait of the first-generation, low-income student I had read so much about and the traditional student who has college educated family members.

Unlike many of my interviewees, I am Caucasian and therefore hold a privileged position in this American culture. Although the number of Caucasians in poverty today add up to more than individuals in other ethnicity or racial group, because of the proportional disparities among groups and stereotype biases, Caucasians are generally not assumed to be from a lower-socioeconomic status. This has implications for Caucasians being able to “pass” easier in upper-class environments.

My path through academia also differed significantly from the individuals I studied. Unlike my interviewees, I did not start my college career at a 4-year

university; instead I attended a community college for 3 years and then transferred to a 4-year institution for the completion of my undergraduate studies. Whereas a few of the interviewees lived on campus, I have always commuted to college. Students who start college at a 4-year institution generally have the goal of finishing a 4-year degree. They also may be more likely to live away from their home and intend to spend four years of their educational life at one institution. This has ramifications for how integrated in the college community a student could become early on. It also may mean that individuals are in a better financial position, for whatever reason, because most community colleges are significantly less expensive than 4-year institutions. Therefore, the students in this study at NWUU could have been somewhat atypical compared to other first-generation students.

Finally, I am well past my undergraduate career and have gone onto other graduate degrees. This puts me outside the experiential field of the participants I interviewed. I sit a long distance away from many of the challenges that these students were facing. While writing out my own responses to my research questions, many of my undergraduate memories were vague. Part of my process in deciding who I interviewed came from a desire to “catch” students when they could be experiencing their first contact with higher education and thus a different cultural world. This changed the interpretive lens through which I perceive student struggles. Education has held a positive position in my life since I was young. While being at many times the bane of my existence, it has also been something that I was comfortable with to some extent. This particular relationship to higher education could have created

specific blinders when trying to reveal an accurate picture of some of these students' experience, who might not have viewed academia as positively or done as well academically as myself.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Characteristics of Participants

Using a purposive sample, an even split between students who had continued at Northwestern Urban University and those who were not enrolled in fall after their first year were chosen for this study. This resulted in 11 participants in each group (see Tables 1 and 2). The 22 participants were composed of 13 females and 9 males, whose ages ranged between 19 and 29. There were 11 Caucasian students and 11 students of color. Nine students reported that they had spent at least half of their lives up until the age of 20 with one parent serving as their primary caregiver. Three individuals had caregivers other than their parents, while 12 students reported that both parents raised them for over half of the time they were growing up. Eight of 22 or just over a third of students in the study talked about having at least one parent with a major mental health illness, severe addiction, and/or long-term physical illness. One student herself talked about having a painful physical condition and another was actively engaged in a major drug addiction while attending NWUU.

Table 1

Selected Characteristics of Participants Enrolled at NWUU at Interview

Name (Gen) Age	Ethnic Group	Family	Follow-Up	Story Title
Thomas (M) 21	A. Indian/ Caucasian	Single M 1 Younger Sibling	Not Enrolled (no contact)	Don't Look Back
Nia (F) 19	Black/ Caucasian	Single M 2 Younger Siblings	Enrolled at NWUU	Whirlwind
Lailani (F) 19	Hawaiian/ Chinese	M & F 10 Siblings (Number 8)	Not Enrolled (no contact)	The Story of the Village Child
Lucia (F) 20	Hispanic	Sister 4 Older Siblings	Not Enrolled (working FT)	Lucky
Max (M) 19	Caucasian	Single F 2 Older Siblings	Not Enrolled (transfer up)	Don't Fear the Money
Maylea (F) 20	Hispanic	Single M 2 Younger Siblings	Enrolled at NWUU	The Meta- morphosis of Maylea
Duc (M) 19	Chinese/ Vietnamese	M & F 1 Younger Sibling	Enrolled at NWUU	My Life Story
Ray (M) 28	A. Indian/ Hispanic/ Black	Single M 1 Twin Sibling	Enrolled at NWUU (study abroad)	Keep Walking, Keep Going
Veronica (F) 20	Korean	M & F 3 Siblings (Number 3)	Enrolled at NWUU	Lucky
Dalmar (M) 20	Somalian	M & F 8 Younger Siblings	Enrolled at NWUU	Capricious
Lynn (F) 19	A. Indian/ Caucasian	M & F 1 Older Sibling	Enrolled at NWUU	What the Hell am I Doing Here?

Note. A. Indian = American Indian

Table 2

Selected Characteristics of Participants Not Enrolled at NWUU at Interview

Name (Gen) Age	Ethnic Group	Family	At Interview	Follow- Up	Story Title
Nancy (F) 21	Caucasian	Single M 0 Siblings	Not Enrolled	Not Enrolled (FT work)	The Never Ending Story
Michael (M) 25	Caucasian	M & F 0 Siblings	Not Enrolled	Enrolled at NWUU	The Story of Michael: It's Been an Adventure
Lucy (F) 22	Caucasian	Single M 5 Siblings (Number 3)	Not Enrolled	Not Enrolled (FT work)	Why God, Why Are You So Expensive?
Molly (F) 19	Caucasian	Sister 7 Siblings (Number 6)	Enrolled at CC	Enrolled at CC	Scattered
Kai (M) 19	Hawaiian/ Caucasian	Single M 1 Older Sibling	Enrolled at CC	Enrolled at CC	It is Always Darkest Before the Dawn
Kendra (F) 20	Caucasian	Single M 5 Siblings (Number 3)	Enrolled at CC	Enrolled at NWUU	My Gift
Kristina (F) 19	Caucasian	M & F 2 Younger Siblings	Enrolled at CC	Enrolled at CC	Losing It
Ryan (M) 27	Caucasian	Family 1 Younger Sibling	Not Enrolled	Not at NWUU (no contact)	It's Not Where You Begin. It's Where You End
Dana (F) 19	Caucasian	M & F 4 Siblings (Number 5)	Enrolled at CC	Enrolled at CC	Accomplishment
Chandra (F) 20	Caucasian	M & F 1 Older Sibling	Enrolled at CC	Enrolled at CC	It's Not Always What You Expect
Damian (M) 29	Caucasian	M & F 1 Older Sibling	Enrolled at CC	Enrolled at CC	The Transformation

The first year cumulative GPA for students who were not enrolled at NWUU at the time of the interview was 2.69, while the GPA for students who were enrolled was 2.70. There was tremendous diversity in students' grades (see Table 3). Each interviewee's transcript was obtained and grade point averages (GPA) across each term were closely examined. While the overall differences between student groups were negligible, four of the students interviewed were on some type of academic notice by the end of their first year. If students were put on academic dismissal, which three students in this study were, they could become reinstated if they joined the university offered academic support program. Only one of the four students with academic difficulties chose to engage this support. The others chose not re-enroll from their first to second year. Therefore, academic performance contributed to some students' departure from the university.

Table 3

Participant Grade Point Averages

NAME	YEAR 1 FA GPA	YEAR 1 WIN GPA	YEAR 1 SPR GPA	YEAR 1 CUM GPA	YEAR 2 FA GPA
Nancy	3.67	4.00	3.90	3.84	NOT ENROLLED
Thomas	1.37	0.00	0.00	1.37	2.74
Michael	4.00	4.00	3.59	3.84	NOT ENROLLED
Nia	2.51	2.44	3.62	2.89	3.41
Lailani	3.31	3.40	1.46	2.72	2.95
Lucia	2.26	2.80	2.24	2.41	1.33
Lucy	2.88	2.92	2.59	2.81	NOT ENROLLED
Max	4.00	4.00	3.79	3.93	2.74
Molly	2.20	1.11	1.89	1.79	NOT ENROLLED
Maylea	3.45	2.51	3.59	3.17	3.55
Kai	0.00	0.64	1.48	0.83	NOT ENROLLED
Duc	2.52	2.00	1.57	1.93	2.08
Ray	2.67	3.16	2.60	2.83	2.21
Kendra	3.00	3.89	4.00	3.63	NOT ENROLLED
Veronica	3.13	3.92	3.41	3.52	3.80
Kristina	2.87	1.87	2.67	2.46	NOT ENROLLED
Dalmar	2.45	1.67	1.67	1.95	2.67
Ryan	1.43	2.50	3.00	2.30	NOT ENROLLED
Dana	3.89	3.22	4.00	3.70	NOT ENROLLED
Chandra	1.72	1.00	2.00	1.72	NOT ENROLLED
Damian	2.84	2.50	2.00	2.62	NOT ENROLLED
Lynn	2.42	3.33	3.25	3.00	4.00

Note. GPAs of 0.00 indicate that student failed every course they attempted.

The study was designed to select 11 students who had left the institution and 11 who had stayed. However, as figure 2 illustrates, there was movement both in and out of NWUU across the year of data collection. Of the 11 students that had not enrolled in the Fall term of their second year, two students were back at NWUU one year later. However, four students who were enrolled at the start of their second year were not enrolled at follow-up (i.e. one year after their initial interview). At study's end, 9 students were attending NWUU and 13 students were not. The 13 students who were not attending NWUU included: 3 students not enrolled in any college, 6 students enrolled at community college, 3 students not at NWUU and unable to contact, and 1 student who had transferred to another 4-year university.

Figure 2. Student paths.

Trajectories and Storied Elements

Student trajectories were examined in three ways. First, I looked for overall patterns. Through this method four distinct patterns emerged (see Figure 3). Second, I focused on how storied elements moved individuals towards or away from higher education at different time points as represented by smooth or sharp ups and downs. Third, turning points within stories were highlighted and themes within these turning points were noted. From these methods, a description of each trajectory group and the storied elements that catalyzed students toward or away from college were identified and then used to inform answers to the research questions.

Figure 3. Trajectory patterns and story titles

Patterns of Trajectories

Pattern 1: Diagonally Shaped Upward Trajectories

Student stories.

The Metamorphosis of Maylea - Maylea

Maylea was a 20-year-old Hispanic/Caucasian female who was raised with her younger brother and sister by her disabled mother. She described a close relationship with her mother, but believed her mother often “gave up” easily. Maylea’s mother advised Maylea not to follow in her footsteps. Maylea spent her elementary school years in special education classes, but by the sixth grade had joined mainstream classes. During her high school years, her family experienced several tragedies which resulted in three family moves. Despite these changes, she did well academically. After hearing about Maylea’s family’s challenges, her brother’s teacher befriended her family. The teacher regularly invited Maylea’s family over for dinner and encouraged Maylea to go to college. The teacher and his wife paid for her application to college and introduced her to people they knew at the university. Maylea said this opened a new intellectual world for her. She also received significant financial aid, a work study position, and a mentor through the university’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). Maylea loved college and had a couple of close friendships. Her mother had little involvement with Maylea’s college pursuits but was not unsupportive. Maylea relied on her family for emotional support and she continued to live with her mother while commuting to college. Maylea struggled to understand what was required

academically at times, but could get support and overcome her difficulties. She reported she loved learning and was still attending NWUU at last contact.

Don't Fear the Money – Max

Max was a 19-year-old, Caucasian gay male. He was raised, along with his older brother and older sister, by his father, who worked in a low-wage, blue collar profession. His mother had Bipolar Disorder, which prevented her involvement in his life. Max's siblings had dropped out of high school. Max described his father as being fearful that Max would do the same, so his father heavily encouraged him to finish high school and attend college. Max's story was filled with vignettes about the shame he felt related to growing up in a lower-income family and missed opportunities due to his family's financial situation. Despite this, Max took advanced courses in high school and did so well that he was able to graduate early. After confiding in his high school counselor about his family's financial situation (which, for him, made college prohibitive), his high school counselor reportedly "tricked him" into filling out forms he thought were for early graduation; the forms were actually for college financial support and enabled Max to pursue college. He thrived both academically and socially in college. He commuted from his sister's house and babysat for her to pay expenses. He wanted to become a doctor and noted that he thought he might as well try because he would be mad with himself if he didn't. Max attended NWUU for two years and then transferred to a highly ranked university.

Keep Walking, Keep Going - Ray

Ray was a 28-year-old Native American/Black/Hispanic male who had been raised with his twin brother by their mother. Ray described a very low-income background filled with parental challenges and personal rebelliousness. He said that both of his parents were under-employed and had struggles with drug addiction. Throughout his story, Ray was critical towards both of his parents for their behavior and inability to manage money. Ray's closest companion growing up was his twin brother. During their teen years Ray's family was in extreme upheaval and Ray and his brother ended up getting "kicked out" of high school twice for academic and behavioral issues. Ray's brother barely received the credits he needed for his diploma, while Ray did not get his. After high school Ray's brother got heavily into drugs, while Ray left home to work at low-wage jobs. Later, Ray's brother got off drugs and joined the military. While living with his brother, Ray obtained his GED. Ray's brother was offered work overseas after he left the military and Ray continued to work at low-wage jobs until roommates helped him obtain a higher paying job in a local hospital. A work colleague told him about getting loans for college so he decided to take a couple of classes. He was surprised at how easy it was and began going full-time. He expressed having challenges with writing and thought that he might have a learning disability, but received adequate grades nonetheless. Ray talked to people in college, but did not describe close peer relationships; instead he remained close to his family members. He reported being conflicted about whether to join his brother abroad and make a lot of money or continue college. He thought if he left college he would

not go back. Ray was gifted verbally and wanted to learn languages. At follow-up he was studying abroad in China.

Lucky – Veronica

Veronica was a Korean female with two older siblings and one younger brother. She and her siblings were raised by immigrant parents. Veronica's older siblings did not go to college but she considered them successful in their professions. Veronica wanted to get her PhD in Linguistics and described herself as very academically-minded. Her parents were supportive of whatever she wanted to do and she described her father as particularly proud of all his children. She wanted to move from her home state in the Midwest to the Northwest. She looked at colleges in this region and settled on NWUU, but delayed entry to gain residency and save money. Veronica came to college and excelled as she predicted. She was very confident and self-assured. Veronica kept saying during her interview that she had a full life separate from college, and that she appreciated living a distance from the campus. At the time of the interview, Veronica was hoping to get a student mentoring job at the college. She thought the job would help her in her pursuits to later become a college professor. She felt lucky that she had personal drive and skills that helped her excel in college. At follow-up, Veronica had gotten the position she wanted and was more integrated into the campus community.

The Story of Michael: It's Been an Adventure – Michael

Michael was a 25-year-old, Caucasian male student who was raised in the Eastern part of the state with his mother and father. His father worked at a low-wage

job and his mother took care of the home. Both of his parents were highly encouraging of Michael's education. During middle school, Michael was homeschooled by his mother. This continued until he was studying independently. His father hated his job as a truck driver and spoke with deep emotions about his hope that Michael would stay in school and go to college. Michael's mother also helped him plan early in life for what he wanted to do as a profession. They went to informational interviews with professionals and Michael focused his study towards careers in architecture and engineering. His family was also religious and Michael was heavily involved with his spiritual community. Michael worked as soon as he was able and saved thousands of dollars for college. He talked about being glad at the time to get out of the house after he received his diploma and went away to college. Michael loved his independence, but was not very focused on his studies. He transferred to a couple more colleges until he was called back home to help support his mother after his parents' divorce. Michael described it as a hard time, and afterwards he decided to go on a mission with his spiritual community. While on his mission he worked in the medical field and reported that he matured a great deal during that time. Upon his arrival home he married his girlfriend who was finishing up her degree. He started college again, this time at NWUU, with a lot of family and support around him, as well as a solid religious community. He studied engineering for one year at NWUU and did well. At the time of the interview, he was not enrolled at NWUU because he had gotten ill before the term and decided to leave for one term rather than jeopardize his grades. He was also in the process of changing his major to a pre-medical field to pursue becoming a

doctor. Initially, he thought becoming a doctor would be too difficult, but after doing research and getting good grades in challenging engineering classes, he thought he had a chance at being successful. He reported that his parents always told him he could do whatever he wanted, but they could never do what they wanted to, so he didn't think it was really a possibility. At follow-up Michael was doing well and back at NWUU.

Whirlwind – Nia

Nia was a 20-year-old African American/Caucasian female raised with her two younger brothers primarily by her mother. Nia's father had some contact while she was growing up, but their relationship was strained in adulthood. Nia and her family had moved a lot during her childhood because her father was in the military. Nia's mother worked at lower-wage jobs. Nia said money was tight, so she tended not to ask her mother for money. Nia and her mother were very close. Her mother encouraged Nia's athletic talent very early in life and predicted that this talent would help her go to college. Nia did extremely well in school throughout her life. In addition to being athletically gifted, she was socially popular and performed well academically. Nia had several offers from colleges across the US to join their track program. She said that deciding where to go was a hard decision that she prayed about. She decided to attend NWUU because it was a few hours drive away from her mother. Nia always liked school and thrived in college. She talked about some difficulty with a coach, but at the time of the interview, they were working things out. Nia enjoyed the university and thought she was learning a great deal. She was very focused and felt that her talent for track was something God had given her. She received a financial package and lived

with a couple of her track friends in campus housing. Nia also was selected to a leadership position at the college. At follow-up she talked about continued challenges with her coach and was considering transfer to a higher tiered university.

Summary of trajectory pattern 1.

These students' educational story pattern was represented by a steep upward diagonal trajectory. Events appeared to unfold in their lives that created propulsion towards higher education. Not surprisingly, all (except one) of these students were attending Northwestern Urban University at the time of the interview with one student having moved on to a high tier college at follow-up and another student expressing a desire to move onto a higher tiered college during their member checking interview. These individuals, for the most part, described their experiences of being in college as comfortable and secure. Four students in this group had extremely strong academic ability. The pattern most approximated a diagonal line upward representing a steep climb towards completion over time. The upward slope of their climb started at different time periods for students, but once they were on an upward trajectory, they generally experienced events that moved them towards higher education rather than away. Specifically, some students with this trajectory began a significant upward slope during adolescence. These students moved away from family when the family conditions didn't support higher education, or conversely followed their family's expectations, when family was supportive of the students' natural inclinations towards academic pursuits. In this pattern, there was not a lot of family upheaval, except in one case.

After starting NWUU, the trajectories rose sharply. However, most of the trajectories showed a leveling off that happened around the time of entering NWUU. This appeared to show that even with students whose trajectory pushed upward, there was still a period of adjustment that students had to go through. These adjustments had to do with familial changes, adjustments in understanding the demands of college, and/or settling into new social environments. The difference between these trajectories and other types of trajectories was that students with consistent upward trajectories were able, to a greater or larger extent, to quickly adjust to the new environment and demands to move on a path towards continued enrollment. Interestingly, some of the trajectories showing this pattern revealed that social integration was not as necessary when students were highly motivated in their degree pursuits.

Some students spoke about social connections that further propelled their advancement in college by providing them with access to college, or notification of special programs to help them go to college, or money. In other words, there were individuals in their lives who were able to help them get social and/or cultural or financial capital in some form. Two of these students' trajectories were heavily influenced by associations they had in high school and/or programs they were involved with in college that set the course for a facilitated continued college attendance.

In this group, when there were slight downward turns, there was a quick correction that followed. This pattern signified an effective coping strategy that was used to resurrect them on their path towards continuation.

Pattern 2: Stories with Gradual Upward Trajectories

Student stories.

What the Hell am I Doing Here? – Lynn

Lynn was a 19-year-old Native American/Caucasian female who was raised with an older brother by her mother and father in the Midwestern part of the US. Her father held a low-wage job and her mother held a semi-skilled position. Lynn said her mother would often tell her that they were a “poverty family” so they needed to be careful with money. Lynn’s mother strongly encouraged her to go to college. Lynn described herself as doing very well academically throughout high school. Her brother dropped out of high school. Lynn described her mother as very active in helping her research programs and colleges. She discovered a music production program in the Northwest and Lynn decided to apply. Lynn moved to the Northwest with her boyfriend, however, she also wanted to meet new people. When she first started NWUU she became depressed after not meeting the people she had hoped to meet. She also struggled financially. Eventually, she did meet a new group of peers who she moved in with. However, they rejected her shortly after she moved in with them and she was left homeless. Lynn hid these challenges from her parents while she continued to do well academically. Despite her living situation and financial troubles she pulled through the school year. By the time of our interview, Lynn was in a better position. She had gotten a nearly full-time job at the university and was able to find stable housing. However, she talked a lot about being very tired and debating about whether to continue her education. She was conflicted about whether to just work or try to

continue both work and college. She was hoping to try and “trick the system” so that she could get in-state tuition which she felt would help a lot. At follow-up Lynn was still attending NWUU.

Capricious - Dalmar

Dalmar was a 20-year-old Somali male who was the oldest of nine children raised by immigrant parents. Dalmar and his family came to the US when he was 10 years old. Dalmar did well in high school. He described having several responsibilities for his family which included interpreting, driving for the family, and caretaking his siblings. Dalmar’s father encouraged him a great deal to go to college. Although Dalmar got funding to attend a higher tiered university in high school, he decided to go to NWUU to stay with his family. Dalmar had a tremendously difficult time in college when he first came. He described being “lost on an island” when he first started NWUU because he didn’t understand how a lot of college worked. He would attend class and then go home right after, not realizing that he had to structure study time himself. His parents were pleased that he was able to spend more time at home. Dalmar also couldn’t understand how other students had so many friends, while he was initially isolated. However, he described that over time and with the receipt of poor grades he started to catch on to what he needed to know. He was able to teach his parents what college was like. He learned he had to stay at the college in order to study. During this time, he was able to connect with another Somali friend from high school. He imagined that she also had similar troubles at first, but he wasn’t certain. Dalmar also described using computers in the EOP office, but never inquiring about

the program. Eventually he was told about the program and encouraged to apply. Dalmar said he found college very difficult because there was no one to help him figure out what he was doing. He really wanted a degree because in his culture it meant something when someone in their community got a degree. Dalmar never discussed the magnitude of his initial trouble with his family. He said he didn't want to have to explain everything and have his father not be happy. At follow-up Dalmar was still at NWUU and very connected with his family.

Accomplishment – Dana

Dana was a 20-year-old Caucasian female with four older siblings who were raised by her mother and father. She said her father made good wages in a semi-skilled job and her mother stayed at home during her upbringing. She noted that money was somewhat scarce because her father supported seven individuals on his income. Dana said that her siblings weren't "college people" which is why they didn't go. Most of her siblings became parents at an early age. Dana was a very conscientious student and got good grades throughout her life. She described herself as a "math geek" and finished high school with honors. She expected to go to college and initially wanted to go to a higher tiered college and attend in a traditional fashion. However, a month before she was to start college she said she became too "chicken" to leave her family. Instead, she enrolled to NWUU at the last minute, enrolling in those classes she was able to get into. Dana also wanted to have as little debt as possible so she worked more than half-time while attending NWUU. She lived with her parents to save money and commuted to college. Dana thought that academically college was easy. She thought it

would be harder, but found out that she wasn't required to turn in assignment after assignment, which she thought was easier than high school. Dana got funding her first year, but discovered she wouldn't get as much her second year. She also did not want to take the required, thematically-linked, general education courses. Socially NWUU was not what she expected. She had little connection with other students, but rather, stayed close to her family and boyfriend from high school. Given her receipt of less financial aid and her dislike of the curriculum she decided to leave NWUU to attend community college near home. At follow-up she was still taking classes at community college.

My Life Story – Duc

Duc was a 19-year-old Chinese/Vietnamese male with a younger sister raised by immigrant parents. He talked about his family, both in the US and abroad and valued the opportunity to study in a country with a good educational system. Duc's father worked in a low-wage job where he was mistreated because he didn't have the educational qualifications that other individuals at his work did. Duc's mother also worked outside the home. Duc was highly motivated to go to college, but talked about regularly worrying about his grades. He had planned to go to a private recording arts college, but after he and his family discussed the financial burden, Duc decided to apply to NWUU. Duc's parents and extended family were pleased that he was going to college. Duc failed a couple of classes soon after starting college, but he was good at talking with people, so he found out what he had to do to make-up his Fs. Duc said he felt confused the first year because he didn't have anyone to talk with about college.

He found it challenging when professors didn't make sure students understood the material. Duc made friends easily and eventually felt more comfortable in college. He said he chose NWUU to be near his family and to save money by living with them. Duc's college was paid for by loans and his parents, who had saved money for him since he was in middle school. Duc was very focused on getting a degree so he could get a good paying job. He did some work in his field of interest in order to try and make job contacts. He felt that one needed contacts in order to get a job later. Throughout his story Duc talked about the importance of always taking advantage of opportunities. At follow-up, Duc was still attending NWUU.

My Gift – Kendra

Kendra was a 20-year-old Caucasian female raised with two older and two younger half-siblings by a single mother with a mental illness. She talked extensively about a troubled home life. However, she was able to take refuge in school from an early age. Kendra reported significant differences between her mother and father's side of the family. Her mother's family was poor and uneducated, while her father's family was wealthier and more educated. After an intense custody battle, Kendra went to live with her father. She moved from a large urban city to a small rural town. Kendra flourished in her dad's care and became highly involved in her new high school. After graduating, she wanted to go to a private Christian college, but decided not to go after experiencing challenges during registration and orientation. Instead, she decided to attend NWUU and keep working her three jobs. Kendra was also starting to become involved in a church community and did not want to leave that community.

Kendra did well at NWUU, but she did not want to take the clustered general studies curriculum. Thinking that she might transfer into the private Christian college, she decided not to take the freshman required courses. Initially, Kendra felt little connection with NWUU and was fearful of asking her teachers for help. She did well academically, but maintained all of her social connections outside of the university, thus spending little time on campus. Eventually, she decided to attend the community college near her home. Her primary reason for leaving NWUU was because she did not want to take the general education clustered courses. She also received extensive financial aid her first year because her father went bankrupt in his business. During her second year of college, she would not receive as much aid. At follow-up, Kendra had completed her general studies at the community college and had returned to NWUU.

Summary of trajectory pattern 2.

This trajectory proceeded generally in an upward fashion, with more downturns along the way. Trajectories curved upward, but not as dramatically as the first pattern of stories. Students with this pattern did well academically (except in one case), but sometimes struggled to move forward during their first year of college. However, by the end of their first year of college all were moving towards some type of degree. The most defining characteristic of this group was that there were challenges during the transition to college for a variety of reasons. At follow-up, three students with this pattern of trajectory were still attending NWUU and two were at community college. All of the students showing this trajectory had historically been

above average to good students in high school. Their stories were positive, but the tones of the stories included some disappointments.

For all of these individuals, family was a positive force that pushed them during their senior year towards pursuit of a college degree. The degree to which families could assist them to select a college and apply for financial aid varied tremendously. However, family was very important in buoying all of these students so that they could stay on a college course. Students' stories with immigrant parents also revealed specific early cultural factors that supported students' upward movement over time.

Some students had rises and falls before college which resulted from changes of direction right before entering college. These changes indicated that students were heading towards one educational path and, for one reason or another, switched paths at the last minute to attend NWUU. Another common structure in these trajectories was some rockiness after starting NWUU which in some cases had to do with the last minute switching. This lack of a smooth transition led to a less-than-optimal experience upon entering college. Unlike trajectories resembling an upward diagonal pattern, the difficult issues these students faced did not resolve as quickly. Perhaps as a result, two students in this group decided to leave the university. This trajectory seemed to be the result of a little less planning, a little more distress and dissatisfaction after coming to NWUU, a little less clarity about their degree goal and a little less initial integration than they wanted or needed. Social integration was difficult for these

students which may have had to do with both the way they “did” college and/or their personality traits that shied away from engaging with the university.

Pattern 3: Flat Line Trajectories

Student stories.

Don't Look Back – Thomas

Thomas was a Native American/Caucasian 21-year-old, male raised with his younger half-brother by his single mother in a small coastal town. Thomas described a low-income background. He was motivated to go to college because he did not want to be a “lifer” in their small town with few occupational opportunities. Thomas was socially active in high school. He talked about being above average academically and passionate about sports. Thomas worked throughout his life and began working as early as he was legally able. He came to NWUU to study business and moved to the city with his girlfriend who had started attending NWUU the year before. Thomas said he found it extremely difficult to pay for all of his expenses in college. He worked all the time to “keep the lights on” and described feeling consistently scattered. As a result, he performed poorly and by his first term he was on academic warning. This caused him to lose a diversity scholarship that paid a substantial portion of his tuition. Thomas was extremely determined to succeed. After being put on academic probation he decided to work with the academic support staff at NWUU to improve his grades. With their help, he was able to map out his classes and learn how to schedule adequate time for his studies. His girlfriend left college to work and was able to share more of the financial expenses. Thomas said he would not quit college until NWUU kicked

him out and told him not to return. He was able to raise his GPA significantly and stay in college. However, at follow-up he was unable to be reached and was no longer attending NWUU.

Lucky - Lucia

Lucia was a 20-year-old Hispanic student with four older half-sisters. During the first ten years of her life, Lucia was raised by her father who was in his 70s at the time of the interview. Lucia's mother was addicted to drugs and she had not seen her since she was a child. At 10 years old Lucia went from the laissez-faire parental style of her father to the authoritative parental style of her sister. Her sister was a disciplinarian; teaching her manners and emphasizing school. Lucia talked about her struggles to be independent from her sister. She left home during her senior year of high school to live with a friend. Her friend's parents encouraged both her and her friend to go to college and Lucia's sister also supported her on that path. Lucia, unlike her friend, had little financial resources to attend college. However, Lucia's sister told her about an organization that helped high school seniors obtain funding for college, so she was able to get significant aid. Despite initially wanting to go to a college further away from home, she changed her mind to stay close to her elderly father. Lucia lived on campus in student apartments. She befriended some troubled peers from high school who were not in college who took advantage of her. Meanwhile, her high school friend with whom she had lived also went to NWUU, but unlike Lucia, her friend thrived in college. Lucia had a difficult emotional time in college and struggled academically. Lucia gave up when she didn't know how to do assignments.

She was also confused about her relationship with her sister. Lucia talked about being ambivalent about whether to cut all ties with her sister or stay connected. She thought about leaving college many times, but was encouraged to stay by her friends in college. Although she continued for over a year and a half, at follow-up Lucia had left college and was working full-time.

The Transformation – Damian

Damian was a 29-year-old Caucasian male who grew up with his older sister and parents in the Midwestern US. Damian talked about disliking school throughout his life, but was encouraged to try and do well by his parents. He did not do well academically and regularly skipped school. During his junior year of high school he got work in construction. He progressed in that field and was earning more money than his peers throughout his early 20s. However, over time he began to get tired of his work. Although he thought about starting his own construction business, he thought that it would take a lot of time to obtain the appropriate permits and he saw his work as dangerous. Damian's sister had moved to the Northwest and encouraged him to come to live with her to attend college. He sent for an application from NWUU and then moved to the Northwest. However, after moving he decided to take time to establish himself. He found himself doing construction work again, making money, and getting experience with other aspects of construction work for several years after his move. Again he grew dissatisfied and finally applied to NWUU. He wanted to study forestry, but after enrolling at NWUU and taking natural science courses, he found the work too difficult. From his perspective, his grades were very poor;

however, he consistently received above a 2.0 GPA. Damian started to research why he was having such a difficult time and eventually found a forestry program at a local community college that he thought was a better fit. He believed meeting people already in the field and getting a two-year degree was a better way to find future employment. Socially at NWUU, Damian had no complaints, but he was not closely connected to other students. Damian left NWUU to attend community college and was still there a year after his interview.

Losing It – Kristina

Kristina was a 19-year-old Caucasian female with two younger siblings who grew up with both of her parents. Kristina reported being an above average student academically and a gifted basketball player in high school. Kristina's father had a small metal business and her mother was his secretary. Her parents divorced when she was in her early teens, but her mother continued working for her father for years afterwards. Kristina said her father was not concerned whether she went to college, but her mother was highly encouraging. Her mother believed that college was more important for women because, unlike men who could make good wages in trades, women needed an education to earn decent wages. Throughout high school Kristina wanted to go to college to play basketball, but during her senior year she decided to quit playing. Although Kristina's mother prodded her a lot to get ready for college, Kristina left to attend college in the neighboring state at the last minute. She wanted to go away to college for an adventure, but once the adventure wore off she did not enjoy going to college. She lived off campus and moved into housing with roommates she

did not know days before starting school. Kristina left good friends from high school, but had few social connections at NWUU. She was unable to find a job and became depressed. She attended classes sporadically and wondered why she was in college. Eventually, she decided to enroll in a university supported work exchange program for a term with the intention of leaving NWUU afterwards. After going back home she attempted to get a job, but realized most of the jobs she wanted to apply for required a degree. At the time of the interview, Kristina was working more than full-time and had started taking one class at the local community college. At follow-up she was still at the community college and working.

The Story of the Village Child - Lailani

Lailani was a 19-year-old Hawaiian/Chinese female student raised in Hawaii with her 11 siblings, mother, father and several extended family members. Her parents and siblings were of low socioeconomic status. In fact, Lailani was very conscious that she was making almost as much money as her father who had been employed most of his life with the same company. Lailani had hopes of either joining the military or going to college. Her sisters often referred to her as the family's "last hope" for success. She reported that there were very few role models in her family, except for a couple of aunts. Both were in the military and one had a college degree. Throughout her story she talked about not wanting to live like her siblings who were continually struggling financially and who had become parents at a young age. Due to a medical issue, she was unable to go into the military, so Lailani secretly applied to a private university in the US with assistance of her high school librarian. She was accepted, but

on her way to the university, she visited two of her sisters who were living in the Northwestern US. Lailani said they talked her into staying, but also noted that she had wanted to be talked into staying with them. She had a difficult start coming to NWUU which was mostly due to getting poor grades and feeling disconnected socially. She failed a class and thought that it would impact her student aid. She talked about being very ashamed and worried about telling her family. Eventually she was able to retake the class and obtained a better grade. Lailani felt out of her element. She recalled her peers asking her degrading questions about Hawaii, like if she had come to the US in a canoe. Lailani also thought that mainland people were not as warm as Hawaiians. However, over time she did make a couple of friends. While attending college Lailani worked at a daycare. She thought about leaving when she was not doing well academically. At times she believed she was not smart enough for college. During the interview Lailani was starting her second year at NWUU. At follow-up she could not be contacted and was not enrolled at NWUU.

Summary of trajectory pattern 3.

This trajectory moved regularly towards and away from a four year degree. These students experienced events and life contexts that did not propel them forward in a consistent manner. They were most represented by a straight or jagged line across time that did not seem to consistently move upwards or downwards, away from education. Instead, these students experienced struggles that made commitment to their path unsteady and/or unsure. Reasons for the up and down movements of their trajectories included changes in motivation over time, feeling a lack of fit in college at

times and a fit at other times, doing well and then doing poorly academically over time and/or vice versa. The overall shape of this trajectory could be described as a flat line. Interestingly, while three of these students had left NWUU at the time of the interview, two were still at NWUU. However, at follow-up none of these students were enrolled at NWUU.

Students in this group appeared to be going to college on their own with less overall support than students with trajectory patterns that swung upwards. This group's trajectories indicate difficulty getting on track for college initially. When they did head for college, they had difficulty thriving their first year either academically or socially. Social integration is varied among individuals describing this trajectory pattern, but for most of these students, college is not socially satisfying. In sum, students with this pattern show both academic and social challenges in their first year and some insecurity about moving forward towards a degree at NWUU. This lack of upward movement over time causes some students to seek other life paths.

Pattern 4: Downwardly Sloped Trajectories

Student stories.

It's Not Always What You Expect - Chandra

Chandra was a 19-year-old, Caucasian female who was raised by her mother and father until they divorced during her teenage years. She had an older brother who was 18 years her senior. Chandra described her family as middle class, but after her parents' bitter divorce she went to live with her mother who had financial difficulties. Chandra reported doing well academically in high school, but struggled socially after

she changed high schools. She applied to several colleges, including high tiered ones, but was only accepted to NWUU. Chandra said her mother was disappointed and insisted that she live in the dorms or else she wouldn't help Chandra pay for college. Chandra became very socially involved in the dorm culture and her grades suffered. She also had significant financial difficulties keeping up with peers who had more money. Chandra did not like the general education curriculum offered by the university and over time doubted the worth of going to college. She was asked to leave the dorms because of heavy partying and, as a result, lost much money from having to break her housing contract. By the end of her first year she was on academic probation. Chandra reported feeling lost and unsupported most of the time at NWUU. Although she was offered support to stay in college through an academic program, she decided to leave to work part-time and attend community college part-time so she could figure out what to do. She said she thought she would have done better in college, but was hopeful about eventually coming back to NWUU. At the time of the interview and at follow-up she was working and attending community college.

Why God, Why Are You So Expensive NWUU? – Lucy

Lucy was a 22-year-old Caucasian female with one older brother, an older sister, and two younger half-siblings. Lucy was raised by her mother, until she was “kicked out” when she was 13. She bounced around living situations for a few years and eventually came back to live with her mother and to stay close with her younger siblings. Lucy said that she saved up two years to come to NWUU and attended because it was the cheapest university that she could get to by bus. Lucy received

average grades, but disliked the general education courses she took. She wondered why she was paying for classes she thought were immature. Lucy worked almost full-time during college and found it financially hard to make ends meet. After her grandfather, who had been supportive of her college pursuits, died around the same time a friend of hers was diagnosed with schizophrenia, Lucy made the decision to leave NWUU. She also struggled with a long-term health condition, but she did not have health insurance. She wanted to study forestry and environmental sciences, but felt that college was one hoop after another and with her personal struggles she decided it was too much. At the time of the interview she had the goal to work hard to give her younger siblings an opportunity to go to college and find a job with health benefits. After following up with Lucy one year after her initial interview, Lucy was working full-time as a manager at a fast food restaurant and had health benefits.

The Never Ending Story – Nancy

Nancy was a 21-year-old Caucasian female who came from an industrial, economically depressed part of the Eastern US. She was raised by her mother. Nancy's mother had a semi-skilled job. Nancy described a very low-income upbringing. She was academically bright, but socially extremely shy. She had challenges during her first year of high school and decided not to return. Nancy completed a correspondence school from home and did well. When she got her diploma she applied to two elite private institutions. She received acceptance to one of them with a full financial aid package. She felt like it was an incredible opportunity. She knew that by attending this college she would be moving away from her family

both socially and economically. She moved into the college dorms and stayed one week before leaving to return home. Nancy said she wanted to fit in there, but felt extremely uncomfortable and that where she came from was “on her.” Nancy went home devastated. She started a correspondence with a man over the internet from the Northwest who later would become her partner. She came to visit him and never left. After moving in with him she had trouble finding a job so she decided to attend NWU and study English. Nancy said her previous experiences made her intolerant of having to follow a structured curriculum, so she took what she wanted. She did not feel socially uncomfortable at NWU. She simultaneously reported that while she liked that she could disappear in the crowd, she felt like nobody cared whether she showed up or not. College became increasingly difficult to afford and she was able to obtain more and more employment. She seriously doubted the utility of an English degree and dropped one class after another until she was no longer enrolled. At follow-up Nancy was still working full-time and not enrolled in college.

Scattered – Molly

Molly was a 19-year-old Caucasian female who was raised by her oldest sister in a family of eight. She was one of the younger children in a fundamentally religious polygamist family. Molly’s father was a prominent figurehead in the family with 45 children, but she did not know him. Molly’s mother had 20 children by two different men. Her full-blooded biological siblings consisted of 10 children; but two had died. Her family lived on a religious compound outside of the US. When Molly’s oldest sister was 15 she escaped from the compound with Molly and some of her other

siblings. Her sister had help from family members outside of the religious group until her sister was old enough to assume full parental care for Molly and her siblings. During early and middle school aged years, Molly attended a small conservative religious school. Although it was private, through her aunt's associations, her siblings were allowed to attend free of charge. Various adults who associated with the school gave her siblings donations, which was normal for her family when they were on the compound. Eventually, Molly's oldest sister moved to the Northwest to pursue a teaching degree and Molly enrolled in high school there. Switching from a small intimate school to a big public high school was a big change for her and she felt less comfortable socially. After high school, Molly wanted to go to college and have the experience of living in dorms. However, she quickly noticed a large income disparity between her and the other students. She also experienced emotional challenges being away from her family. In her interview, Molly reported that the drinking and drugs in the dorm were "very influential" on her. She was also shocked by how much money she had to spend for tuition and living expenses. Although she worked 35 hours a week she was unable to afford her living expenses and had to move out of the dorms in the middle of her first year. She reported doing well in high school academically, but she did poorly in college. Molly said that she felt scattered all the time. She was on academic probation by the end of her first year. Molly decided to leave college and work full-time. At the time of her initial interview she was working over 50 hours per week with disabled individuals. At follow-up Molly was enrolled in community college part-time and doing well living with her sister.

It is Always Darkest Before the Dawn – Kai

Kai was a 19-year-old Hawaiian/Caucasian male who was raised by his disabled mother. He had an older brother who did not graduate college, but from Kai's perspective he was successful as a middle manager in a small company. Kai reported about 20 minutes into the interview that he was "kicked out" of college because of his grades. Kai remembered being told early in elementary school that he should go to college. He thought that teachers tended to say that to everyone, whether it was true or not. Kai said he received "mixed reviews" academically in high school. During his senior year he took a career inventory that recommended him for everything from welding to engineering. Kai concluded he should go to college and pursue engineering. Throughout his interview he said he felt that he received poor advising in high school and then again in college. Desiring the full university experience, he decided to live in the dorms. There he had several social and financial challenges. He thought that many of the people he lived with were heavily into drugs and had money to facilitate constant using. He was very poor and learned quickly that once he paid for his books and the dorms, he had no money left over for any other expenses. Kai tried to get a job, but had difficulty. He also had significant challenges academically. He took a heavy load because he misunderstood that he could take fewer credits than what the engineering department stated as a requirement to graduate in four years. As a result, he failed all of his classes. Although he tried to replace all of his grades by retaking the courses he had failed, he failed them all a second time. Kai was academically dismissed, but was offered an academic support program. However, his

mother needed surgery so he decided to go home to help her. At follow-up Kai was working full-time and attending community college in his home town.

It's Not Where You Begin. It's Where You End – Ryan

Ryan was a 25-year-old Caucasian male from the Southern US who was raised with a younger sister. Ryan described his mother as an alcoholic and his father as a drug addict. His grandparents raised him and his sister from the time he was 2 to 10 and then his maternal aunt assumed their care. Ryan slid by in school. He possessed a social finesse that got him by with little effort most of the time. Ryan had a passion for computers and spent his time fixing them instead of doing school work. During his teen years he started doing drugs. After high school, he went to a technical university with application assistance from the librarians at his school. Ryan quickly found out he was unprepared for college academically. He was also very upset to learn that the university was in a county that did not allow alcohol. Eventually he got kicked out of the school when he brought drugs onto the campus. Ryan worked as a cook and lived with his sister who became pregnant at an early age. While he was working as a cook and dealing drugs on the side, he met a woman working as a waitress from a significantly higher socioeconomic background. She was just finishing up her accounting degree at the local university. He stopped using drugs for a while during their courtship and they later got married. They decided to travel to the Northwest and shortly after they settled they found out that she had late stage cancer. Ryan and his wife quickly scrambled to get work with health insurance. His wife encouraged him to go to college so that he would have a future. He went to school between working and

being with his wife in the hospital. He received average grades, but mentioned that he was not academically prepared for college. He also doubted the worth of college because he did not see the benefits of his wife's degree paying off for her at the jobs she was getting. Eventually, Ryan's wife died. He decided to move back home to be closer to people he knew. At the interview, he had gotten in trouble with the law for drugs and had 30 days of sobriety. He was hoping to get his life back on track. At follow-up, Ryan was unable to be reached.

Summary of trajectory pattern 4.

These students' trajectories either went up and then down or simply went down after starting at NWUU. For these students, college was a significant challenge. They all moved away from getting a four year degree. This group experienced dramatic changes in their trajectories. Once starting at NWUU, there was a relatively rapid decline that never corrected itself. Three students who left NWUU had not enrolled in any other form of higher education at the time of the interview. They did not have terribly negative experiences while in college, but they all experienced things outside of college that pulled their trajectories downward. Two of these students who were able to be contacted at follow-up had not decided to re-engage in educational pursuits. Students who had left with significant academic challenges had all started community college.

Trajectories for this group displayed major slides which consisted of a series of events that directed students away from education. For some students, there was a major final event that pushed students out of the university and for others the

transition out was a slower process. Two academically challenged students had to leave if they did not attend an academic support program offered by the college, and they decided to leave. Two other students had tragic personal losses that created a “last straw” that propelled them to discontinue. Other students let their job become the center of their lives, until they passively made the decision not to attend NWUU anymore. Interestingly, although the processes of leaving were different, all had quick downward turns in their trajectories and fairly unhappy storied elements after coming to NWUU. These elements included a lack of social support for school, a lack of financial resources, a lack of social integration in school, tragic incidents, and, for the academically troubled students, academic problems. If academic problems occurred within the first term of attending NWUU, then subsequent challenges resulted in an accumulation of deficits that they were unable to reverse.

All but one of the students showed a downward slope in their trajectory when faced with academic challenges that did not get resolved quickly. Students exhibiting this trajectory pattern, who didn’t leave primarily for academic reasons, showed a decline in academic performance and/or a decrease in academic load after coming to NWUU. All of the students who left for academic reasons also had financial stressors that threatened their successful continuation in college. The top three students most academically equipped to continue in their path towards a degree, as shown by their early academic ability, talked about challenges with the general education curriculum at the university. This drove their trajectory away from continuation when their motivation began to wane.

Social difficulties were also present in this trajectory pattern. Three students with this trajectory pattern lived in the dorms. The dorms provided some opportunities for social integration, but two students found themselves challenged by balancing their social lives and their commitments to college. The other student living in the dorms had destructive social interactions which discouraged him. Students who did not leave for academic reasons described social challenges or a lack of social connection with the college. By the time these students decided to leave, their social integration was weak or nonexistent.

Trajectory Twists, Turns, Descends & Climbs

Early turning points that related to educational trajectories included changes in family structure or location. These included: parental divorce, custody changes, moving or being kicked out of the home. Turning points in the context of education included: entry into or exits from schools and institutions, moving to attend school, entering or exiting social systems, significant personal changes, changes in financial aid, and connection to people or programs. Later turning points outside the educational system included tragic events. Turning points that could be in or out of the educational system included: getting work, changes in significant relationships, changes in their financial situation, and moving. These types of life events created movements in students' lives and changes in their motivation.

Turning Away from Education

There were many turning points within trajectories that moved students away from college. For example, several students talked about having doubts about their

college path right before they were about to graduate from high school. This type of turning point usually had to do with individual fears about starting college and what they were going to do with their life afterwards. For one student, doubts about going to college surfaced when she felt “overwhelmed” with the process of applying. While many students experienced this doubt, generally students were able to move through it and continued on their originally planned course. Many students changed their choice of college right before their previously chosen college was about to begin. These students thus started college in a harsh, rushed way. This turning point was caused by the desire to not go away to college and instead stay near family for college or because of some dissatisfaction connected with the university the student had been planning to attend. One student said she was “too chicken” to move away from her family. Other students said that they were on course for entry into another college, but for financial reasons they decided against it.

Other turning points away from education occurred after college had started. One experience that a couple students mentioned was going to college with the hopes of being in a new environment and subsequently getting turned off by college once the newness wore off. For a couple of students for whom this occurred, it was difficult to find reasons to continue when they were faced with attending college and had not yet integrated into their environment. Unsuccessful social integration was a turning point that pulled four students away from their journey. Turning points occurred with respect to unsuccessful social integration when students tried to integrate into a social group, but the social group wasn’t a good fit for the student or was not supportive of

the academic side of college. Most students were able to correct for this turning away from education by finding a better social fit, but it was not easy for some.

Finally, some turning points away from education happened before students left the institution. Perhaps one way to describe some students' decisions to depart is as a "last straw" phenomenon. Last straws occurred when students experienced multiple negative or dissatisfying events until they were no longer allowed to continue or they decided to leave the institution because of a final negative event. In this conceptualization, last straws could be passive or active, but generally were illustrated in storied trajectories by a somewhat downward slope until one final significant storied event caused them to leave. Another similar turning point occurred when students left the university to stabilize their lives. For example, after Damian was not getting the grades that he had hoped for, he found a program at a local community college that seemed to be a better fit with his goal to work for the forestry service.

Turning Towards Education

In addition to events that turned students away from education, there were also events and processes that turned students towards education. One of these, for example, was careful planning. Some students planned more than others. Generally, students who planned more were able to have a head start on a path that would lead to degree completion. Early planning often included help from the students' parents and family members. For example, Michael's mother was very active in helping him chart an academic course towards majoring in engineering. Math was emphasized so that by the time he entered NWUU, he was able to understand and complete the higher level

classes for the degree he was initially seeking. Some early planning that students talked about was financial. Duc's parents had saved for him since middle school and this made it possible for Duc to go to college and only have to be responsible for half of his tuition.

Another turn towards education occurred when students were able to meet influential individuals who could act as supports to help them into college and/or to continue there. These individuals often had a dramatic influence on how or if a student would be able to pursue the path of college. One example was Maylea, whose family members were friends with her brother's high school teacher. He and his wife helped her in a number of ways, included paying for her application fees and introducing her to staff at NWUU that helped her get in NWUU's EOP program. Max's counselor forever changed his path when she helped him obtain a full-scholarship to college for his first year. The assistance and monitoring of these individuals created upward movement in the students' life trajectories towards the completion of a degree.

Support programs made a difference for some students. Some students were able to make use of academic programs, athletic programs, student counseling, and programs that holistically helped the student through their first year. When students were able to take advantage of these programs, their experiences in college appeared to become more positive, pushing them towards continuation.

Finally, employment could have an effect of either helping to keep a student moving through college or pulling their energies away from college. Employment that was on-campus had the effect of moving students more towards degree completion.

Although student work was not able to sustain all students' living situation and bills, student jobs connected them to the university and propelled them towards continuing.

Looking closely at student trajectories and storied elements helped to put the themes that students talked about in context. The discoveries uncovered through this process were used to answer research questions and compare stories among individuals.

Research Questions

1) How do First-Generation, Low-Income College Students Describe their Educational Journey Through Their First Year of College?

Students described a variety of journeys through college. Stories of their journeys included their reasons for going, their orientation towards higher education and their aspirations for the future. As they embarked on college, some found that their expectations were wildly different than what they experienced. As many moved through their college experience, they experienced changes within themselves and the world around them. Storylines described here are not mutually exclusive. For each student, multiple storylines could be at play, reflecting their complex lives and directing their next move.

Immigrant Stories of Getting an Education

One type of storyline that emerged for some students was the immigrant story. While only one student identified as an immigrant, a few other students reported feeling more or less connected to the heritage of their parents that was situated in a cultural context. The surrounding context had implications for how the students and

their parents viewed education and how much they could assist their child with understanding the university system. In many of these stories, getting an education was not a decision, but an opportunity that had to be taken. These students described a sociohistorical context that was vastly different from the stories of students whose parents were born in America. Most of the students telling these stories recognized the struggle and sacrifice that their parents went through and had respect and gratitude for their journey. This influenced the students' thoughts about what they should do in their lives. These students also knew the traditional storyline of other students from their culture and talked about how their family diverged or replicated this particular immigrant narrative.

Students talked about the differences in opportunities available to their parents. Many students described their parents' struggles in their stories. Veronica talked in glowing terms about her father who had struggled in his post-Korean war experience.

[My father] came from post-Korean war, so things were rough. He is the oldest son. That is kind of why he didn't go to high school, just because he worked and tried to support the family. They had a house made of mud. They were fleeing and they were dealing with that.

Duc similarly talked about his family coming over from Vietnam, not knowing the language. Dalmar reported that his father had brought him and his eight siblings to the US from Somalia without any knowledge of the English language. He described how war and migration had broken up his larger extended family, but his nuclear family was a pivotal part of his journey: "My life pretty much revolved around my family, my relatives, everybody except when the war started and stuff. Then

everybody kind of separated. I still do live with my parents and with my aunt and her kids.”

A common theme in these stories was the idea of education as being something important, related to the family’s immigration to the US. Veronica noted that education was “a bigger deal” to her parents because they felt like America was a great place to get a good education. Duc talked about how his parents’ cultural background influenced his motivation to go to college, but at times, created pressure.

If my parents didn’t see me getting some sort of education, they would probably be upset. They would probably be ticked off knowing that now that I am in America, one of the best educations [sic] in the world and they didn’t get a chance to do that, and that I should take advantage of it, because it is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Families were described as emotionally supportive and also provided them with other things, such as places to stay while in college and the opportunity to attend school without having to work very much. Several students talked about their family’s desire for them to focus on school.

Many of these students with immigrant backgrounds described their parents’ attitude of pride and encouragement to go to college. There seemed to be deep connection and unity within the family. Veronica said, “There is an unbelievable amount of belief in me, I guess. Totally, whatever I wanted to do they trusted my judgment.” These families also celebrated their children’s accomplishments. Duc’s comment illustrates his family’s excitement.

When I got my letter in the mail, at first I was looking at it and didn’t really think much of it. I got accepted. It was cool. They looked at it and they were proud of me and everything, took me to dinner that night. It was just like a

little family get together. I guess they were like overwhelmed so they called my grandmother and everything.

A few of these students said that their parents had particular aspirations for them. Interestingly, these aspirations were always at a very high level, such as a lawyer or doctor. Immigrant parents saw no boundaries for their children, and what they could be. Lailani exemplifies both the cultural aspects of her parents' history and how that played out in her mother's aspirations for her, "My mom wanted me to be a lawyer. She wanted me to fight for Hawaiian rights. I feel very strongly about Hawaiian rights, but I don't think it is something that I would take upon myself to go to school and learn about."

Most students did not have the same aspirations as their parents, however, and picked a goal that was more aligned with their individual truth. This did not appear to be very troublesome in the way the students in this study described their backgrounds. Some noted their ability to free themselves from their parents' expectations. Duc talked about his mom's expectations for his future career and his decision to take a different path.

At first my mom wanted me to do like medical stuff, pre-med and all that stuff, because you know how Asians are. When you think of an Asian you will be thinking oh, computer engineer, doctor. They always pushed me toward that field, but I was just like, I'll just go on my own.

For Dalmar, just getting a college degree was a big accomplishment.

The degree really symbolizes something. For instance, in the Somali community, oh, this person went to this college and he has this degree. Just that degree symbolizes a big thing. Oh, he accomplished something at least. He may not have a good job or he might not be working at a good place. At least he has this. Look at these other kids, they didn't go there. They dropped out. At least he did something.

Some of these storylines highlighted the desire to move away from a background of poverty. Issues of poverty colored the cultural context of these stories and often had historical roots for the family. For example, Duc talked about how his family experience propelled him into education.

Yeah, I mean it is a poor country and everything. I have a lot of cousins there, too. Only two made it to college. All the other ones are just like working on the field and driving trucks, delivering pineapples and stuff. Comparing them to like where I am right now, I value everything at this point in my life... I'm sure they would like to be in my shoes for a day.

Some students talked about wanting to leave the poverty of their family which was grounded in their parents' experiences. Dalmar talked about his parent's experience.

Just my parents, since they don't have good educations they can't get good jobs and stuff. I don't want to go through that same process. I want to have a good job after college. That is like my main focus, to do good, to do better. That's pretty much it. I want to change.

Lailani also talked a lot about her family's situation growing up, which consisted of low incomes, lots of individuals living together, evictions, government housing, and other struggles. After 18 years of working, her father was making the same money that she was. She described wanting to be different from her family in getting a "career" versus a "job." Lailani also talked about being very careful about pregnancy because she had seen her sisters become pregnant at an early age.

The stories told by these students centered around family. While many of the students got a tremendous amount of support and love from their parents, they also supported their family or had aspirations to do so. Dalmar was the student most active with responsibilities in his family. He often took care of his siblings, drove family members places, interpreted for his father and read for him. Since he was the oldest,

he noted that there was tremendous pressure on him. When he went to school, Dalmar said he and his parents had to learn how it worked. He even compared going to college with his experiences of coming to the US, as having a whole new culture to learn.

Education as Movement Away from Something I Don't Want

Another prominent storyline was of moving away from family. These stories consisted of moving away from a background of poverty or moving away from an unfavorable lifestyle. The impetus for these students going to college was based on seeing something in their family context that they did not want to repeat. For many, college was the ticket out. The family relationships varied among students who had this storyline running through their life. Sometimes these parents actively encouraged their children's path towards college and away from them. For example, Michael's father drew a stick figure of himself in his truck driving job when Michael was 6-years-old.

[My dad] felt like it was a bad industry to go into and he told me, as he drew this picture, "Son, look at your dad here. Look at how unhappy he is. You don't want to do this. You want to go to school and get an education." And I can't count how many times he told me that over and over again. I'll never forget that picture he drew for me. It's like it happened recently. He had some really powerful emotions behind it.

Max had a similar experience. His father disliked his own job and encouraged Max to finish his education, particularly in light of his siblings both dropping out of high school. Max's father hated working as a butcher under his cousin who was the boss. Max described a close, loving relationship with his father, in which he would put money back into his father's wallet while he was sleeping and was regularly concerned about money. Maylea's mother encouraged her to not be like her. Maylea

thought this was sad, but knew that her mother wanted the best for her and didn't want her to make the same mistakes in life.

I just think there are some obstacles in her life that she never really was able to overcome. She gives up very easily, so that is kind of like one of the lessons I take from her. She said before, "I don't want you to be like me." I know that is kind of like a hard thing to say because, you know, when you are little, you are like, oh, I want to be like my dad. I want to be just like my mom. I don't know, I think you have to take what you can from that and just do the opposite.

A reason why students wanted to move away from their parents' backgrounds had to do with the struggle and the shame of poverty. Max explained that he protected his dad throughout his life because he wanted people in his high school to look upon his father positively.

I love my dad and I respect my dad and I didn't want them to know that we were poor, because he is the moneymaker in the family. I didn't want to have that reflect poorly on him. That's why I didn't tell my teachers or my counselors. I didn't want them to think that my dad did something wrong to make us poor, like he wasted the money on something, that he was like a gambler or just that he didn't want to support his kids at all.

Other family backgrounds were described as less supportive and more unstable. For students with these types of families, moving away was a survival technique. Distancing was a strategy for moving them out of a bad situation and the distancing vehicle was education. Several students with this storyline had parents who were living with a disability, had addiction problems, or were abusive. Despite these challenges, several of these students still reported close relationships with their families. They were propelled to go to college via their individual motivation and desire to get away. Kai reported that, "I'm glad I am not either of my parents. I am just me, and it is nice not to have to worry about her health or him not being a particularly

cool guy.” Ray reported that, “I guess my respect for my parents is way gone. It hit the wayside a long time ago, so I always thought, well, who cares. I think that for everything. If I like it, I’m going to do it.” Ray also described how his parents had been “scare tactics” for what he didn’t want several times throughout the interview. Ryan also reported, “My mom and dad were pretty much - well, I never saw my mom. I only saw my mom like twice. My father was in and out of prison my entire life.” Lucy was more elusive about her parental issues with her mom, who she said kicked her out at 13. When asked about why she was supporting herself so early on in life Lucy said, “Ummm she, she was busy with her own personal issues. Like, she didn’t have a good relationship with my step dad. She was in and out of whatever. She was preoccupied that’s why.” Kendra was very explicit about her movement away from her family by pursuing an education. She talked about her mother being abusive. Kendra used school as the “one thing” she could control and focus on during her upbringing. This was a pivotal part of her story.

Education as Moving Towards a Practical Goal

A third storyline that emerged was related to students going to college for a particular purpose, to obtain skills or credentials to meet a specific goal. Some students pursued education for practical reasons, but absolutely did not like school. They came to university to gain a skill that would lead to a better job than they were currently working. Other students whose stories contained the idea that education was a vehicle towards a practical goal knew exactly what they wanted to do. Students telling this story were going to college to get specific skills and their degree was their

ticket to get there. Students adopting this storyline were focused and had accepted the educational hoops they would have to jump through. They were more focused on gaining entry into their chosen professional field rather than the “experience” of college. Not all of these stories describe students who knew exactly what they wanted, but all of these depicted a very practical method or approach.

Two students who had come back to school after working maintained a strong sense of who they were as individuals, although they appeared to force themselves into the student role. They exhibited an ability to adapt to the college environment and approached challenges head on. Despite their poor academic self-conception, they were very motivated to get a degree with which they could do something. They seemed to have a clear focus on what they wanted to do and an even clearer idea of what they did not want to do (i.e. stay in their current jobs). These students illustrated how they wanted to do something different with their lives. Ray appeared to struggle more financially and his move was to find a better paying job because he was becoming afraid of not having a career. Since he was good at talking, he wanted to learn languages and thought that this would provide him a stable career, rather than moving from one low-wage job to another, as he had been doing for several years.

Damian had worked as a skilled plasterer and made good money at his trade for several years. He had started working while in high school and continued to increase his skills. He came to the Northwest because his sister was living here, with the intention of attending university. Despite this movement towards a different career, he delayed entry into college for eight more years until he became dissatisfied with

doing the same work he had done before. Damian talked about how his movement through life led him to think seriously about college.

I didn't want to go to school at first. Screw this, school. I don't know about anybody else, but I didn't like school. I couldn't wait to get out. Then I was like, construction is cool when you are younger because you can build up pay really fast. You are fresh out of school and you are working in the summers or whatever, and by the time you graduate and start working full time and you are already kind of up on the pay scale. Then pretty soon you are making more money than other guys. Right now, I don't need to go to school. Then, as people go to school and graduate and get their jobs, you start to slow down in your pay scale, and whatever you bought, whatever it is, you get unhappy about. Then you just watch everything kind of change.

Damian talked about feeling worse and worse as the days wore on. He stated that everyday he hated his job more and more. Eventually, he came to the university and started to attend with the goal of working in the forestry service.

These students were able to go to university with experiential knowledge of what they didn't want which was to remain in their current situation. This knowledge propelled them towards a college degree.

Other students with a storyline with a practical focus had not worked for years before coming to the university, but did have a determination and clarity about why they were going to school and how it held the possibility of a better future. These stories included life experiences related to taking care of themselves and their future lives. Throughout the interview, Veronica kept saying that one needed the "right tool, for the right job" and since she was settled on getting her PhD in order to teach, college was something she would have to do as part of that path. Veronica talked extensively about not feeling like she had to go to college at all to be successful. She

had several interests and two siblings who had been successful without degrees. She merely approached college as something required for her chosen field.

I think a lot of people still feel like college is the way to get your foot in the door to really have a career and start being an adult. That is not realistic and that's not true. I believe that just because of growing up in my family, being around my older sister and brother, being around all of the friends I have. We are so different. School is just one little path for some people. I know people make a big deal out of it, and I think it is a big deal for the people who do it, but it is just important to realize there are so many other ways to approach life and your career.

Although students with this storyline sometimes changed their major direction, they tended to go to college with a clear goal in mind. Even though Michael's goal of becoming a computer engineer changed after his experience of going on a mission with his church, during his interview, he was clearly focused on the end goal of becoming a doctor and was now taking practical steps in that direction. Michael appeared to never doubt that college would be the method through which he obtained his ticket to the middle class.

These students were all striking in their motivation, and their stories were clearly focused on an end goal. The commonality of their storylines was that they all plugged away at college with a purpose. Their occupational aspirations were also all very high, requiring advanced degrees past the bachelor's level. These stories seemed to indicate that having a clear major or focus on an end goal helps students continue on their path.

The Journey of College as an Experience and/or Adventure

In some contrast to the storyline representing a clear purpose, this journey has to do with students choosing to attend college for the experience or as an adventure.

For individuals who adopted this storyline, going to college seemed more of a rite of passage or something to do after high school. These students had a less clear idea of college as a means for obtaining a specific goal or aspiration, but instead their future direction was something that would come later for them. Many students with this perspective had possessed idealized visions of what college would be like.

These students appeared to think of college as a regular event of life. Several students talked about the messages of attending college as being very normal. These messages were from different venues, such as media, friends, family and their schools. In this storyline, the messages received about college were sometimes not based on any experience of the individual and their capabilities, but more about college being a good thing for people to do. Kai described some frustration around being bombarded with this message, even though he later felt he did not have the skills to be a successful student.

I can actually remember back even in a cooking class I had in sixth grade, cooking, and it was just an elective. I was talking with someone instead of being at the kitchen station. The teacher said, well, you know, you are going to have to learn to stay on task if you want to finish college. She said, don't you realize that if you can't do that then, I don't know, you will only have half the earning potential or something. Teachers were like that all the time. It doesn't make any sense, but they do it.

Within this storyline, going to college isn't so much a decision among alternatives, but a path to take when a path is needed. Lucia described going to college in this way.

I am thinking back and not remembering thinking about the degree as much as just having something, a step, something to do, something that I knew was a good thing. College is a really good thing for people generally. [Pause] In a way it was just sort of expected, sort of just happened in a way.

Lucia said later that she wished that she had been more focused on getting a degree and what she could do with it. She talked about wanting to feel secure and know what she was doing after high school. Kai also talked about just going forward despite having a challenging time in high school. Going to college was an expected path for him.

Honestly it wasn't really even a decision. I was always going to. I only realized last year that something was unusual. Since I was a small child I always knew I was going to. Just, when I got to high school it became an issue of where. That was really all there was to it.

When asked if he had an idea of why he wanted to go to college, Kai said, "Probably just because you can make more money with a degree." Dana also talked about college as a given in her life.

I think it was just always in my head that I was going to go. That is just how my life was planned out. Every since I was little I just knew after high school you go to college. I just never really figured there was another path to go.

Some of these stories were about the entry into college as an adventure or an experience. They also included notions of how to go to college that were less about getting tools or academics and more about things like meeting people and going away. For example, Kristina said, "I think I kind of like thought of going to college as an adventure. Then I got there and had to go to classes and that kind of like wore off." A majority of students with this storyline running through their educational life did things that traditional students do, like living on-campus, going away to college, and partying with other students. Lynn stated, "I thought the whole point of graduating was to go out and explore and go to college. That has always been my idea, is like you graduate from high school and then you leave."

The expectations of how to do college within these types of stories came from influences of media, higher-income friends, and even family members. Molly said that she went to college based on her ideas about how it works.

I went to a really conservative high school and had friends who did a lot of things like live in a dorm after high school and go travel, whatever, go away for school. I wanted to go live in a dorm so I could meet people and blah, blah, blah.

Kai also described similar expectations of how to experience college that fit with his image of college. Kai reported that he had gotten ideas from his brother who attended a college far away from their home. Although Kai lived a couple hours away from the university, he opted to live in dorms and described his decision based on desiring the college experience.

That seemed like being right in the thick of the college experience, that that was the best way to just immerse myself in a completely different environment. And it was. It was completely different. I'll say, I was immersed more than I had even thought possible.

While this storyline did not immediately mean there would be challenges in college for students, it did mean that the student at some point would have to be able to find another reason for going. Additionally, since these students were low-income, they would have to find a way to maintain financial resources for their traditional student life if that is what they chose. Some students enjoyed the process of college and that was sufficient to sustain them. However, for others wanting to go to college for an experience, satisfaction was short-lived when the experience or adventure became routine, challenged, or dissatisfying in any way and there was no other supportive reason to carry them onward. For example, Lynn said she had come to

college because she thought that going away from home for an adventure was the point of graduating high school. Then reflecting on her experience of college, her actual studies took a backseat to the experience of college itself.

Since I have been out here I feel like I've learned a lot more from like having moved thousands of miles away from my family and being in this new environment, and just people with new ideas and stuff. I feel like I've learned so much more from that than from going to school.

Lynn did stay after her first year, but several students who came with an experience in mind did not. Students had ideas about college and these ideas either matched up or didn't to their expectations. If their ideas about college did not extend past the initial stages, then oftentimes they couldn't find a reason to continue.

Finding My Place in the World Through Education

Perhaps connected with the idea of wanting an experience in college was the underlying hope by students that they would get a more defined sense of what they wanted to become and who they were as independent people. As college itself was a socio-cultural environment, many students talked about going to college in hopes of obtaining answers to existential questions. This storyline described students' journeys in terms of how they would become college-educated members of adult society. Within their tales was an exploration of what they were good at and what would be "good" for them. These stories contained explorations by students who were "trying out" peer groups, higher education, ways of being and being on their own. Unlike totally independent students who had managed their lives independently from their families, many of these students had not separated from their families and may or may not intend to. This storyline prescribed college as a way to find one's purpose in life.

A major component of finding oneself storylines was to find out first what they wanted to study and then what they wanted to do for a career. After the first year of college, students were at different stages of figuring this out, which caused anxiety for many. This tended to result in a rocky path through college for first generation, low-income students. This storyline manifested in some students' descriptions of why they started college in the first place. For example, Molly talked about going to NWUU and then community college to find out what she wanted to do for a career. She noted why she kept going through school.

I think it is because I don't know what I want to do and I don't want to be stagnant so I am just going to do this until I...maybe it will help me find out what I want to do, you know. That is what teacher's will - that is what everyone in high school told me.

Maylea talked about her process of going through college as a journey for discovering how she would use her college experience.

My best friend, she is like I wish we could just take all these fun classes and just learn stuff and really no pressure. But then you are like, what am I going to do? I don't have anything to make a degree.

This storyline for students was about trying out different majors and switching, which is common in many college stories. However, this process may be more difficult and cause more anxiety for students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds if they can't be leisurely about their decisions for financial reasons, or if they are trying to pursue a major in which little is known about succeeding. Kai talked about getting bad advising in high school and then going to college to try to become an engineer. After failing all of his courses, he took them all again and failed them a second time.

Students using college to find themselves also talked about different peer influences in college that helped them to define the person they wanted to be. Kai talked about trying out his college peer group and then realizing he didn't like them.

Like the first term it was all kind of exciting, like they are going to the Saturday Market or whatever, so I went with them. We are just going all over this city that we don't know anything about, haven't seen any of. They are drinking and it is not something that I have been doing a lot of in the past. I was like, oh, this could be kind of interesting. Then they stopped doing everything else and just kept drinking and I realized that I didn't like that and I didn't like them.

Molly talked about her college activities as helping her to see who she was.

I just wanted everyone to think I was cool and had a plan, whatever, do what I am supposed to be doing. But then when I got here I was like, well, who am I? I never considered my health or myself at all. So for the first time I considered myself, and I started thinking about me and why I do things and how I let people do things to me and whatnot. So that was good. And, I don't think the dorm - well, I don't think the dorms were a very good place. There were lots of positives and negatives there, and I think one of the biggest negative things was drinking and using drugs. And it was very influential on me, I would say, at the time.

Students talked about a variety of peer experiences while in college that helped them figure more about who they were. Max talked about his tight knit group of friends and how his family said he had changed through his college experiences.

They repeated a lot of times that I was just happier and I had way more energy and I seemed more driven and motivated. I seemed more . . . not a unique person, but I seemed a very specific person now. I guess I was more opinionated or I had grown into myself more maybe, into a different, like an older and specific version of me. Before I was kind of quiet and passive and then I came back and I had all these opinions. There were some things that I just wouldn't talk about. But they definitely said I was happier and they didn't understand why.

The storyline about finding themselves also had a component of deciding how or if to stay connected with family. This manifested in Lucia's story about financial

independence and challenges staying in college. She talked throughout her interview about challenges with her dependency on her oldest sister who had been her caretaker from an early age. She was starting to separate financially from her sister in college and talked about the joys and fear of her new financial independence.

Financially I am on my own compared to last year, which is totally fine with all the financial aid. I have scholarships and grants and so I am feeling a little excited but a little worried. It is like I am swimming by myself.

College Is Me

Several students adopted an attitude that they were academic people and therefore college fit with them. College wasn't so much a choice, but rather the next step in their lives simply because of who they were. Generally, students who propelled themselves through college using this storyline were students who had been "academic" from an early age. Academic students were those who truly enjoyed learning and the process of the academic journey. Unlike other folks, this pathway was ingrained into who they were as people, self-identifying as the type of person who naturally attends college. They usually had been selected at an early age by family to attend college, when others noticed their academic leanings. These stories wove around their academic selves.

Students with this type of story described their journey to college as natural, unquestioned, inevitable, and in most cases, easy. The start of their path was clear and focused. Veronica said that while she came to the Northwest because she wanted to explore the area, college was always in her plans. She never thought that it would not be a possibility. She never thought she would do anything else. Dana echoed this

sentiment by saying that it was in her head since she was little that she would go to college. During high school Dana had made a commitment to graduate with honors. The academic start for these individuals was smooth and consistently easier compared with many other students.

Students adopting this storyline situated themselves at the center of their story. Kendra's story was one of an "achiever." She said that she was known as the "brains of the family" and she was often compared to her grandmother who was also academically-minded. Dana considered herself a "math geek" and in the course of the interviews compared herself to her siblings to illustrate her propensity for being more interested in academics than all of them. Michael talked about deriving a great sense of pride from his academic accomplishments. Veronica reported that, although she didn't like to define herself as a college student, she did feel like she was an "academic" and "investigative type" of person. These students didn't receive much help with their educational pursuits and the reasons for this were described by Veronica who reported, "I never needed help with school. I am very independent in general and with education, especially public education, like I said, it was just a non-issue." She "loved learning, period."

The environment of academia was described in their stories as somewhere that they were encouraged to live up to their potential and as a place where their self-esteem was bolstered rather than tested. College was, for the most part, a positive experience in this journey. Veronica talked about being able to take care of herself and

of being a “driven” person. She talked powerfully about her strong belief in herself and her potential.

I really can do whatever I want. I’ve had friends where that wasn’t implied and it really kind of messed them up on what they think they can achieve. If you can’t believe you can do it, then you can’t. That’s something that helped. Second of all, just the way my personality is and like mentally. I really fit well with college and academia. It has always been easy for me and I’ve also reveled in it. I’ve always really liked it.

Although Kendra’s self-esteem had been threatened when she lived with an abusive mother, she described being most comfortable in academic settings and flourishing once she wasn’t living with her mother. She reported she was now more secure and thriving. Independence was a highly talked about trait for this group of students. Nia, in addition to revealing herself as a good student, also talked about her ease in social settings, “I’m just, I guess, I don’t know, maybe it is because I am just outgoing or social, but I don’t have a problem with adjusting to new places or meeting new people or anything like that.” She also derived a lot of esteem from her talent of running, which she said, “...separates me from the rest of the world.” The positive messages before coming to college only strengthened these students’ beliefs in themselves during their college attendance.

2) What are the Reasons Some First-Generation, Low-Income Students Give for Leaving College after Their First Year?

One of the most interesting findings in this study was that most students who left NWUU did not leave higher education. Some who left NWUU transferred to community colleges or other universities. Eleven students in this study were selected who had gone to college their first year and were not enrolled the Fall term after they

had started. Reasons why students left ranged from getting sick early in the term to being academically dismissed and deciding not to take advantage of an academic support program offered by the university. Overall, most students appeared to want to keep going and only decided to stop when circumstances were such that college seemed the easiest thing to let go. Through reading the stories, it appeared that college was, for some students, the only unsure thing and it was not useful to keep juggling it amongst other things they were doing. By the end of the study, some students had returned to NWUU, while others who were initially at NWUU had left. Therefore, the picture of who stayed and who left is more complex and less dichotomous than a simple count. The question of why students left NWUU is also multifaceted as students appeared to leave for a combination of reasons. A discussion of these reasons follows.

Dissatisfaction with College Process

Several students talked about dissatisfaction with the college process. Two of the primary reasons were: 1) the expectations of college didn't match what students experienced and, 2) a dislike of particular requirements of the institution they attended. Although these issues were not absolutely specific to those who discontinued their enrollment, for these students, dissatisfaction was something that their stories emphasized as being problematic in their lives and influential in their decision to get out. Several students felt that they were not enjoying the process of college and therefore found its utility questionable.

For example, Nancy noted that after having been homeschooled during her high school years, she was, "...intolerant of having to follow a lot of rules or having to work up to where I wanted to be," and did not like being shut out of particular classes because of her undergraduate level. Nancy also did not see how a degree in English would help her to obtain a career and this caused her to wonder why she should continue. Lucy had similar frustrations. She noted that she had spent time getting money to go to school and was not happy once she arrived.

It's really bad, like you work. I worked for two years to get money and everything. I worked at call centers and had to put up with the corporate bullshit and then I went to school and thought, this is going to be different you know, it's all going to be about learning and it was just one hoop after another. One stupid assignment after another. Yeah, I did not like it. I did not like it, yeah.

Similar disillusionment appeared regularly in Ryan's transcript in terms of not readily being able to find the value of a college degree. Ryan's wife worked as a waitress when they arrived in the Northwest because she was making more money doing that than working with her newly awarded degree in accounting. Ryan said that he didn't believe degrees were necessary because no one ever asked her for her degree. Once she did eventually get a job in accounting in order to get health insurance, she was paid less than others at her work without an accounting degree. Ryan said that education seemed like "a racket" to him. When asked about this opinion, Ryan explained that it was advantageous to both the business community and the university when students left school. He reported that businesses were able to pay people low wages by saying their workers lacked education. Therefore, students who went to college for three years and did not finish eventually became part of the low-

paid workforce and at the same time owed several thousand dollars to the government in the form of financial aid debt. Ryan also felt many students paid the university significant amounts of money without having reaped the financial rewards promised by their degree.

In addition to overall dissatisfaction with college, some students did not like specific university requirements. These students didn't have a problem with college per se, but disliked certain requirements. Kendra and Dana took a similar path in order to avoid certain requirements by the university. They received good grades throughout their early and high school education and strongly identified with their student identities. However, during a summer break, both of these students took classes at their local community college and decided to stay there. Both of them cited their reasons for leaving as not liking the university curriculum and therefore not wanting to take some required freshman and sophomore general education classes required specifically by NWUU. In addition, they found the community college closer to home, so they thought leaving NWUU was more convenient. Kendra noted her connection with home.

I was going to take some classes there anyway because like during the summer, I took a full load during the summer because that way I could graduate a year early. That was part of the reason. I think there were scheduling things in there. It would be easier to just take these classes at community college than have to travel to NWUU. So during the summer I was able to work and do community college courses because they were online and stuff like that. It wasn't motivated by finances. After I realized how much I would be saving, that was cool, but the idea to go there full-time for an entire term was mostly because of the general education classes.

When asked if she had ever thought to leave NWUU prior to this time, Kendra said she had not.

Dana had a similar overall positive experience of NWUU, but talked about convenience and not wanting to do the connected general education classes required by the university. When asked why those classes were such a deterrent, she talked about not liking the format of the classes.

I wasn't all over that. I couldn't tell you really how it works, because, like I said, I registered the day before so a lot of them weren't open. I was like, okay, so I am just not going to do that this year. So I never took my [freshman general education classes]. I just took other classes and knew I would have to take certain classes, core classes the next term. But all I knew is it was like your core classes combined, kind of. That is what I was told. It is like core classes they have around a focus study. Like You, Me and the Society, or Architecture and Us, and stuff like that. To me, I am one of those people where I want the basics. I want you to lay it out. I want - this is what literature is. This is what math is, and I want it all separated and I wanted to get the basics and get it done. I'm not one of those people that learns around a focus. I don't need that. I just want the basics. I just want you to give it to me straight. I don't want to feel like my learning is being tailored.

Kendra was less explicit, but also talked about her decision to transfer to community college in the context of having to take the freshman general education classes in a connected fashion as contributing to her leaving.

No, and I didn't do orientation here, so I'm not sure how it differs or if they do stuff like that. I didn't take the [freshman general education] classes. That is the reason I went to community college, because I already had credits there from high school. There is like a loophole in the system. If you are a transfer student you don't have to take freshman or sophomore [connected general education classes]. I didn't start off with them because I thought I might go back to [the other private university I got into]. So it caught up with me, and I was, wait, I don't even want to take these classes.

Although Lucy did not decide to enroll in community college after NWUU, she also didn't like the university general education curriculum. This didn't have a direct effect on her departure, but added to her experience while in college.

I just kind of always thought that college would be like, like a way to get away and become more stable, make money. So, I don't know how much I really thought into it. College was kind of disappointing the first year at NWUU, because you have to take this bloody university [curriculum].

Unclear Goal or Purpose for Continuing College

Related to the idea of disillusionment and dissatisfaction was the student's quest to find meaning in their experience. Many students who left talked about being challenged to find a reason to continue going to college. While other students who continued in college may not have had a specific goal in mind when they started, students who left described having an unclear goal or purpose as important for keeping them in school. When they were unable to find one, they left. Many students couldn't connect a purpose with what they were doing in college because they didn't see the relevance of what they were learning and/or they weren't convinced that what they were doing would lead to anything they wanted in the future.

Nancy appeared not to have a strong impetus for finishing. She had started attending NWUU because she had met a new boyfriend for whom she moved across the United States and she needed something to do. Her passion was writing, but she didn't see that getting a degree and studying English would propel her towards any kind of career goal. Financial aspects of college were also strained because she was an out-of-state-student. Her mother had given her some money for college, but she would

not be able to give it to her the next year. Nancy was hoping that she would find something that made college worth attending, until she eventually started getting more hours at work and decided to leave.

But I have never really been that sure if I wanted, or felt like I needed to go to school. It was mostly - well, when I first enrolled it was also kind of something to do, because I was having a lot of trouble finding work. It was like I can't just sit here in my boyfriend's apartment all day. I have to find work and if I can't find work, then I should go to school. I don't know, like I wanted to go to school, too, but it is hard to imagine staying for four years, let alone going further than that. I don't really have any clear idea of where I'd be at the end or even if it would be worth it to me at the end.

Kristina had a similar sentiment. She talked about knowing individuals who had gotten a degree working at a movie theater earning low wages. She said she would ask them about the value of a degree and reported that time and time again, they mentioned the ability to make more money. However, for herself, she didn't find this particularly motivating. She felt that being able to earn more money was not a primary value of hers and left the university after not being able to find a good reason for continuing.

Interference from Major Life Events

A couple of students' stories included major events in their lives that had consequences for their continuation in college. For two students, the death of a loved one was part of the reason they decided to stop. The individuals who died had been a primary reason why these students attended college in the first place and also had been providing support to the students as they moved along their journey.

Ryan described how his wife had encouraged him to go to college so that he would have a future independent of her. With his wife's encouragement and support,

he enrolled in college. When asked further about why he kept going to college after his wife got sicker and sicker before she eventually died.

More therapy than anything else, to get my mind focused on something, anything else. So that's [pause], that's why I started. Then I tried computer science and that was way too hard. So I moved to geography. I thought I'd be a geography teacher, maybe, but that is when and if you graduate. After her first surgery, her doctor, Dr. Roy told me that she had a 50-50 chance of living five years. So with that sort of timetable, finishing school, I knew I wasn't going to finish with her. That kind of takes out a little bit of ambition. [crying a little]. But it was good therapy.

Another student talked about several things happening in her family which made going to college very difficult. Her grandfather, whom she described as a significant support to her, passed away. In addition, her friend's brothers got a mental health diagnosis. She tried to continue in college, but as her grades suffered, she eventually left.

I kind of have a bad habit, when things go really bad in the family, like when someone passes away, my grades drop. When things were good I'd get like As and Bs and when things were bad I'd get Cs and Ds, or I'd withdraw...that happened twice. That was pretty bad.

Several students had challenging lives that made the interference of life events likely. Although some students would start college highly motivated, major life events could inhibit the most motivated student from continuation.

Significant Financial Challenges

It is not surprising that many students had challenges with finances. While this was not uncommon among stories for both students who left NWUU and those who stayed, the stories told by students who left described more financial challenges that caused them an extreme amount of stress making attendance at NWUU eventually

seem untenable. These students weren't able to secure financial resources to attend college. Financial challenges were caused by a number of issues. These students struggled with knowing how to financially plan for college, the inability to find worth in the money being spent for college, the desire to continue attending the university despite less aid over time, and their ability and willingness to balance employment activities and pay for college.

Lack of financial planning.

Financial planning for college is a complex process. In addition to understanding how to fill out financial aid forms and submit them to the federal government, there are also numerous budgeting decisions about college, including understanding how much it will cost over time and how much of that money the student will be personally responsible for. Students also make decisions about how and where to attend college, including where they should live and how they should spend money while in college. These decisions are inevitably colored by a long history of personal and family spending habits and attitudes towards money. Financial landscapes and student attitudes evolve over time which makes understanding the financial world of students challenging. For lower-income students, the ability to secure financial means for college is the difference between continuing or stopping; this may be different for students with more financial security.

Contributing to their difficulty to plan financially was the fact that some students seemed to have variable and unknown levels of outside help while attending

college. Initially, most of the students had a difficult time figuring out what they would receive from financial aid or other sources. Kai said that he started planning to go to college late and realized he didn't know about financial aid or scholarships. Whatever he couldn't pay he just assumed he would have to take out private loans to cover. He did receive a Pell grant that paid for 12 credits, but he was under the assumption that he had to take 18 units because of his chosen major, so not all of his tuition was covered. Chandra was promised money from her parents, but her mother was in financial chaos herself and did not anticipate so many college expenses for her daughter. Molly did not realize that her financial aid would not cover all her housing expenses and ended up taking out the maximum amount in loans and student aid.

Two steps occurred for many students: First, the recognition and experiential realization of the costs of tuition and living expenses, and second, students' need to adjust to meet those demands. Students who left NWUU could not find an effective way to meet the financial demands. This caused a significant amount of stress.

Several students made choices about how to go to college without full consideration of their ability to afford it. Many of them hadn't considered how much the cost of college would impact their lives. Students wanted to attend college, but were caught between their desire to attend college, and their ability to afford it. Without the knowledge of how much college was going to cost, these students seemed to make choices that didn't fit their financial situation.

For example, a few students wanted a traditional college experience which consisted of moving away from home, living in the dorms and being able to have fun

socially. However, this traditional model was not possible given their resources, which they found out experientially after entering college. Specific financial challenges occurred when these students made financial decisions about where to live that were not sound, given their economic situation. Most striking was the fact that three of these students chose to live in the student dorms and all of them said this was a bad financial decision. Not only were the dorms too expensive for them, they also reported that the social scene in the dorms was not conducive to them doing well academically.

Molly acknowledged that she was not financially prepared to attend college and lived beyond her means, which interfered with her ability to be successful. Molly described a lack of planning.

The financial part of it was completely different. I thought I would get loans and pay them back after I graduated. But the situation with the dorms, where it was...it didn't pay for – everything wasn't paying for itself like I thought it was going to. Then I got into a bad situation, basically, and I wasn't able to do it. So that was completely – I did not expect that at all.

Once Molly had maxed out all her loans and couldn't pay her housing bill, Molly ended up having to move in with her sister mid-school year. Molly reported that “stress and money were the two big things” that led to her leaving college. She reported that she moved into the dorms at NWUU and it was “the worst mistake” in her life because she could not afford it.

I knew I didn't want to come back here because it was really expensive and I wasn't doing as good as I was paying to do. And I felt that I just wanted the responsibility off of me to have to pay and make it worth it. I wanted to go to a community college where I could take it as seriously as I was and not put myself at such big risk of debt and, you know, serious financial stuff. So then the whole decision to not go this term to any school, I wanted to...I had owed my family a lot of money and I owe [the university] a lot of money and I have some credit card debt. I just wanted to - I got this really cool job and they

could give me as many hours as I wanted and I thought well, maybe I will just go work a lot this term and then go next term and see what happens, you know.

Chandra talked about not being eligible for residency, which increased her tuition costs significantly. She also relied heavily on her parents for money. Chandra said her mother had significant financial difficulties herself, but she insisted Chandra attend a four-year university and live in the dorms. Specifically, Chandra said her mother didn't understand all the costs and expenses of college. She also reported that her family had also spent money that was earmarked for her education, trying to start a business. Chandra experienced a lot of financial stress while in school. This, coupled with her poor academic performance, made it difficult to do well. Once Chandra left the university, she reported, "Pretty much the most important thing right now is - because my financial situation is really messed up, so I am trying to get that settled and stable so I can get back into NWUU and afford to go. That was a major stress point for me."

Kai also talked about wanting to "go away" to college. Although NWUU was in the same state, he decided to live in the dorms. He reported he had to take out a loan to get into the dorms and pay the entire contract at the beginning. Once he did that, there was no money left for living. He also was under the impression that he had to take 18 credits to go to college for his major. However, 18 credits were above the number of credits that his financial aid would cover. Kai said he realized that he needed a job, but was unable to get one. He saw other people getting jobs, but he

could not and he couldn't figure out why. He thought that it might be because of discrimination. He looked for a job for over six months.

There were students with financial challenges who did not attend college in a traditional way, but were surprised about the costs involved. This made a difference in their decision to continue. Nancy said, "I didn't qualify for residency either, which made the tuition difference huge. I kind of wish I had just waited and worked first. I didn't realize how huge the difference was."

Changes in financial resources over time.

Some students received less funding from one year to the next and these changes deterred continuation at the university. For example, Kendra experienced changes in funding over time.

I actually got really lucky. My dad, because of the store's failure, he actually didn't have an income, because of the way it was. Then he got divorced and his wife was the one with the income for the family. After that, basically we were like prime candidates for financial aid. So my first year my tuition was completely paid for which was really nice. Then once my dad started working - he actually drives a truck for my grandpa's distribution company - he made way too much money doing that. I haven't been able to get financial aid since then. But I had savings so I have been able to pay for it, and then my dad. I have been working, and I have been able to pay for it.

After moving to her local community college, Dana said she didn't like her classes as much, even though she decided to go there initially, but money was a secondary reason too.

I was like, oh, next year I am going to have to take that stupid general education class. I was like, whatever, I'll go to [community college] next year. It will be cheaper. I didn't get the grant. It was when I got my FAFSA back and they said we are not giving you money, literally. I was like, okay, that made up my mind. I don't really have a choice now, because it wouldn't have been too much more, but it would have been enough that I would have been

totally crunched for money. I wouldn't have had enough to pay my other bills. I was like, um, thanks for making up my mind for me. It wasn't until I got my FAFSA back that I was like, okay, done.

Dana went on to talk about debating between community college and university.

Yeah, I always told myself, I don't want to go to community college. I did all of this work in high school, why would I go to a community college? What is the point? I always told myself, you are not going to go to a community college. But the cost [for the university] isn't even that much more, too bad. It is less at [community college] by all means, because it sucks. . . at NWUU last year I was able to get a grant, so I didn't have to pay it back. Whereas, at community college, even at NWUU this year, I wouldn't have been able to get it. They said my parents made too much. Granted, my mom quit her job and it was totally lower, but the federal government is...funny. So it would have been a little bit more at NWUU, but it was just that class mainly. I didn't want to take it.

Students on the edges of receiving aid made decisions to transfer to community college when they were unable to get funding. It made sense to these students that they should transfer institutions even though their grades were high and they potentially would be building a different kind of social and cultural capital for their futures.

Balancing work and school.

In order to secure funding to attend college, many low-income students had to decide between the number of hours they worked and the number of classes they took. That decision was also moderated by factors such as their borrowing ability and comfort, their external funding resources, and their determination of the value of what they get in return for what they spend. These factors were dynamic throughout the college process. Some students appeared to struggle, carrying a heavy load.

Nancy talked about her decision to go to college as a decision based on needing to do something in her life. Since she was not able to get steady work, she

decided to go to college. Although she had no problems performing in college, as her ability to gain more hours at work increased, she wondered about the worth of her degree. She began to let her employment take precedence and left college.

They kept offering me more work, so it was hard to make the classes. I had to drop. I think it was a psychology course. I had to drop it because I had to be at work instead. Then I decided to stop going to the [freshman clustered course], even though it was a lot of fun, just for the same reason. I didn't know if I wanted to pay for just one class, and just do one class a term. It didn't feel like it was really helping me get further towards anything. I dropped out - I wasn't really sure whether I wanted to, but then there are the refund periods.

Lucy reported that while she did take out loans to go to college, she had seen very bad things happen to her family because of debt, so she was reluctant to use financial aid. She worked over 30 hours per week. Although work was not the only reason she decided to leave college, it contributed to her being really worn out and unable to manage college with the rest of her life.

Well, it was that and I was just really tired from working and going to school and adding one more thing on top of it. So, I kind of messed up my last term and was like, ahhh, I've got to stop, you know. Figure out a better way to do it.

Although Thomas ended up staying in college, he was put on academic probation because of his poor grades. Thomas had a hard time performing in college and directly related this difficulty to his employment. He found it difficult to manage paying for all of his expenses and doing his schoolwork on top of that. Luckily, he was able to get into an academic support program and obtain financial support from his girlfriend, who left the university to make money. This, in turn, allowed him to reduce his outside workload.

About the first year and a half was just really bad because I had to work so much to be able to pay my bills and that affected school work. I didn't have near enough time. I didn't give myself enough time to finish anything. So I am taking care of that. Last year there was a lot more anxiety, a lot more uncertainty about my future than there is this year. This year I realize what it takes to do well, or at least satisfactory.

For many lower-income students, working was a necessity. The prospect of taking out thousands of dollars in loans for a far-off reward which nobody in their family had obtained was a daunting prospect. Students who left the university because of work demands had worked since an early age. Its short-term benefits seemed more relevant to their current circumstances. Students whose work interfered with their pursuit of a college degree had immediate needs that they perceived as more pressing than college.

Academic Challenges

Several students who left the university experienced academic challenges. Academic challenges were caused by a number of factors including pre-college ability, inability to balance other demands on time, being able to meet the demands of the chosen major and poor strategies for improving academic performance. Almost half of the students in this study who left the university had challenges with their academic performance. Two were on academic dismissal at the time of the interview and one was on academic probation. All of these students' stories described a significant degree of distress associated with their grades. Interestingly, only one of these seriously struggling students was not in higher education at the time they were interviewed.

Several students talked about having difficulty with the demands of the work and not expecting the difference between the academic rigor and independence of college compared to high school. Kai reported difficulty understanding what courses were the appropriate level for him.

What they call pre-calculus in high school, it is like the first week of trig. That is 112, and then 251 is calculus. They just placed me in calculus, but all those other weeks of trig that they don't actually teach you anything about in high school. I was not ready for that.

Molly also talked about being unprepared.

I had a hard time, I think it was definitely more of a confidence issue because for some reason I didn't think I had enough, you know, intelligence or enough education leading up to it, to be successful and get As. I got Cs when I was here. I failed a couple of classes, and I think it was just an issue of immaturity for me and confidence. I know I could do it but I didn't think I could at the time.

Ryan also talked about challenges with his high school preparation.

I don't think my high school preparation was adequate. I think a lot of work needs to be done before you get to college. I think the way it is, the system we have now does not prepare a student to be successful at college. If it fits the racket, that's alright. The best thing a university has is a student who goes three years and quits.

Chandra also had severe academic problems. She, however, talked about how she wanted more structured support and said she was unprepared for the lack of structure and support.

I just wasn't prepared for how independent the school was going to be. I think that is probably the best way to put it. I was ready to be independent and I was fine with it, but I needed a more structured school program.

Chandra and Molly said their social lives interfered with their performance academically. Both of these students talked about doing well in high school and then

getting really poor grades in college while living in the dorms. Looking back, Chandra saw how she had changed.

It is easier now, especially last year when it was my first year, to get caught up in doing all the social activities and hanging out with friends all the time rather than doing my work. Now it has kind of settled down a little bit, because my friends are a little bit more focused on school, too.

Kai, on the other hand, took active steps to remedy his poor academic situation, but the steps he took were ineffective.

I was getting bad advising in high school and then again at NWUU. I was taking classes that were far above my skill level. I didn't end up passing any of them first term. I tried to re-take them, to do a grade replacement and I ended up failing them again. I haven't had that happen.

By the beginning of his last term, he knew he wouldn't return to NWUU. He said that his mother was getting surgery and needed someone to look after her.

When these students were in academic trouble, they weren't able to cope in a way that prevented their departure. Only one student took advantage of a university sponsored academic support program. Chandra described why she did not. She perceived her dismissal as somewhat unfair because she was able to get a C average, but not higher than a C in every class after she was on probation. She seemed to vacillate between thinking the system was unfair versus taking ownership for her academic performance.

Yeah, you have to go to this, it is like a two-hour class, I want to say. You sit there and listen. They basically just bring in these people to talk about the importance of school and better study habits and that sort of thing. I think it is something that you need to go to. You had to go to that in order to register for your classes for the next term. I don't know, I feel like I should have gone - and I don't blame them for this, because I should have done this on my own anyway, once I was having problems, that was my issue with not admitting it. Although in the end, it is not really a good thing either, because I have so

many friends who did do that. They are on track, they are graduating, they are finished, and they are still working at Starbucks. Great, they are graduated, but they really don't know what to do.

For some students their strategy for dealing with poor academic performance was to find a new path by leaving the university and attending a community college. This appeared to be a constructive coping method for staying in college. This was illustrated by Damian's move.

It had been so long and I had forgotten so much. I took a year of chemistry and biology. I took the first term and I started chemistry, and I was like whoa, I am not ready for it. I still continued with biology. It was pretty much like a 10-credit year, 10 credits per term, as opposed to 15, because I wasn't really ready for it. During the year, that is when I started doing my research, like, why is this so difficult? Then I came on a [local community] college. I heard about the forestry program and the math classes and stuff, went through the classes, read what they were about and what they prepare you for. It was like, that's it.

Several students had academic challenges. This affected different students in various ways. Students who were able to adopt coping strategies that made them approach their problem effectively seemed to be better off. Sometimes this would not lead to them staying at the university, but it helped them look for alternative educational programs that met more of their needs and were a better fit.

3) What Meaning Do First-Generation, Low-Income Students Make of Their
Experiences in College and How Do These Meanings Propel Them to Make Particular
Educational Decisions?

Process of College

Students had various notions about what the process of college would be like. Some of these processes were unique to NWUU, such as team-taught clustered courses during the freshman year around a particular interdisciplinary theme, and others were processes relevant to all colleges. When the expectations of how college would work did not match how they thought or wanted college to work, some students were disappointed. One common experience that many students had was the realization that students could not freely choose the basic classes they wanted and have them count towards degree completion because of the specialized requirements of university, and the restrictions of some courses because of pre-requisites.

Some students felt that they were paying for a particular experience or were somewhat unsure about what they might get out of college. These students chose classes based on what they enjoyed or what they were interested in rather than on what was required by the university to graduate. These requirements felt restrictive and unfair to many students. Several students found the thematically-clustered, year-long general education courses frustrating. As a result, students did one of a number of things: ignored these requirements completely, left the university and took classes elsewhere, adapted to what the university wanted, or became very frustrated, but not act on that frustration in any way. Nancy talked about her frustration with having to

follow these requirements and the difficulty of being able to take the courses she wanted to take.

This one [class] that I really, really wanted was already closed. I didn't register in the fall. I registered for it in winter, which also kind of threw things off, because then your sophomore year you have to register for the sophomore clustered courses. You have a lot of choice in which particular freshman or sophomore [general education cluster] you want to take, but since they are required it makes it harder to get other classes in your schedule that you are really interested in. That was like the one class that I wanted to finish this term, just because I thought that the teacher was great and I was really interested in where we were going in the community service part of the class. I didn't really pay that much attention my first year to the things that I needed. A lot of things, they didn't seem to really go together and they wouldn't necessarily have helped me with my major.

Nancy also talked about being restricted from taking the upper division classes she wanted to take which caused her some frustration. She made meaning of the process of how she did college and understood how it worked as having been influenced by her earlier experiences of home schooling. This appeared to contribute to the dissatisfaction of her experience that led to her leaving higher education completely.

Other students who had similar frustrations about being asked to complete specific courses opted for a different remedy, which was to leave the specific university requiring the classes they did not want to take. A few students talked about still being focused on degree requirements. Dana's dislike of being told what classes she had to take propelled her to ignore requirements and eventually take classes elsewhere.

How university requirements worked was very confusing to some students who didn't seem to understand the meaning behind the university-prescribed classes or

classes at a college level in general. Some students talked about the classes being less structured, which caused confusion. Chandra reported this difficulty.

You could take classes that didn't apply toward your graduation. It was really confusing keeping track of that. I was used to more of a system. Coming here, too, was more difficult because they just kind of let you take whatever, particularly the freshman general education classes. I understand that they are very helpful, but for someone like me, where I am looking at them and realizing that they really don't count toward my degree that I am going for or something. It was really frustrating to me to be taking a class that I didn't think was really worth my time, especially when most of it was spent on discussion and things that didn't have anything to do with what we were talking about. I've taken a philosophy class, and that was all discussion, but to me that is what a philosophy class is, you are kind of discussing ideas. A class based on democracy and the foundations of it should be more about that, not just random discussions of government, like around the world even. So as interesting as they were, I found it really frustrating for me. It didn't fit with my idea of what I thought college was going to be like. I thought it would be, you get your core requirements out of the way and then you move on to your others things and then you are finished. Your core classes help you figure out what you want. You take a few electives, whatever, and then from there you go on to your degree. That isn't really what it is like.

While some students were unhappy about this aspect of the process of college, and in particular about the university's general education curriculum, other students, although voicing frustration at times, appeared to adjust accordingly. Thomas explained how he made a different meaning from his experiences when faced with this challenge.

I didn't really know, being that I was a first generation college student. I still had some illusions that, oh, college will be great. You will be able to take the classes you want to take and everything, which it isn't. It is just like high school. You just pay for it. I mean, you know, you have to take a bunch of classes you don't want to take to take the classes you do want to take. Then even then, there are so few of the classes you actually want to take that it is, you know, it just kind of ruins the whole illusion that I had of it.

View of College and Students' Experience of It

How students reacted to the process of college was related to what students thought college was: a way to get one's ticket punched via obtaining a college degree, a way to obtain specific skills or career, or a way to become a more educated, changed person. Students made meaning of their experiences of college by filtering them through their imagined purpose(s). Students' experiences through the lens of their imagined sense of what college was supposed to be like informed their actions. Two aspects of this were: 1) what they thought it was for in general and how their expectations matched up to that, and 2) the process of college and how that matched up to their expectations.

First, it appeared that many first-generation, low-income students were focused on coming to college as a way to obtain a skill or a career. When getting a job was the purpose of why they were at college, the value of college was judged through this aspiration. For some, college was giving them a specific skill or heading them in a career direction that they wanted to go and this propelled them to keep going. For others, the link between college and the path they were on was weak. This led to the feeling that what they were doing was pointless. This might be more likely among first-generation, low-income students who desired practical skills to begin working and might not have known that certain majors are less conducive to providing concrete vocational skills or career requirements. Sometimes this desire for practical skills was determined after the student had started at the university.

Damian reported that after he left his construction job and started going to NWUU, he had significant difficulty with the science classes in the biology major he had chosen. His goal was to work for the forestry service, so he switched colleges and got into a program at a community college with a specific two year program for forestry. He talked about his journey and the decisions he made, indicating that he had wanted a training program that would get him work.

I wanted to get some kind of a degree, just to show myself and to show employers that, hey, I am trying for this. I am working for this, and this is what I know so far and this is what I have, but yet I am also going for more. But on the other hand, while I am going for more, I do have this, and this is enough to get me a job so I can get my foot in the door, you know. Some people, you can go to school for four and a half years, whatever, you get a degree, and then all of a sudden, alright cool. I have a bachelor degree in whatever, in biology or whatever, but to them that doesn't mean much. Alright, that's cool, you have that, but where is your work experience. Where are your contacts? They want you to make contacts.

When students desired skills or a career and couldn't reconcile that with what they were learning, their classes seemed "pointless." Some students couldn't justify continuation or they simply did poorly. Chandra reported this sentiment.

Even now I think a lot of the classes I took were pointless. Now I at least realize what the ultimate goal of them is, but at the time I was just kind of like, why am I taking these classes? I am paying a fortune to take a class that I am not even remotely interested in, that is not going to help me in life at all. I am not learning any useful life skill at all. In math at least you know, at some point you are going to need to know basic algebra, even if it is just for doing your own taxes.

Chandra experienced academic challenges that made it impossible for her to continue. In comparison, Nancy also wondered what the utility and meaning of college was for her and how it would improve or change her future life.

I chose the English major because I love writing and literature and everything. I couldn't imagine taking on another major, like history or anything like that. Even though having an English major, I never really knew what that would be good for. I felt like a lot of people were thinking the same thing, thinking that was a stupid major to have, or that it was kind of pointless to go to school for that, especially if you are just going to go for four years and not continue after that. A lot of the decision, maybe, was just to take up time, just to do something.

For some of these students, once they had experienced college, there was an acceptance that college was different from what they thought it would be, but they still had the goal to obtain a degree. Chandra experienced some resolution after leaving NWUU.

Now that I have kind of figured out more what I want and accepted the fact that I don't know what exactly I want to do, I just need to finish a degree of some sort, I've kind of accepted that. I am able to handle that better. I can find the motivation to just finish it anyway.

Kristina made similar comments about how her experiences in college led her to not see it as particularly useful, except for monetary purposes, in which she said she was not that interested. However, after leaving college, she went back to community college, making a different kind of meaning, that a college degree was the gateway to many jobs regardless of what they were teaching and how they taught.

I have been back and forth on that, and realized, whoa, there is all this cool stuff I could do, looking at jobs and stuff, but I can't because I don't have a degree. I think my dad kind of skips over that part and is like, go do what makes you happy.

Some students could link what they were doing in college with what they would like to do in the future and this made sense to them. It propelled them forward and their path was clear. Veronica said, "It is kind of like you can do what you want, but I am pretty academic and what I want requires that I get a PhD."

Perhaps at the other continuum of students looking for a skill or career path were students who were going to college from a wish for self-fulfillment. These stories sounded different, less frustrated with a wish to continue, like the students with a clear purpose. Maylea said that she often fought with herself about why she was going to college and whether she should be thinking about it in practical ways towards being able to make money or whether she could make meaning of her experiences the way she was thinking currently. She reported, "I guess my goal from the beginning has always been that I just want to be smarter, more like involved person in the world. I don't know exactly how to say it, but I don't ever want to be like ignorant." Similarly, Dalmar had this same attitude, "The real reason I am becoming a better person, like an educated person, a person that is aware of his surrounding. I know what is going on and stuff, not just personally, just going on a cycle."

When students enjoyed college and saw it as giving something to them that was fulfilling their intrinsic needs as people, they tended to continue and not question the path they were on. Several students mentioned both wanting to fulfill an intrinsic need and wanting to obtain employment afterwards, however generally there was a top driving motive. Nia made meaning of her experiences in both ways, but seemed to lean towards a self-fulfilling journey.

I will get definitely a better understanding, I guess, of how the world, at least how America works and people, well, just everything in general. Even in geology, I am taking geology, just to get a better understanding of everything. Then also finding a job of something that I love to do, and can get paid a lot of money for. [Laughter]

Students who appeared to be driven by an intrinsic desire to grow and change in some way appeared to have an easier time being convinced that they should continue in college. While career aspirations were important for many students, for most, what they wanted to do was not very clear. When their aspirations were not clear and they did not see a value of college beyond their want of a degree or career, it was difficult for some students to find a reason for continuation.

Academic Experience and Meaning

Students had vastly different academic experiences throughout their journey. While some students found the demands of college easy, others were extremely challenged. Performing adequately in college was a minimal requirement for continuation. Several students, who did well in college, described their experiences of college as normal or expected. The meaning these students seemed to make of their academic experience was that it was what they expected and they knew that they would do well. Nancy was one of those students. Her good performance didn't move her forward in any particular way except to affirm what she knew. This actually didn't seem very motivating for Nancy who had always gotten good grades.

I had a lot of really great classes. I did really well in most of them. I think my GPA was a 3. something, 7 or 8. I could do well, and I have always known that I could do well in school. Until I started home schooling I've never really cared that much about it.

Students who were academic "types" of people reported that college was a given. Kendra said, "I was actually surprised that it wasn't harder when I first started here." Dana echoed these sentiments.

It was so easy. I would come home, and I am like, mom, it is really easy. I was so scared to go to class the first day. I thought it was going to be so hard. Oh, my god, how am I going to be? And I have to take notes and it is going to be a lecture. I was so nervous. I get to class and it is so laid back. They were just this is how it is, here is your homework. At NWUU compared to community college the homework was totally minimal. It was so easy.

Students who did academically well at NWUU did not necessarily continue at NWUU. Specifically, four students who did very well left. One student went on to a higher tiered university, another two went to community colleges to avoid university requirements, and one discontinued going to college altogether. Instead, doing well in college just affirmed what they knew and enhanced their self-efficacy within the university setting. For other students, doing well in college held value and made them feel good about themselves. Students like Nancy had always gotten good grades and therefore, felt somewhat unchallenged. Other students, like Michael, enjoyed the positive feelings associated with excelling in college.

I guess I feel kind of some pride from my accomplishments. I mentioned my ACT scores, my GPA, I guess I feel maybe a tad embarrassed that I was homeschooled and whatnot and all the more, I don't know, prideful about my accomplishments. It's kind of silly, I don't know.

Students who got something out of their performance appeared to be motivated by good grades and continued in their pursuit of higher education.

In contrast to students who excelled academically, many students struggled with the extra demands of college. Perhaps one of the hardest things for students to deal with in school was poor grades. For different students this was handled in different ways and their difficulty was attributed to a variety of reasons. Many

students who had the experience of struggling academically left NWUU, and a few continued.

Ironically, several students who reported doing well in high school performed poorly once they got to college. Many were surprised that they were performing poorly. This prompted some students to think about leaving. Lucia talked about getting some incompletes and a C minus her first term, while a friend from high school whom she had helped through math, excelled once she was in college. Lucia thought about dropping out because she wasn't doing very well, but continued with support from friends. When asked what she thought was the difference between her and her friend who did so much better, Lucia said it seemed to have to do with confidence and having a clear goal. Lucia thought she fell into a rut more easily and it was harder for her to imagine a positive future.

Poor performance was also threatening for some students' well-being because of insecurity about continued financial aid. This related repercussion was mentioned by several students and caused stress. Lailani talked about being very "scared" because she imagined that her financial aid would get cut off. Thomas's diversity scholarship was taken immediately after attending college because of poor grades.

I did have a scholarship my first year, the Diversity Recognition Scholarship, but my first term - I think I ended up with like a 2.3 and you have to maintain a 2.5 to keep it. I lost it as soon as I got it. I didn't know that, so that really bummed me out. That was kind of depressing, like wow, I already lost my scholarship which pays for like 12 credits a term for up to five years or something like that. It was a little discouraging at first. Lack of monetary support from the parental unit kind of changed my perception of how things worked.

Although many students were able to move through getting poor grades, others appeared to have been frozen by it, particularly if they had received satisfactory grades previously. Thomas reported that when he was in severe scholastic difficulty, he found it difficult to get help. He attributed his poor performance to a lack of managing his work with school. Thomas talked candidly about why it was difficult for him to get help, "It really took me getting kicked out of school to get any help for myself. I don't know why, I'm just not that guy. I am not that, alright I need help, where do I go person." Ironically, Thomas did take action by joining the academic support program. This could be connected to his tenacity and his extreme avoidance of what he did not want.

Well, I am not going to give up. I am not going to give up until they tell me you cannot come here anymore and don't reapply. Had I got kicked out of here, I planned on attending community college to take some credits until I got my GPA back up. But I didn't have to do that, I had to put my nose to the grindstone. Basically I doubled my GPA in a term. I went from a .95 to a 2.14 or something like that.

So, you know, it is doable. I just have to do it. There is no point in giving up. When I can do it, I can make it work. I can fix whatever I do wrong. I have been given a second chance. I am not going to just go, oh, I don't really want it. I will just go back and live at the coast and work at Fred Meyer for the rest of my life. No, that is unacceptable for me.

Students who continued going to college despite their poor performance did not associate their bad grades with their inability to do the work and this helped them continue without over identifying with their poor grades. Males in the study seemed to do a better job at remaining confident in their abilities despite evidence to the contrary. Duc described his challenges and attributed them to poor high school preparation.

Since I first started at NWUU I failed two classes. I believe that it was simply due to like preparation that my high school did not give me when I graduated. There are a lot of things that they didn't require, such as senior projects, senior portfolios. I believe that I wasn't ready for the college level and that is why I am struggling. But I am making it, going through and everything.

Duc just kept going forward. He looked at failing as something that just happened in life. He reported, "You are going to fail, everyone fails once in their lifetime, once or twice. The only way to be good at it is just redo it again, give it a second chance, if not a third chance." Other students, like Lailani, appeared to internalize her poor grades to a greater extent. She said that her "worst fear" was not living up to her family's expectations. When she failed a class her first year she kept it a secret from family and "thought it would be the end" of her. She was extremely worried about her financial aid, but ended up being able to rectify the situation, albeit not without significant stress, worry and doubt. When academic doubt crept in, some students' motivation for going forward plummeted. This occurred for Chandra who talked about losing motivation over time.

My first term I think I failed one class, but I got an A and a B and an F, which was kind of random. Then the next term was kind of the same. By the last term I was pulling like a C and a D and a B, or something. It got progressively worse each term. I lost more and more motivation to care.

Other students used leaving as an effective proactive strategy after receiving poor grades, as a message to go and find something else that fit better. Damian was a student who took difficult science classes early in his college career and after getting poor grades he evaluated his experience as a result of it being so long since he had been in school. He felt like he couldn't remember a lot of what he had learned in high school. Then he started looking at a program at a community college and left to pursue

that program which he thought was a better fit. While this seemed to be an effective strategy for Damian and was proactively managed by him, most students with academic difficulties were more passive.

Social Experiences and Meaning

Students had differing ideas about what they wanted socially out of college and how they would get it. These students described four basic types of social experiences while going to college: 1) social experiences that were satisfying and non-detrimental to continuation in college, 2) social experiences that were detrimental to continuation in college, 3) dissatisfying social experiences, and 4) satisfying social experiences outside of the university. Whereas some felt college was something to immerse themselves within a different social and intellectual world, others described the social aspects as more peripheral to their lives.

Some students sought an engaged social experience in college and found it. Students who were successful at finding an engaged social experience usually had to do things to make that happen which included living in the dorms or on-campus, which few students at the university do. However, sometimes students became so involved with the social aspects of college, their academic studies were neglected. Three students who lived in the dorms with the greatest opportunities for on-campus social engagement did not find it to be an entirely positive experience. Reasons these students cited for challenging dorm experiences included the inability to pay for the dorm, the social overindulgence at the exclusion of academics, and the economic inferiority they felt compared to their dorm peers.

Chandra liked some aspects of the dorms. Her social expectations were that she would go to college, live in the dorms, meet lots of friends and have fun. She met lots of friends and was engaged socially, but was not engaged academically. Chandra talked extensively about the positive social experiences of the dorms, but also talked about extensive drama that she and her friends had with the dorm monitor, which eventually led to her near eviction. Instead, she was able to pay \$2,000 to get released from her dorm contract. Chandra noted several financial challenges in college and although socially Chandra thought that the dorm helped her meet new friends, it also seemed to interfere with having a successful college experience. Chandra reported, "Yeah, the living situation wasn't good when I was here at NWUU, which is probably a part of what influenced me not being there anymore."

Molly reported an almost identical experience. She had wanted to have the full college experience and then by the end of that experience reported that she had left because of stress and money. Her experiences in the dorm were very social, but she could not afford what other individuals in the dorm could and this caused her to feel different from her roommates.

I didn't have a lot of the things that I needed because I was really poor. And it wasn't very convenient for me to live there because I didn't have a computer and I didn't have a lot of things that everybody else had. And I had a lot of weird emotional stuff because I moved out by myself, and everyone else that was there really had all the things that they needed, like laptops and blah, blah, blah. And their parents bought them a microwave and everything, and I just had my clothes, basically. I guess I didn't feel very supported there by people, even though I did make some good friends. I liked being around my family more because they understood me and whatever, made me feel comfortable.

Kai appeared to enjoy his experiences at first in the dorms, but then seemed to not like the individuals he was living with. He described feeling different every day because of social class differences between himself and his roommates. When asked what he thought the main difference between him and his roommates was, Kai reported that they operated with a different set of priorities and had more disposable income.

Better impulse control. That is the only thing I can really attribute it to, because just the pleasure principle. That seemed to be what drove them all the time. I was actually there to try to go to school. That would be my best guess for that. Additionally, though, and I did realize this at the time, I guess, a lot of the people - my roommates and a lot of the other especially heavy drug users on the floor - their families really, really had a lot of money. A guy who lived just a little bit down the hall from me, apparently his parents own a ranch, right next to the one owned by Kenny Rogers, who apparently is a real person. But they are well-to-do, so he never had to work or anything to get the money to pay for that stuff. Really, I guess that is not the difference between me and them, but certain people in the dorm and other people in the dorm, some of them had the money to facilitate constantly using and others didn't, and I didn't, but I didn't want to.

Social disconnection in terms of seeing oneself as different because of social class was only mentioned explicitly by one student living outside of the dorms. Lucy described some differences that she felt when she compared herself to other students although she lived off-campus.

I felt a little bit different than the other kids in college. Like you could tell the kids whose like parents had paid their way in there and they were kind of like, more relaxed and you know, a little better dressed, a little you know, and you're kind of like I'm hungry I don't have enough food, I gotta work these hours. You don't really talk about the same things and you've got these other responsibilities.

Other students experienced social disconnection because they sought connections with other students, but were unable to find the type of connection they

wanted. Most of these students talked about a poor match between what they thought college would be socially and how it was in reality. Students who did not have strong connections nearby because they had moved to the Northwest to attend college talked about feelings of loneliness which made their life at college difficult. Lynn described not having the social experience she wanted to have.

I spent my first year excited, but really unhappy and crying a lot and contacting home a lot. I was thinking about moving back and stuff like that. That definitely crossed my mind a lot, just because I felt like I was getting really disappointed because it was really hard for me to meet people, and the people I did meet I just thought were stupid.

Eventually she was able to meet other people and start making friends. She was able to cope with the social challenges she encountered and move through it, but other students did not. Kristina talked about living off-campus with two roommates who were not in college and her inability to get over her homesickness. She reported being depressed because she missed her friends from high school. Kristina reported that as she went through the year she became lonely and depressed so she stopped going to her classes. She also had started a relationship with a person from home who was attending a university in her home state and was able to see him by joining the sailing club at NWUU. Kristina appeared to stay connected with her previous ties and did not become socially connected in her new city. Her social experiences were unsatisfying, so she ended up leaving NWUU.

I would see some people in a class and not ever see them again until the next day in that class. Like, I didn't run into people that I knew. So I don't know, I thought it was kind of hard making friends, just because it was fleeting.

Interestingly, two students attended NWUU as commuters and had expectations of an engaged social experience. They performed academically adequately and eventually left the institution to attend community colleges nearer to their homes. They both expressed surprise regarding the social experience of NWUU, but also described a life that was very involved off-campus. Both had switched from the universities they had been attending because they wanted to stay connected to their home social lives. When Dana was asked about whether NWUU met her social expectations of college, she expressed what seemed like dissatisfaction, but also acknowledged it was something she had chosen.

You know all those movies where you are living in the dorms and you are going to all these big parties and life is so wow, and it is totally nothing like that. Oh, my god. Society needs to change their TV shows, because it is a total letdown. No, that is one of the reasons I didn't go to [Western University] as well, one of the minor reasons. I knew if I went there I would have been doing that [partying], because, you know, it is a bigger campus. It is more college orientated. I knew I would have probably ended up doing the partying and all that kind of stuff. I knew that it wasn't worth it. I wasn't going to waste my money on classes that I wasn't going to be able to wake up in the morning to go to. So it is totally different than what I thought. I thought it was going to be more social and stuff like that, and mainly I just go to my classes and go home and do my homework and go to work. It is totally different than I thought, yet I took a different route than I thought I was going to do. I didn't think I was going to be working at the same time.

These challenges appeared to stem out of NWUU serving them as a commuter college, when they expected a social experience from college. The way some students also created their social lives made it very difficult for them to engage socially in college. Kendra reported that she "accepted" the social aspects of NWUU as a commuter, but changed her major from business to Spanish in order to get more

social interaction from college. Eventually, however, she made the decision to leave NWUU to attend community college. She felt that she had social support elsewhere.

There was absolutely nothing social. I pretty much accepted that. It was fine. Like I said, I was here to just get my degree, but I had so much stuff going on with my church and friends at home, so I didn't feel like I was lacking anything there. It felt a little weird to sit next to people and not know anyone's name, but when I started taking Spanish courses, the classes are a lot smaller. You have to converse with people in Spanish and so it is a huge difference. I find myself meeting a lot more people. That's cool. I haven't actually met people that maybe I would contact out of school and hang out with, but still knowing people's names and asking about homework, that's better.

Other students described little social engagement in college and didn't seem to mind.

They either had a social network outside of college that worked for them, or they treated college like a job in which people are somewhat cordial, but disconnected.

Ray expressed his social experiences directly.

It was fine. I met a ton of people, but then I don't talk to them after that class. I know that a lot of people that you meet are disposable, like classmates and stuff. You meet them for class and then everybody is so busy, it is hard to actually meet if you are not going to class all the time.

Later he compared it to "real life."

Same as real life. You meet a lot of people at work and they say, "We should get together," and it never happens. After you are out of that job you don't ever see those people again. Then years later you run into them, and say, I remember you. I remember I used to work with you at so-and-so. How are you doing, and then you just talk a little bit and that's it. People are like that.

Students who were not very impacted by the disconnected, commuter style of college experience, didn't seem to be bothered that classmates were not available for deeper relationships. In many cases, students were still connected with their families and siblings, which compensated for a lack of social integration.

4) Are There Any Identifiable Differences Between the Stories Told by First-
Generation Students Who Continue College After Their First Year and Those Who Do

Not?

The most obvious difference between the stories told by first-generation students who continue college after their first year and those who do not is that students who continued college either did not experience the same academic, social and personal difficulties as the students who left, or, when they did experience similar challenges, they were able to cope effectively.

Differences with Regard to Students' Academic Success

One important difference between the two types of stories was that a majority of students who left the institution talked about academic struggle to a greater extent than students who had not left. While students who stayed also talked about academic struggles, students who survived poor performance and continued in their journey were students who were able to “stick it out” and find out an effective remedy for their situation. These students took control of their performance before they received academic warnings and notices from the university that they were in danger. Their willingness to be proactive appeared to stem from how they viewed college at the time, their motivation to continue, and their ability to cope with a difficult situation.

In general, college seemed much more troublesome for students who had academic problems. Whether or not a student left as a result depended on whether the students were able to resurrect their poor performance before they were asked to leave.

Differences in Satisfaction with Process and Goal Commitment/Motivation

A contrast between the stories of students who continued versus those who did not, but did equally well in academics, revealed that students who left expressed greater dissatisfaction with some aspect of college or had unclear goals. This is in striking contrast to students who had good grades and continued. In general, students who performed well academically and stayed were not only committed to the goal of college, they were also more satisfied overall with their experience of the institution. For example, while some students had disagreements with the structure of the institution, most were able to take a balanced stance towards classes and move forward. An example can be seen in the differences in how dissatisfaction was dealt with can be seen between the comments made by Kendra versus Veronica. Kendra talked very clearly about her dislike of university requirements and her plans for graduating.

I don't even want to take these classes. I just didn't feel like that was fair, but I realized if I went to [community college] for a term I would be considered a full-time student there, and when I came back I would be considered a transfer student.

This can be contrasted with Veronica, who thought that the structured classes were "a little frustrating" but could see the value of the classes for others and therefore did not take action to find a way out of them.

It is a good experience to be around different people, but being shoved into that from having a job and just working in the city was a little frustrating for me, especially since the [general education clustered] classes are supposed to help transition students, which I think is really good. I really like [general education program], but I kind of felt like I was back in high school in a way, like an extension of that. I didn't really want that. I didn't really like high school.

Similarly, vast differences in the sense of purpose and motivation were evident in the stories of those who stayed and those who left. Kristina, who left NWUU, couldn't find a good reason to continue college. During high school, she was planning on going to college in order to play basketball. Once she changed her mind about basketball, she had little motivation and purpose for going. She reported, "Once I decided that I didn't want to play basketball, because that was like the reason that I wanted to go to college to start with. Then, I don't know really." Students with clear goals or at least a goal to get a degree had the motivation to continue. Veronica described her goal in specific terms.

I realized that I wanted to do linguistics. Then I got pretty excited. I already knew I wanted a PhD but that solidified that. That makes me want to make sure that I keep trying harder and actually learn to work hard and just get some self discipline to put aside time for study. Plus now it is something I want so badly for my future, like if I have that under my belt, if I know that I can work at that, then I will feel better about everything else. I don't want to be lazy. I don't like pipe dreams.

Even when the goals for life after college were unclear, students who continued had a firm goal to finish college. Nia's quote illustrated this point.

I loved school. I still do. Like I love learning and I like going to class and all the stuff that everyone else hates to do, except for homework. I hate that, too. But I knew I wanted to go to college. Like it has always been something that I was going to do, no doubt about it.

Several students who continued also had a clear externally motivated goal of wanting to move away from their family's circumstances of poverty and low-education. Duc also continued despite a rocky start at the beginning of college, because he was

motivated by wanting something different from what his family had. Some other students' motivation also stemmed from this desire.

Differences in Social Support for Continuation

Several students who continued had social support encouraging their continuation in college, whereas students who left tended to have either less support for their continuation overall, or their support for college was far removed so they decided to attend college elsewhere. Nancy's boyfriend, for whom she had moved to the Northwest, was her primary support and did not attend college. While there were other circumstances that led to her discontinuation in college, her relationship was something that appeared to pull her interests away from continuation and engagement. When asked if there were other things that were drawing her time away from wanting to continue college. Nancy said, "Definitely - wanting to spend more time with my boyfriend and some of the people that I have met here. I haven't had friends that I hung out with in years, so, yeah. I talked to some people during classes, but I never really hung out with them outside of school or anything."

This can be contrasted with Lucia who actually got support within college while she was having some academic challenges while attending NWUU.

Last year I actually, maybe about halfway through I wondered what I was maybe doing in college. I had sort of a panic moment where I thought maybe I should leave. I had a lot of support from friends and people just saying you don't have to - you are okay and you don't have to decide and just get out of college. You can still not be sure about things and be in college. So I stayed...

Maylea described getting a lot of professional support. She was able to become enrolled in EOP, which provided support for continuation, even when she was unsure. Maylea talked about the feelings associated with her experiences.

Last year I was so afraid. When I was starting school, I was almost like I am not ready. I don't want to start fall term. Maybe I should start winter term. I just felt like I wasn't really on top of things and I didn't know the campus. I didn't know how to get around or where to buy books or any of that stuff. I know I had to get help from people. I don't know. Also I am a part of EOP, so my mentor, Lisa, she has helped me out a lot. Whenever I have a question about anything, she is always there, and I am always, Lisa, what do I do? She helps me out, and I am like, okay. I am glad I had that support. Also some of, like my family is really good friends with my brother's teacher, because [my brother] goes to Smith High School. [My brother's teacher introduced me to] this one lady who works here. Sometimes when I needed help with something I would go ask her, and she would always let me in her office and we would talk.

This kind of support was either insufficient or totally lacking in some of the leavers' stories. In some stories, even when professionals did reach out, the students weren't able to get what they needed because they weren't able to articulate their needs clearly or they had some personality challenges being confident and proactive about getting the social help they desired. Looking back, Chandra said she was hesitant to ask for help.

I think my teachers probably would have all given me a good grade at least for the effort and for learning how to do it. I had a major problem asking for help. I realize now I could have gone to any one of my teachers any time and said, "I don't know what is involved in this research paper. Can you help me?" My mentor would have helped me with any of it. I had a really good mentor in my freshman general education class. I just didn't really - I had a really big problem asking for help, probably because I had never had to before. Of course, that is probably why I passed my freshman [general education cluster course], because finally at the end I talked to my teacher. I was like I don't know what I am doing. I have a real hard time asking for help, but here I am. I remember him actually having a discussion with me. He was an older teacher, and he was like it is really hard, but you have to learn how to ask for help. He

is like if the teacher won't help you, then you could say, okay it is not completely my fault, because I didn't know how and my teacher wouldn't help me. He was like, whereas now, I can tell you right now you are going to blame yourself if you don't ask for help and realize you could have. He was right.

Alternatively, students like Duc didn't have those hesitations. Even though Duc struggled academically like other students who had left, he continued in college. This may have been connected to his lack of self-inhibition with getting help. When asked about his ability to get help versus other students who might struggle with doing so, Duc talked about his personal ease with asking for help.

[Other students might think] it is a scary thing or something, but I didn't really care. I am just looking for advising. That is really it. I am not asking them about anything else, just advising. I didn't see anything wrong with that.

Another type of social support that was mentioned by many students who continued versus those who left was support from their families for their continuation in college. Sometimes this was in the form of pressure, but it helped encourage them continue nonetheless. Dalmar talked about the support his father gave him in college and his father's implied desires for him. Dalmar said that he thought his father encouraged him to go to college because it would make him a better person.

Even though my dad didn't get a formal education, he is pretty smart. So it could be that going to college would make me a better person, better rounded person, and to get a good job, too, I think. I think that is the mindset he would have, I think.

Some students also felt a commitment to their parents to continue in college, because of their love for their parents. This strongly supported students' continuation, even in the face of challenge. Lynn illustrated how her

decision to go to college was strongly influenced by her relationship with her parents.

They are like really proud of me for always doing well in school. I was like a crazy high school kid who did crazy things, but I always went to class. So they were really proud of that. I think I did it a lot to just make them happy and “thank you guys for always giving me so much freedom and supporting the fact that I want to move thousands of miles away, and that you do want to help me do that, so I’ll go to college for you guys.” I think was definitely probably most of it.

Differences in Student’s View of Self and Ability to Cope with the Demands of College

The stories told by continuers were generally different from those of students who left the university on a number of components, including how they viewed themselves and their abilities within the academic setting of NWUU. Stories told by continuers generally included more positive self-beliefs and proactive, effective coping styles than the stories told by non-continuers. One of the primary self-beliefs of continuers was that they could accomplish the necessary tasks of college. Additionally, their view of themselves was more likely to be an accurate assessment of their strengths, weaknesses and capacities. Successful continuation in college led to positive self-beliefs and vice-versa.

Some students had very positive self-views that helped them move forward in their projected paths. Perhaps the most confident interviewee was Veronica. She described herself very positively, and her beliefs of her self-efficacy were strong. Max also was confident in his abilities to do the work that school required and he had aspirations of becoming a doctor. Although he had some self-doubts, he didn’t let

those thoughts dictate his actions. At follow-up Max had left NWUU, but only to transfer to a higher tiered university. During his initial interview, Kai reported his future aspirations.

What I really wanted to do is go to med school and probably study psychiatry, but that part is open. When it gets down to it, that's what I want to do. I am going to try to do it before I fail, because I might end up doing it. I don't want to be unhappy with my life like my dad is. If I was a professor I probably wouldn't be, but at the same time, part of me might be saying I wish I had gone to med school. I wish I was a doctor now. I want to at least try before it gets to that point.

Experiences in higher education influenced students' positive sense of self.

Michael was initially counted as a student who left NWUU because he took one term out due to illness and wanted to keep his high GPA. However, Michael continued to do well and enroll the next term in college and at follow-up. Michael talked about how his success in college had influenced his aspirations.

Yeah, I never would have dreamed of even entertaining the idea that I would have been able to do something like "go to med school." That was never in my vocabulary growing up. My parents never introduced that idea. They certainly told me that I could do anything I wanted but ummm I suppose they felt like they couldn't really do what they wanted. You can do whatever you want, except such and this, except the really cool, good things. I guess what's cool is different to different people, but this is a real recent thing that I feel like I can do this.

These stories were in stark contrast to the stories of other students who left. For example, after Molly had significant academic and financial troubles her first year, she transitioned out of NWUU and started to gain some more self-awareness and self-respect.

I don't think I have been stable for a long time, and I think I was just - I think at that time I started thinking about my life and my mind-state and what I was actually doing or how much I actually knew myself. That's when I started

thinking about myself, you know, because I never thought about it in high school. I just wanted everyone to think I was cool and have a plan, whatever, do what I am supposed to be doing. But then when I got here I was like, well, who am I. I never considered my health or myself at all. So for the first time I considered myself, and I started thinking about me and why I do things and how I let people do things to me, and why I let people make me do things to me and whatnot.

Students who left emphasized greater challenges than students who stayed.

When students who stayed did report challenges, they described coping in persistent and effective ways. In addition, for some students who left, switching colleges was an effective coping strategy. The stories varied with the perceived degree of challenges. Some were easier to fix than others. Examples of coping permeated both kinds of stories.

Veronica talked about coming to the Northwest from her hometown and being “unprepared,” but very persistent that she could do what she set out to do. Similarly, Kendra considered herself a “survivor” because she had gotten through an abusive childhood. Lynn talked about a challenging first year in which she moved from her home state, ended up losing her housing after two terms and was being forced to stay in various places until she could secure a more permanent living situation. Throughout this turmoil, she continued to attend all her classes and her on-campus full-time job. Michael and Max talked about a changing sense of self that became more confident and self-assured because of school. Michael had initially attended three different colleges after high school. However, after going on a two year mission with his church, he had gained maturity and learned what he needed to be a good student.

I was a lot more prepared and a lot more ready to go to college when I came here a year ago. A whole lot had happened between that period of time where

I had those three pieced together half-motivated semesters or terms at the other colleges, and I developed a lot socially and I had developed a lot more perseverance and motivation for doing things that I didn't have. I built a larger social network for support going through this.

Students who left appeared to utilize passive or ineffective coping styles.

Molly described her academic challenges and difficulties coping with them. She reported that when she started to do poorly, she let time go by until she was eventually dismissed. Even students who continued in college had difficulties at times that they described as very traumatic. Nevertheless, they pulled through the situation and rectified it. Lailani described getting an F and using positive self-talk to manage her way through the situation, but not before her self-esteem was bruised. She talked about pretending to be confident, while in reality she felt very insecure.

Dalmar talked about having a rough start his first term and feeling like he was "lost on an island." During his interview he contrasted what he was like his first term and how, after that first year, he was able to stick with things and get through the situation.

I had no idea what I was doing, especially first term of college. I was taking a couple of classes, like three classes, 12 credits. I would come to school, go to school and then just leave. I didn't even take it seriously. I didn't know that after class you have to go to the library and study more and stuff. It showed. After the finals and stuff it showed. I learned from that. This year it is better because I think I have more experience. I know what I am doing. I know where to seek resources and stuff. This year I am more prepared. Last year I had no idea. Basically there was no one to guide me, no one I could go to for help.

Dalmar described that his transition into a different kind of student.

I think as the term progressed, I was understanding more. I was learning new stuff, making friends and asked questions, learned about this area, that resource. If you need help with something, go here, do that. As the year went

on, I started learning. I was learning a lot as the year went on. I was understanding all the stuff that was available to me that I didn't think was.

Differences in Students' Ability to Secure Financial Resources

The ability to secure financial resources was a difficult issue for many students who decided not to continue. Those who were able to continue were not as hindered by finances. The first thing that was either implied or specifically noted in the stories of students who continued versus those who didn't was the ability to put higher education as a high priority in their lives. This prioritizing suggested that students thought that their experiences were worth something. Alternatively, students who had challenges finding the value of college had trouble justifying its cost. The debate about the worth of what they were doing in college was addressed in the stories of students who decided to leave. Some students eventually could not justify the costs of going, without really knowing why they were doing it.

While some students who continued didn't exactly know what their degree would be used for and disliked some courses, large-scale doubts about the worth of college were rarely mentioned in the stories of continuers. Students who continued saw college as important and used successful strategies to defray the costs of college. Some of these strategies included; delaying entry into college in order to save money before going to college or to gain residency status; choosing to live cheaply in terms of their choices of how and where they would live; deciding on how they would work and attend college; and securing financial aid with the help of people and organizations. These strategies helped students continue in college and even were

helpful in keeping students in college when they debated leaving. Lucia talked about her decision to keep going and that relationship to her financial aid.

Also I kind of thought it would be nice to work and take less credits, but my financial aid is for full-time, and so it is sort of a difficult situation. Should I keep doing full-time, even though I am not sure I am able to handle it, but I am given the money to do it.

Other students talked about strategic planning to make sure they could go to college. Ray explained his use of financial aid as creating a “safety net” for himself as there was no other way he could get the money for college if he needed it.

If I sign up for all my classes and then I don’t have \$2,000 to pay at the beginning of the semester, they will kick me out in the first week. Sometimes I will have enough money to where I could pay off all my school stuff and sometimes I do at the beginning of the semesters. So if I don’t have enough money and I don’t apply for FAFSA or my loans, I can’t go back and I can’t get that money from anywhere. There is no net for me, so I am making my own net with the loans, I guess.

Family helped students with the financial costs of college for some continuers. Even families who struggled a lot financially would help students attend college. Duc’s parents worked in low-wage jobs, but started saving early for his college. Duc talked about his family’s strategy.

I guess since I was in middle school or something, so they kind of knew I was already heading into college. I had thoughts about it and everything, and there was no way I was not going to go to college. I pay half of my tuition for a term, and [my parents] will just get out money from a loan and pay for the other half. That way it is half and half.

Veronica said that her parents were unable to pay at all even though she wanted to leave her home state and attend college in the Northwest. She decided to delay a year before going into college. When asked why, she talked about gaining residence status.

Residency, because a lot, well, not a lot, but some people's parents can pay for their college, but mine cannot. So I am taking out loans, financial aid, and it is just so much more expensive if you are out of state. I would have been from [out of state], so it is not realistic for me to just want to jump into it.

This type of planning was not evident in the stories of some of the students who left. Molly talked about being unprepared for what she experienced financially.

I did all my stuff and got all my financial aid and whatnot. Then I didn't realize that the financial aid - well, I should have - I didn't realize the financial aid didn't really pay for the dorms at all, except the stuff that I got back, I would pay for it myself. It cost me like \$2,000 in the first term there, which was so annoying, because I couldn't get it loaned to me. I had to work and pay the bill, because I was already maxed out with my loans and my whatever. I moved out because it was way too expensive.

Although low-income students somehow find money for college, it is not easy. Some parents cannot contribute or even get loans because they are in too much debt themselves. Despite all that is against some students, they seem to continue to find the resources to pay. Lailani ended up getting a job after attending college for a while and took out loans. She described her process of trying to pay for college while also being hopeful about the future financial incentives that drive her toward continuation.

That is another thing why I wanted to go to college and get a good career, because everyone in my family is in debt, in some shape or form, whatever. They are just in debt. I do not want to be in debt. I don't make much, but still, I put away \$20 from each paycheck and I send it. I am starting to pay off my debts now. I am not going to wait. I get this quarterly interest, and I pay that as well as like sending just \$20 from each paycheck. I'm sorry; I just need to, so I am not in debt as much as I would be if I hadn't paid it at all. I don't want to be in debt. I am so scared of being in debt.

Students appeared to have different levels of financial maturity and described planning to a greater or lesser extent. Students who had gotten full grants or scholarships had less financial worry, whereas students who had planned very little or

were lacking in knowledge about how to budget ended up in very difficult financial situations. Students who were conscientious, but not so fearful as to allow money to be a barrier, continued at NWU if other factors did not interfere with their continuation.

In summary, there were a range of stories for individuals in this study. Some of the distinctions between students who continued and those who did not were great and others were very slight. The stories of individuals who left included more challenging, arduous journeys over time. Conversely, students who continued had personal, environmental, and financial resources that carried them through term after term towards their degree. These students' incremental successes over time appeared to fortify their determination to continue and make them less vulnerable to leaving. Overall, the stories from students who continued included a greater degree of overall satisfaction, happiness and positive experiences in college than the stories of students who did not continue.

Results from Faculty and Staff Triangulation Interviews

Faculty and staff were aware of many of the difficulties facing first-generation, low-income students. Many were also able to identify the more nuanced challenges facing these students, such as a lack of specific knowledge about how to navigate the university system and the inability for students to adapt culturally to the expectations of the university. Overall, faculty and staff confirmed challenges that student interviewees had mentioned, recognized the specific strengths these students brought to the university, and could identify why these students might be more likely to leave within the wider lens of higher education.

Faculty and staff confirmed financial challenges for these students. Several faculty and staff interviewees talked about finances as one of the top issues facing students. This was consistent with financial issues being the most frequently talked about topic by students. However, beyond talking about how students had a lack of financial resources to go to college, or the high cost of tuition faculty and staff were able to go deeper into the specifics of what they did not know and the resulting consequences. For example, one staff/faculty interviewee said some first generation students didn't understand certain cultural rules about going to college, such as making sure to turn in your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) early because financial aid was given out on a first-come first-serve basis. Less aware students would then not get their FAFSA in early and not receive work study, so inevitably they would have to work off campus. Ultimately this made university harder. Most students I interviewed did talk about these nuanced issues, perhaps suggesting that they did not have an appreciation of this wider lens. However, some students talked about slowly understanding more about how financial aid worked over time, but initially they had missed out due to their lack of awareness about the importance of timelines or changes to their plans for where to go to college.

Understanding what college was for and how a college experience translated to future work was also talked about at length by most of the faculty and staff interviewees. Within the context of these topics, experts spoke about how first-generation students sometimes had a very narrow understanding of what the experience of college was for. Four out of five of the expert interviewees mentioned

the experience of college as much more than getting a degree. Experts talked eloquently about how college was a way to change oneself and to become enlightened, rise above one's social class, and/or become an informed citizen. The fact that students didn't have this broader view saddened one interviewee.

I think we failed them. I think that someone has to communicate that to them. If you think that just getting a bachelor's degree is all about getting a job, you are making a mistake. What we talk about here at NWUU is creating a citizen, a citizen of the local community, the national community, the global community. You are here to be exposed to things that you wouldn't be exposed to if you just stayed home and drove to work every day. You are going to see people that you wouldn't necessarily run into, points of view that you wouldn't necessarily hear.

This sentiment was echoed most strongly in the transcripts belonging to faculty/staff who had been first-generation students themselves.

The logistical intricacies of how a degree translated into a job were also discussed by staff/faculty interviewees. They thought that many students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds had a narrow understanding about how what they studied would translate to a career. One interviewee said that first-generation students think they want to do something practical that will get them a job. Often they don't realize that there were many ways that college can help them to do that that are not exclusively based on what they learn in their classes. Instead, the experience of college and the path towards degree attainment and future job means building social capital, making job contacts within the field, and joining professional student groups. Variations of this sentiment were echoed by other interviewees. One interviewee thought that some first-generation, low-income students experienced a "crisis of faith" when they had significant doubts about the value of the degree because a degree in

one's hand didn't always directly translate to a job. This kind of doubt could derail students, whereas non-first generation students, who may have seen direct and indirect links between degree attainment and future occupation, would have more trust in why they are doing what they are doing. This interviewee also thought that first-generation students say they want something practical, but oftentimes getting a two-year degree for a semi-skilled job is not what they want to do.

Related to this idea, university staff and faculty emphasized that understanding and being comfortable with university culture is a challenge many first-generation, low-income students face. Specifically, these experts said that there is a skill set that students from non-first generation backgrounds may have gained growing up in a higher income, college educated environment. Higher income traditional students had cultural capital that was valuable within the university context that some first-generation students did not. This subtler understanding of why students faced barriers was not explicitly recognized by students themselves. Instead, a few students talked about how other students seemed to have more information than they did, but they had no idea why. Few of the students said that being from a first-generation background impacted them at all. Several students said that they only knew their experience, so it was difficult to compare what they were going through with the experience of others. It appeared that many students were focused on their individual experiences of not knowing, whereas faculty and staff interviewees could extrapolate what those individual experiences of not knowing were really about contextually after seeing similar patterns across many students. Despite students' naiveté about how their first-

generation, low-income status might have impacted their educational trajectories, some of them were very aware experientially of the feelings of being lost and not-knowing associated with college.

Experts also talked about students' journeys in connection with family relationships. They thought that families could sometimes create barriers for students. From the student interviews, this was true for a limited number of students. However, more often families appeared to help and encourage students in their college pursuits. The positive side of familial affiliation was acknowledged by one interviewee, but the preponderance of the content of the faculty/staff dialogue in this study indicated that among students they had worked with, students had difficulties with family members understanding the demands and worth of college. It makes sense that the perspectives on family of faculty and staff may be different from that of students. As students are in the process of finding out what the demands and worth of college are themselves, they may not be able to see as clearly how their family hurts or helps their process. In addition, since faculty/staff aren't connected to student families in the way that students are, they may not be fully aware of all the ways that familial attachments help students holistically in their lives and subsequently in their college track. It could also be that faculty/staff hear most about students' families when they are causing disruption in the students' process through college. Since college attendance has become more commonplace for students and more of a necessity in the workplace, families may be more aware, more encouraging, and less obstructing of students' progress than indicated by prior research.

Faculty/staff interviewees also talked more about familial barriers associated with gender issues than students did. Specifically, faculty/staff identified more challenges related to being a female in college than female students did. Only one female first-generation student reported gender related issues. Her father failed to see the value of a college degree in the same way her mother did. Whereas her father made good money in the trades, her mother struggled in low-paying pink collar work. Her mother fervently encouraged her to go to college, while her father was unconcerned whether she went or not. This was striking in the family dynamics of this student; however, other students did not talk a great deal about how their gender influenced their college path. Faculty/staff interviewees gave several examples where women had not been supported in their pursuits or interests in college by their families simply because of stereotyped gender role expectations. This could be due to the study's small sample composed of more traditionally-aged students that perhaps was not fully representative of first-generation, low-income students at NWUU that staff/faculty served.

Faculty and staff interviewees talked positively about the strengths of these students which often included determination and a strong work ethic. One interviewee said he was surprised to find that many of the first-generation, low-income students he worked with were like "bull dogs," indicating their tenacity. He initially assumed they would lack self-esteem and think themselves unworthy. At times, he noted, these generally positive characteristics could be liabilities. This interviewee recalled working with a female student who had decided to be an engineer because she had

been told that women don't become engineers. Despite having immense challenges with math, she forged ahead. He recalled it took nearly a year to get her to accept pursuing another path. This story paralleled the experience of one of the student interviewees in this study who also had the goal of being an engineer and so he enrolled in several engineering classes his first term, flunked all of his classes, retook them, and flunked them all again. Another staff interviewee thought that many first-generation students were very resourceful and while, according to the literature, many had trouble, in her experience most of them figured college out for themselves through their determination. Correspondingly, these students' stories revealed their tenacity and determination. However, there were also indications in some students' stories that their experiences left them feeling worn down. This finding appeared to corroborate what two other faculty/staff interviewees talked about when they reported that some students possessed personality factors that caused problems for them such as, a lack of maturity, a lack of motivation to go to college, and/or "a negative attribution towards oneself" when they met barriers at the college. However, as pointed out by one staff/faculty interviewee, studies may see different things happening for students at different time points. Whereas this study extended past the first year of a student's college life, he, like other interviewees, mostly saw students during their initial transition into college within their first year. Faculty and staff working with students in their first year of college might see something different from what was uncovered in this study as students had already experienced the transition period through the first year of college at the time they were interviewed.

Interestingly, four out of the five faculty and staff interviewees disclosed their own family background in relation to first-generation status. Three of the interviewees self-identified as being first-generation themselves and talked about their own stories of both strength and oppression within the university system. Three interviewees thought that it would help first-generation, low-income students if faculty and staff who had been first-generation and/or low-income students themselves openly disclosed this information in the university setting. Ironically, one of these interviewees also described getting a voucher to give to her employer for her first job stating that she was the first person in her family to get a college degree and she chose not to use it so the job would be awarded on her own merit. She also described how she thought that faculty from well-educated backgrounds were easily distinguished by her because they were comfortable with the middle/upper class cultural script. They appeared naturally comfortable with subtle rules of etiquette within the academy like how to be a commanding presence, introduce oneself with authority, and appear unfettered by those more highly ranked than you. She thought they possessed a different level of confidence and ease than others, like herself, who did not come from a more privileged background. This faculty /staff's perspective seemed to parallel one student's report that her friend who seemed more relaxed about college.

My friend ... is pretty laid back with what she does. Oh, you know, don't worry that much about it. Just do what you can. Like me, I am like, oh, my god, how am I going to finish this. How am I going to do this? I need help Both of her parents graduated from college. Her dad majored in business and she is majoring in business, so I guess maybe there is that kind of feeling of, oh, my dad did it, I can do it too. It is like they are almost on the same level type of thing.

It appeared that there was some agreement, at least by first-generation faculty and staff, that revealing one's own background might be helpful. However, two interviewees also expressed some ambivalence about doing so among their non-first-generation, university peers.

Faculty and staff had different personal perspectives about where the preponderance of the responsibility lay for helping students progress. Generally, interviewees saw it as a combination of both the student taking personal responsibility for his/her education and the educational system assisting these students in more effective ways. However, faculty and staff sometimes leaned more towards one side or the other. One interviewee, for example, thought that first-generation, low-income students were more likely to drop out if they were not clear about the expectations of the university. She felt that some students didn't understand it was their responsibility to get good advising and get help with the financial aid form. Another interviewee talked more about students' responsibility to accept that they needed to change by getting away from people who were pulling them down and away from education. She reported that as much as some students wanted to be connected with their families, friends or boyfriends outside the university, they needed to eventually recognize and embrace the fact that they were experiencing something different and that their old relationships may not be able to stay in the same form if they wanted to succeed. Another interviewee said that the university tries to offer the maximum flexibility allowing them to easily transfer, move in and out of enrollment, or take one class at a time because students are working, have children, have familial pressures, and are

busy with other commitments. As a result, students can't ever achieve their goals. This interviewee said the university needs to partner with the students to help them achieve their goal, but not offer so much flexibility that students easily get sidetracked. She said the university needs to provide enough flexibility and advising to help them complete their degree.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Conclusions

Previous literature has found that first-generation, low-income students are a disadvantaged population at our universities today. Being from a low-income background and the first in their families to earn a four-year degree has been associated with both academic and cultural disadvantages that put these students at risk for leaving college. One aim of this study was to look at these students' lives over time in depth. Another was to examine the differences between students with these characteristics who continued at NWUU and those who did not.

In doing this, two striking ideas were apparent. First, students could not be easily categorized into those who persisted in college and those who did not. The majority of first-generation, low-income college students in this study rarely experienced a simple, continuous path into and through college. Instead, their paths were filled with turning points, transitions, decisions, successes and challenges that moved them in and out and among different institutions of higher education. Despite these ups and downs and ins and outs, most of the students in this study attempted to persevere in higher education in whatever way they could. Second, this population of students was heterogeneous, with students at both ends of a continuum - ranging from good students with a lot of support, skill, motivation and ability to students with tremendous academic, financial and personal challenges who navigated college alone.

These two findings have implications for how we conceptualize retention and how we work with this diverse group of students.

Getting through college is different for students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds than other students. A major reason for this is they have less money. However, if staying in college for first-generation, low-income students were only dependent on having enough money, then students in this study who were able to get money would all have succeeded. In this study, “financial issues” was the most talked about theme in students’ stories. However, it became apparent that financial issues encompassed more than how much money these students could secure for college. Students talked about their family’s financial resources, how their financial lives differentiated them and their peers, how their financial situations impacted their choices and decisions, and how their financial backgrounds impacted experiences throughout their lives. As previous research has shown, the characteristic of being first-generation adds a new dimension to the holistic understanding of these students’ experiences.

This leads to the question: Why, despite that all had less money and parents without a college degree, was there so much diversity of outcomes in this study? Why did some students continue, while others did not? To explain, individual differences among these students needed to be explored. First-generation, low-income students who left NWUU had needs that were unmet. These included: the need to be academically successful; the need to feel connected; the need to have supportive others who encouraged their continuation at NWUU; the need to understand the

process of college; the need to embrace that they were doing something of worth; and the need to feel good in their environment. Decisions were made by students based on these needs getting met and what they understood given their personal backgrounds. Resilient individuals who could get their needs met over time regardless of their disadvantaged backgrounds stayed, while those who could not, left. To assure completion, four-year institutions of higher education must respond to the needs of all students who enter into them. The findings from this study and this discussion lead to suggestions for how this can be done.

In order to highlight the complexities discovered in this study, a re-conceptualization of retention and a discussion of student diversity follows. Then, conclusions regarding financial issues, self, and family, which were the most frequently discussed topics in student interviews, are offered. Next, theoretical and practical implications are discussed. Finally, suggestions for future research along with an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of this study conclude this work.

Redefining Retention

One major finding discovered through continued contact with students was that students' paths were discontinuous as they dropped into and out of different institutions of higher education. Descriptions of students' paths included stories of dropping out, stopping out, and transferring. This pattern of college attendance and non-attendance has been shown to be relatively common among undergraduate students. Specifically, McCormick (2003) reported that approximately half of all undergraduates who begin at a four-year institution attend more than one institution

within six years, and about 20 percent attend more than two. However, this may be more common for disadvantaged students and lead to lower completion rates. A study by Goldrick-Rab (2006) reported similar findings. She found that interrupted pathways through college were more common among first-generation, low-income students and concluded that this appeared these patterns were less effective routes to timely degree completion.

Furthermore, many students made last minute switches into NWUU, which caused difficulties in acculturating to NWUU. Many transferred or left NWUU for a variety of reasons including: academic challenges, wanting to stay near family, dissatisfaction with college, and financial reasons. Most students did not see leaving the institution as a problem, and in some cases they felt were forced to do so for academic reasons. In several cases, it seemed like a good idea in order to alleviate stress. Additionally, almost all of the students who were not attending college at the time of the interview conceptualized their departure as simply “taking a break.” As several students who left did enter community college quickly, their conceptualization was not without merit. Many students thought they had jumped into NWUU without a clear purpose.

Although finding a better fit, or an easier way to go to college by leaving one institution for another makes sense in some ways for some students, as previously noted, it has larger implications for degree completion. Transferring or stopping out is perhaps even more consequential for first-generation, low-income students who

already have lower odds of finishing. One staff/faculty interviewee talked about the difficulties associated with multiple transferring of institutions.

We know that the longer it takes somebody to get through, the less likely they are going to make it. They accumulate a whole bunch of credits. They can't make any sense out of it. Sometimes they get just some degree. Well, let's see what courses you have taken. Oh, you have a lot over here, let's give you this degree. I don't think it focuses people either scholastically, academically, intellectually, or even toward a career to just be taking classes all over the place. You have to have some kind of a pathway that you want to follow. We have also looked at our pathways of students from the 1999 and 2000 cohorts coming out of Brown Community College and City Community College. The ones who move around a lot don't graduate at the same rate as those who either stay at one institution the whole time or stay at two institutions. They get the degree. If they are all over the place, they are not as likely to get a degree.

She also noted that while we have made it easier for students to accommodate work and raise their children while in college, we have diluted the process to the detriment of students' success. For first-generation, low-income students juggling several demands, finishing appears to be even harder than for non-first-generation, higher income students.

This qualitative research study raised more questions about switching behavior. Who switches? Why do they switch? And what are the gains and losses associated with switching institutions? These are just some of the questions that future research needs to address. First-generation students with low incomes cannot afford to be career students if their degrees do not lead to a tangible reward, after a time, staying may seem unwise. On the other hand, for some students, switching may be the only way they can continue with their education. According to the literature, making the claim that first-generation, low-income students finish at lower rates may just mean

that they take longer to finish and they finish in the only ways it makes sense to them. It may be a viable alternative to dropping out completely.

Diversity of Students

One university staff said it best when she noted, “There isn’t one thing you can say about first-generation students.” In addition to the diversity found among educational pathways, there were also many individual differences among students. Students who participated in this study struggled with some of the same issues facing traditional students, such as transitioning to college, fitting in to peer groups, deciding on a major focus, and meeting the academic challenges of college. Several students in the study said that their first realization that they were a first-generation student, a characteristic that might somehow be relevant to their ability to finish their degree, occurred when they received a letter inviting them into the study. Since this study purposely selected students who continued at NWUU and those who did not, at least half of the students could be considered “successful” if continuation was the standard with which to judge success. Furthermore, when students left, most quickly enrolled in another college after leaving. As discussed previously, students left NWUU for many reasons, but it seemed that there were also several students who stayed on the margins with possibilities of staying or leaving at any time. While a few students appeared to move along their college path with little doubt, hesitation or blockage, this was not the usual experience for many.

Nevertheless, some first-generation, low-income students needed little support to continue. These students were able to seek out information independently, get good

grades, ask questions when they needed answers, and could strongly advocate for themselves. However, at the opposite end of the spectrum there were students who were not ready academically or socially to meet the demands of college because they required a significant amount of supports. The majority of students fell in the middle. These students were on the edge of continuing or leaving at any time and often made the latter decision based on multiple frustrations and/or incomplete information. For these students, as perhaps opposed to more traditional students, their journeys seemed a little more stressful, a little bit longer, and a lot more arduous. In addition, with so much school wide heterogeneity as represented by NWUU's student body, students faced with difficulties were unlikely to attribute their challenges to their first-generation, low-income status and instead blamed themselves or the institution. Similar attributions of blame towards individual students held by institutions of higher education could result in the inadvertent reproduction of social class oppression. Instead of finding a way to support students from different backgrounds, institutions who blame attrition solely on student behavior would fail to be motivated to change their own unjust systems.

For these struggling students, small changes in the way they were attempting to survive in the college setting may have made a difference in whether they stayed or left. The findings that even first-generation, low-income students represent a large range of diversity on the university campus mean that working to improve student retention for this group will require an approach that serves individual students somewhat uniquely. While intensive case management models like the Student

Support Services Educational Opportunity Program at Northwestern Urban University and elsewhere are costly, the retention rates for these types of programs are high. One of the solutions may be finding a way to assess the unique needs of first-generation, low income college students and delivery of individualized services to them.

Financial Issues, Social Class, & Integration

Traditional models of retention use the background variable of family income to represent students' financial situations coming into college. However, this study found that financial issues encompassed a wider set of interacting variables that dynamically influenced students' educational paths across time. The concepts of "family income" and "integration" were found to be more complex than Tinto (1975; 1993) had hypothesized. These concepts were tied to a larger financial context for students. In this section, specific financial issues unique to first-generation, low-income students will be discussed. First, findings related to the financial aspects of income and material resources will be considered. Second, the social class variables of social and cultural capital and their influence on integration will be explored. Finally, how first-generation students made social comparisons between themselves and others in regard to income and social class factors will be discussed. It will be shown that income and class related financial variables influenced students' beliefs, practices, feelings and choices about college.

Family income shaped students' beliefs and, in some cases, practices, towards money. Yet, students' experiences of being low-income varied. There were students who had come from a persistently lower-income background and others who were

temporarily low-income, due to circumstances such as divorce, business failures, and other changes in family structure. These two types of economic conditions influenced how students thought about financial matters and how they approached financial planning for college differently. Although most students thought affording college was tough, students from families with temporary economic struggle talked less often about money in their interviews and had fewer concerns about paying for college. Students who had come from families who persistently endured financial difficulties, for the most part, associated stress, worry and insecurity with money. Their personal financial resources over time were consistent. These students were motivated not to endure a similar lifestyles to that of their parents. They were generally very money-conscious and more financially independent. However, although they appeared more conscientious, this did not always translate into effective financial planning and practice. While students with longer-term impoverished backgrounds may worry about finances in college, they may or may not have the necessary skills to effectively plan financially for college given their economic resources.

In addition to having fewer monetary resources, students in this study made choices that potentially reduced their opportunities for building social and cultural capital. Although the amount of financial resources students possessed influenced students' institutional choices, this was not the only criterion students used when deciding where to attend college. For most students, closeness to family was a larger factor. This decision may have impacted students both positively and negatively. The positive aspect of staying with family for these students included getting support,

staying connected, feeling secure and having fewer living expenses when family provided shelter or other resources. However, staying with family had the potential unintended consequences of limiting social and cultural capital. Less than a third of students in the study attended college in a traditional way by leaving their hometown and living on campus.

In addition to deciding where to go, students made choices about how to attend college. How they attended college had implications for social integration and college costs. Tinto (1975; 1993) held that the more integrated a student is, the better chances he or she has for degree attainment. However, this study found that social integration is more complex for first-generation, low income students. Students who approached a more traditional style of going to college had more opportunities for social integration. However, they experienced greater financial challenge (excluding students who received full financial aid). Furthermore, their increased interaction with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds amplified economic differences between themselves and others. Students who attended college in less traditional ways sometimes mentioned differences between themselves and their better-off college peers, but not as frequently as students who attended college more traditionally.

Students understood these differences in a number of ways; adopting different attitudes based on their assessment about what it meant for them. Primarily, students talked about the differences between themselves and other students with respect to material wealth. However, some students also indicated that their wealthier peers had less grateful attitudes towards people who provided them things or money. Some

associated the economic situation of others with a greater freedom from stress and burden. Interestingly, and perhaps as expected, lower-income students did not associate the economic opportunities that some students had with more skills and a greater ability to culturally navigate the university system. They generally thought of economic privilege only in terms of financial, material wealth and students' attitudes of gratitude towards their parents. Even when pressed to consider differences in social class beyond monetary resources as a reason why college might be easier for others compared to them, most students were reluctant to personalize that idea. Ironically, some very low-income individuals thought that a lack of opportunities based on lower social class status could be true for other people they knew, but not for themselves, for they were "making it." This might be a strength for these students and help them refute feelings of helplessness with a "can do" attitude. Yet, it could also cause them to incorrectly personalize the challenges they face. Only one student thought significant structural differences between himself and others he had met stemmed from social class differences. This older student said when he was younger he carried some resentment towards others and thought people with financial resources should be more grateful. Later, he came to ask himself, "Why would they be grateful? They don't know anything else." He talked about coming to the conclusion that it didn't matter; people with different "structures" were not any happier than he was, and did not have a tightly knit, albeit poor, family, like he did. Most students in the study did not see important differences between themselves and others. Students who recognized superficial material differences between themselves and others, adopted

varied attitudes about their situations. Some carried resentments and/or jealousy while others thought that students from wealthier backgrounds were simply lucky.

Characteristics of Self

The second most-talked-about topic in this study was the more abstract notion of self. Self as a category had to do with how students saw themselves overall and in their role as a student. Under the overarching category of self, students talked specifically about their beliefs in their academic ability or efficacy, their overall self-esteem, their sense of themselves as a student, their motivation and their coping style. Tinto (1975) noted that individual characteristics such as student ability were important factors, even more important than family background, in predicting student departure. He also mentioned personality and attitudinal differences as important, but did not highlight the contribution of these variables in his theory of retention. Individual differences between students captured by the topic of self were vital to understanding why some students stayed and others did not. Therefore, it is important that a holistic model of retention recognize the contribution individual factors in explaining student departure.

Looking more closely at the individual characteristics of these students, however, may lead to better interventions. For example, beyond just acquiring the academic skills and receiving information, some degree of getting through the college system has to do with individual characteristics that make getting through college either easier or harder for a person. Social and academic integration is inevitably impacted heavily by individual characteristics. For example, some first-generation,

low-income students may be less inclined to fully engage with the academic and social systems of the university, regardless of the amount of contact they have with the university, because of perceived cultural and social class differences between themselves and others. Their disconnection may be a result of social discomfort interacting with individuals outside their social class ranking, rather than having lowered goals or less institutional commitment. Students who have higher self-esteem, feel more self-efficacious, have high motivation and a strong ability to cope with adversity will inevitably attract others to help them, both socially and academically. They also be more likely to persevere. This was evident in the interviews with students. Upon meeting students, there was an almost instantaneous attraction or lack of attraction towards them. Students who were confident, self-assured and intellectually astute were easier to talk to. These interviews were easy and did not require large amounts of prompting, but instead flowed easily. Students who were inhibited and less self-assured were more difficult to coax responses from. The data collected was inevitably colored by my personal impressions and our experience of the interview together. Extrapolating from my own experience, students' ability to possess or learn important interpersonal skills or gifts that draw supportive people, or conversely repel social actors are important. The interaction between the individual characteristics of students with the university and their families while going through college can both support and affirm the student's place in college, strengthening highly valued individual characteristics that work for their new environment, or

conversely be antithetical to affirming positive notions of who they are as people and supporting behaviors that promote successful continuation.

Importance of Family

Family was talked about in a number of contexts. Students talked about family in terms of their current and past social contexts, family cultural issues, family financial issues, family support and/or lack of support, and in many other ways. Traditionally, the families of first-generation, low-income students have been conceptualized as non-supportive or even as barriers to students as they moved into academic college settings to take on a new social class and academic culture (London, 1992). However, newer studies have revealed the benefits for first-generation, lower-income students of being close with their family (Beegle, 2000; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Families influence students' college experience in complex ways. In this study, most students' families positively supported students by encouraging them to go to college. In some families, students were even encouraged by family members to not follow the path that they had taken. A small minority of students talked about their family being non-supportive or a barrier for their continuation. Families became a barrier to persistence when the student's family was generally unstable and what happened in the family interfered with the student's ability to perform in college. In two cases family members were directly unsupportive of the students' pursuits. In these cases siblings and one parent put down the idea of the student going to college or ridiculed their chosen path. Both

of these students believed there was some jealousy involved with their families' attitude.

Several students made decisions about where to attend college to stay near their families. Students who had received acceptance into higher-tiered universities chose not to attend. These decisions did not appear to be based on the family's dependence on the student, except in one case, but more the student's attachment to their family and the desire to stay close to them. As one student said,

One was I was very, very close to home. I was very home orientated. I had never really gone away. I would go on trips, but I had never gone somewhere for a year or anything like that. I was like, oh, my god, I am going to be living somewhere and my parents aren't going to be there. I don't have a car and how am I going to get home.

As previously discussed, some first-generation, low-income students make decisions based on their familiarity and connections with their families. This keeps them within their home communities, but can limit the expansion of their social circle and college experiences, preventing them from gathering social and cultural capital. Families and students may not see the advantage associated with going to colleges further away from home and/or colleges with students from different backgrounds. In addition, culturally, families with lower incomes may have a greater dependence on one another than families with higher income backgrounds so that leaving home is not a rite of passage, but something foreign and, as one student said, "traumatic." First-generation, low income students may be being asked to do more than non-first-generation middle/upper class students are asked to do if choosing to go away to college means the loss of everything with which they are connected. Students from

non-first-generation backgrounds may be expected to make small incremental steps away from what they know if expected to leave home to attend college, whereas first-generation, low-income students are asked to leap across potential culture, income and race lines by doing the same.

Families served as the first social structure from which students learned how to be. Families encouraged more than just attitudes about scholarly pursuits and future occupations in life. They colored students' perceptions of money and debt and were pivotal in cultivating a deep sense of values. Several students who were interviewed had family members who did anything in their power to help them go to college and succeed. Even when parents didn't have a clear understanding of the college system, they tried to learn. When family members did pull students away from their college pursuits, it was described by students as unintentional. For example, although his parents were supportive, Dalmar reported that his parents, like him, didn't know how college worked.

The first year, when I was doing that, that was kind of a good thing for them. Here [Dalmar] went to school and then he came back early. I would be home more and help more, but then [my father] understood, just like I did. I didn't understand, too. You can't just be – [my parents] don't know that you have to stay, go to the library and read books and stuff like that. They didn't know. But this year, I am going to the library and stuff, and then I come to school at like 9:00 and leave at 9:00 or 10:00 or 11:00, something like that, and I tell them I have to go the library, I have to read this, I have to do this stuff. [My parents] are like, the same as me, they are learning, too. They don't know. It is not like some other parents who went to college and then they say, "Why are you home early?" So they don't know.

Findings in this study show that families are still very important and integral to student success after students enter college. In addition to shelter, financial help,

social and emotional support, families encouraged students to leave and through education, make an easier life. For many students in the study, family is the cultural context that they take along with them to college instead of, as London (1992) described, associations they “take off” from. The family context shifts and adjusts as the new member must change to become bicultural within the academic setting, while remaining part of the family unit.

Theoretical Implications

Theory Revisions

The findings that emerged from this study did four things: 1) confirmed some elements of the traditional student theory of retention by Tinto (1975, 1993), 2) verified differences between retention models for traditional versus non-traditional students, 3) expanded understanding of social class contextual variables in current non-traditional models, and 4) provided support for building retention models that address retention on multiple levels.

Several of the theories of departure have described the phenomenon of retention on specific theoretical levels. Most well-known is Tinto’s (1975) Longitudinal Model of Dropout which describes student departure at a sociological level. Before re-addressing Tinto’s (1975,1993) models, there are some noted specific limitations with respect to these data. First, Tinto (1975) cautioned researchers against lumping together voluntary and involuntary leaving, reporting that these behaviors are different in character. In this study, there were some students who left after academic dismissal. This study included them for two reasons: 1) leaving college because of

academic problems is nevertheless a reason a first-generation, low-income student might leave and therefore relevant to the research questions, 2) students on academic dismissal from this institution are offered help to become re-eligible for enrollment at NWUU, but only one student in this study took this opportunity. This study was able to examine why he did, while others did not. Other students, while not academically dismissed, were nevertheless under duress due to academic challenges. All of these stories tell us something about the path of first-generation, low-income students.

Furthermore, Tinto (1993) talked about his model as distinguishing between temporary dropouts and permanent dropouts. The finding that most of the students went to another institution of higher education is again, part of the description of these students' paths. Excluding students whose pattern of college enrollment includes interrupted enrollment or transfer fails to capture an accurate picture of students' behavior. Despite this, Tinto's (1993) model is helpful in providing a template with which to examine how these data might fit or not fit his model. Furthermore, it is essential to understand the subsequent models of retention that have been built on his early work.

Tinto's (1993) model of retention holds that the departure of an individual from an institution results from the interactions between an individual with pre-enrollment individual attributes, previous schooling, family support, financial resources and dispositions (intentions and commitments) with both the academic and social systems in the institution. The individuals' experience in the academic and social systems, called "integration" by Tinto, modifies his or her intentions and goals.

Social and academic integration are important concepts in Tinto's model and have been scrutinized the most in the development of new models.

While Tinto's original model focused on traditional students, Bean and Metzner (1987) argued that attrition among non-traditional students was different. Their model of attrition among non-traditional students de-emphasized social integration and held that attrition is more related to the four sets of variables of: 1) academic variables (study habits, absenteeism, GPA, academic advising and course availability; 2) intent to leave as influenced by psychological outcomes of satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress; 3) background and defining variables such as age, enrollment status, residence, educational goals, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender; and 4) environmental variables such as finances, hours of employment, and family responsibilities. In addition to putting less emphasis on social integration, Bean and Metzner (1987) contend that environmental variables play a larger role in attrition among non-traditional students. In her study of successful bachelor degree recipients from intergenerational poverty, Beegle (2000) found that Bean and Metzner's (1987) retention model more closely captured the experiences of her interviewees, with the exception of Bean and Metzner's (1987) assertion that students who stay in college are more likely to be engaged in the college social life. Beegle (2000) focused on successful graduates from poverty backgrounds and found that most of them had not been socially engaged while in college. She, therefore, concluded that social integration was not a necessary ingredient for degree completion. Instead, she found that academic and social integration were impacted significantly by students'

social class culture and environmental variables played a bigger part in determining her interviewees' success. This current study suggested that social class did impact the experience of some students. However, Bean and Metzner's (1987) finding that social integration was loosely tied to attrition for some non-traditional students was replicated in this study. In order to more fully look at how concepts within Tinto's (1993) model might be understood in relationship to social class, academic integration, social integration, and goal commitment are discussed further.

Academic Integration

Data in this study showed that academic ability was a gatekeeper for persistence in college. Students who struggled academically were more likely to question their continuation in college. It was surprising that several students in this study who had academic problems in college reported doing well academically in high school. Doing well in high school and poorly in college had a number of negative effects on students' self-esteem and also their comfort with seeking help. Difficulty once they began college could be a result of numerous factors. In this study, some students indicated a lack of awareness about the higher academic expectations of college. Several of these students explicitly mentioned that they failed to gain the skills they needed from high school. This finding is corroborated by Tinto (1975, 1993) and Bean and Metzner (1987) who held high school preparation and/or high school GPA as prominent variables in their models for both traditional and non-traditional students, respectively.

External issues, such as work and family crises that drew students' time, energy and attention away from studying, were also major factors that influenced students' ability to stay engaged academically and continue in college. Along with external issues, financial resources, support and individual characteristics such as motivation and the ability to cope were also important. Again, early theorists recognized these external influences in their models to a greater or lesser extent. Tinto (1975) mentioned external issues in his early model and expanded on them in his revisions in 1993. Bean and Metzner (1987) gave much more weight to these types of issues in their model of attrition for non-traditional students. Beegle (2000) also found students in her study, who, although successful, struggled academically because they had large external demands on their time from family and work commitments.

Tinto (1975) described both the difficulties arising from high school preparation and challenges for students due to external commitments. He devoted little attention to why first-generation, low-income students might not seek help once they had academic problems or why they would choose to do college in a way that made it more difficult to do well academically. For these questions, students' experiences of academic culture and the dissonance between their cultural values and expectations and those of the university need to be examined. Exciting work delineating possible cultural differences between first-generation and traditional students has started to be done in this area. Collier and Morgan (2008) found differences among faculty and groups of students regarding issues of time management and coursework. Specifically, they found differences between traditional and first-generation college students'

understanding of faculty's implicit expectations, and theorized this could be accounted for by differences in their ability to master the student role and in the cultural capital they possessed before starting college. Studies like these give credence to the idea that some of the difficulty students have in navigating the system may have to do with cultural differences between students' family background and the academic system. The implicit understanding of what is expected may be taken for granted for by most traditional students. Students without this implicit knowledge may suffer academically and socially.

Social Integration

Social integration was an interesting factor in the study. Since Northwestern Urban University is a commuter university, there was an immense amount of diversity with respect to students' desire and ability to affiliate socially with the social network of the university. These findings suggest a theoretical middle ground among that of Tinto (1975, 1993), Bean and Metzner's (1987) and Beegle's (2000) work. It appeared that students in this study fell into four categories with regard to their degree of social integration desired and obtained. These four categories included: 1) students who wanted to socially integrate and were able to, 2) students who wanted to socially integrate and were not able to, 3) students who did not have an expectation or high desire to socially integrate and therefore did not, and 4) students who wanted to social integrate and they did so to the detriment of their academic performance (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Schematic of social integration at NWUU.

NWUU is a hybrid institution. While the majority of students commute to school, hold jobs, and attend college as an addition to their already full lives, there are also some opportunities for students to partake of more of the traditional college experience by living in the dorm and being part of a small, on-campus connected group.

Most of those interviewed appeared to attend the university like “typical” non-traditional students: they attended a college in their home state, lived off-campus with roommates or their family, and were not highly socially integrated into the university. This fails to accurately describe students within Tinto’s (1975) original model, but does confirm findings by more recent theorists who believe Tinto’s model relied too heavily on socialization to explain attrition since non-traditional students generally did not integrate fully into the college system (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Metzner & Bean, 1987). However, a small minority of students made choices that were either closer to or farther from that which is generally thought of as a “traditional” college experience including: separating from family to attend a college a significant distance from home, living on-campus with other students in dorms, and taking part socially in the university culture. As Bean and Metzner (1985) reported, traditional and nontraditional students cannot be easily classified as one or the other. While healthy social integration into the university appeared to support student’s continuation for some students, it was more complex than Tinto (1975, 1993) originally proposed. This study found variation among students with regard to their

need for affiliation with the institution and also their ability to find connection when they sought it out.

Interestingly, three students with high social integration in the university culture left the institution after their first year. These students wanted to socially integrate and did so to the detriment of their academic performance. The traditional university experience that includes living in the dorms, a high level of social integration, and a culture of student partying was particularly detrimental for these first-generation, low-income students in this study. For unique reasons, first-generation, low-income students may have three strikes against them. First, they have fewer resources than students with higher incomes, who can afford the more expensive, traditional college experiences. Second, their families may be less able to guide them through the financial planning required to responsibly manage the costs of college based on their lower student budgets. Third, they may be less prepared academically for college and therefore have less of an ability to absorb the academic costs associated with intense social engagement, compared to that of traditional, more academically prepared, students. All of the students who participated in a traditional college experience at NWUU had both financial and academic problems. Students who participated in a greater degree of financial planning seldom chose to live on-campus, unless they received significant financial aid.

In addition to the financial and academic barriers first-generation, low-income students could face when seeking a more traditional college experience, there may also be added social discomfort relating to higher-income, non-first-generation peers.

Students in this study who lived in the dorms and attended college in traditional ways talked more frequently and more intensely about economic differences between themselves and their higher-income, non-first-generation peers. Although they were able to form relationships with these other students, and at times to the detriment of their grades, these relationships appeared to be somewhat superficial.

These findings have implications for understanding how the encouragement of traditional forms of social integration in college could be contradictorily prescribed for these students. First-generation, low-income students may want a traditional experience and the social and cultural capital that can come with it, but seeking that experience could actually reduce their likelihood of persisting.

Students who attended the university in non-traditional ways tended to be less socially integrated into the college system and they talked less about differences between themselves and other students. Reactions to being less socially integrated varied among participants and appeared to be contingent on students' initial expectations about social connection going into college and their strategy for coping if those expectations were not met. Some students appeared to have a low need for social integration and perhaps most closely resemble the "typical" non-traditional student who is older, works more and spends little time on campus. For them, the social aspects of college were relatively unimportant, with the exception that if a student had satisfying social connections outside of the university that became hampered by college attendance, then these outside relationships could take priority. Some students with a high need for social connection within the university left if they were unable to

find it or got too involved with a peer group that did not support their persistence. Satisfying social connections outside of the university could compensate for reduced in-college connections as long as those connections stayed strong and were not impinged upon by attending the university. Like students with low social needs, if these students' off-campus relationships became threatened they were likely to leave.

Goal Commitment

In Tinto's (1975, 1993) model of retention, goal commitment is a fundamental variable. Accordingly, students come into the institution with a level of commitment to get a college degree. This commitment is either strengthened or weakened depending on whether the student becomes academically and socially integrated into the university system. Goal commitment relates to the goal of degree completion. However, underlying the goal of completing the degree for many students in this study was the implicit belief that a degree will be helpful for gaining entry into some type of professional field. In this way, the belief in the worth of a degree is coupled with commitment to the degree itself. Perhaps for first-generation individuals in particular, the belief in the worth of a degree may be more difficult to imagine. Some students in this study with unclear professional goals and doubts about the worth of their college degree left NWUU.

Although it is perhaps normal for students to change their focus of study and question how a college degree might fit into their future, this process was particularly distressing for many first-generation, low-income students in this study. Unlike higher-income students who possess greater financial, social and cultural capital

entering college, these students were unable to trust that if they made great sacrifices for college now, they would benefit later. This may result from three factors. First-generation, low-income students may have a limited ability to: 1) envision the job they want, 2) to plan how their degree gets translated into capital to get the job they want, 3) believe that they can do what others in their family have not, and 4) tolerate the short-term struggles in college for the long-term gain. Non-first-generation, higher-income students may be able to envision the careers they want and have a better understanding of what is involved with getting into those careers because of previous, close exposure to them. In addition, they may have career opportunities or know how to create opportunities because they already possess the social and cultural capital that first-generation, low-income students lack. Finally, non-first-generation students may have a higher tolerance for the challenges of college, and thus a greater commitment, because they have additional resources to help them cope and a trust that these resources are available to them.

Several students were focused on gaining a practical degree with which they could make a living and become financially secure. When they could not see the relevance or applications of the courses they took or had great doubt about the worth of their degree, students lost motivation and left. One staff/faculty interviewee reported that these students had difficulty navigating the system in ways that worked for them.

First-generation, low-income students cannot afford to be career students so they say that the practical application of what they learn for their degree is important to them, however they also make mistakes planning and strategizing

on how to make what they study useful for creating future job opportunities that will serve them most.

Another reason that students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds may experience challenges is their difficulty in embracing the upper/middle class value system prescribed by the university. Upper/middle social class values that privilege scholastic achievement, intellectualism, and individual wealth, may not resonate as strongly with students from lower class backgrounds. As a result, goal commitment and deeper notions of worth, both of particular classes and the degree itself, may be in question. Several students in this study talked about their dislike of the clustered general education requirements for the university. These students said that they felt like the clustered classes were irrelevant and “pointless.” Several students said they would have liked to take regular, un-clustered classes like “math” and “writing”, without a central thematic basis. During a member checking discussion with one student who talked about disliking the university’s requirements of the clustered courses it became evident that his dislike of these particular classes had to do with his perceived irrelevancy of the classes and the way they had been presented to him. This particular curriculum had been adopted by the university to help students complete their basic skills, but also to adopt different “modes of inquiry” through a topical presentation. This student reported that he had no interest in adopting different modes of inquiry and preferred, instead, to gain the reading and writing skills he would need at his future job. After asking him more about the pursuit of his degree, this student said that his father would often tell him that the only difference between him and his boss was a piece of paper. And because of that, his father’s boss made significantly

more money than his father did. While the student had been encouraged to pursue the “piece of paper”, his beliefs about what he wanted from college had little to do with the more lofty goals that the staff/faculty (from the triangulation interviews) talked about.

Some of the challenges students described, from the dissatisfaction with the curriculum to the inability to find the worth of college, could be related to tensions between the cultural values prescribed and upheld by the university and opposing values held by first-generation, low-income students and their families. During the triangulation interviews, staff and faculty talked about how college changed people into more aware, concerned, and enlightened individuals, whereas students were focused on getting a degree and financial security. To them, this made sense experientially. Only a minority of students saw the idea of becoming a more informed, changed person, in and of itself, worthy of the investment of their time and energy. These students’ intrinsic motivation saw them through rough times in college. While it could be argued that the opposing viewpoints between students and the university culture might simply denote a normal, developmental process that all young college students go through, it could also indicate a real difference with the potential to subtly exclude particular individuals. This finding would point towards further inquiry into how the value system of higher education embraces, or conversely, opposes, the ideologies of its citizens.

Another interesting insight was that the triangulation interviewees, who held the strongest beliefs about college being an important vehicle for value change among

students, were staff/faculty who had been first-generation college students themselves. Staff and faculty have, in some respects, bought into the university value system. They have embraced, at the level of experiential knowing, that the system works. Students who look at their path ahead, for whom it has not yet “worked”, may have yet to fully accept what staff and faculty know and advocate. They might be poorer students, still struggling with existential questions, reluctant to “take off” from their family, and less academically inclined than those who say that the struggle of college will be worth it in the end. Recognizing this tension still leaves more questions, but it also may suggest where to look for answers about why some students make it and others do not.

Bridging Theory Together to Build New Models

Previously hypothesized models describe the phenomena of attrition in a variety of theoretical levels. For example, Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model described the process of attrition at a sociological level, leaving out important cultural variables. Whereas Guiffreda (2006) considered contextual cultural variables based on his study of minority students, Beegle (2000) maintained that contextual social class variables impacted students from poverty. At the other end of the theoretical spectrum, Bean and Metzger’s (1987) model of non-traditional student attrition and Bean and Eaton’s (2000) Psychological Model of Student Retention focus more on individual level variables. The findings in this study indicate that a holistic model of attrition for first-generation, low-income students must include variables on multiple levels.

Whether students persisted or left had partly to do with individual factors. Constructs that emerged through examination of the code of “self” included student

identity, self-efficacy, motivation and coping. Similar observations were made by Bean and Easton (2000) who thought that psychological factors were important to consider when examining student leaving behavior. For example, Bean and Easton (2000) conceptualized motivation in their model as both an important background factor that students brought with them into the university and something that was shaped over time by students' application of attributions towards experiences in college. Similarly, this study showed that developmental changes in thinking, motivation and coping continued to be fluid throughout students' college experiences. Changes in these variables impacted students' perceptions and ultimately influenced their decisions to continue or leave college.

In addition, Guiffrida's (2006) cultural and family additions to Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory described attrition among these students more fully. Specifically, Guiffrida (2006) recognized the need for students to stay connected to their home communities. He reported, "While Tinto's theory recognizes the impact of family on pre-college commitment, to truly be descriptive of students who espouse collectivist cultural orientations, the theory must also recognize the potential of families and friends from home (or what I refer to broadly as home social systems), to support students once they arrive at college" (p. 456). In addition to adding home systems to one of the social systems with which the student interacts with while at college, he also added "Cultural Norms/Values (individualist versus collectivist)" to one of the pre-entry attributes and "Motivational Orientation (extrinsic versus intrinsic)" to the commitments column of Tinto's (1975, 1993) model.

Models for ethnically diverse students like the Family Education Model (FEM) created by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) for understanding retention among American Indian students also recognize the need for colleges to partner with family. Using the principles of social work and education, this model suggests that replicating the extended family structure within the college culture enhances feelings of belonging among American Indian students. A large component of this model is the family specialist who serves as a family social worker, educator, advisor, advocate and event planner. The family specialist works directly with the family to create a cultural connection between the university and the students' heritage. Aside from its use at the University of Montana's Department of Social Work, the FEM model has not been applied in any other mainstream institutions. This is other evidence that family and cultural issues need to be considered in a comprehensive theory of attrition.

Theoretical modifications to Tinto's (1975;1993) theory that add connections to family were supported in this study. The emergence of "immigrant stories" by students who either were immigrants themselves or had parents who were immigrants supported Guiffida (2006) and HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) findings that family connections are an integral part of some students' college experience. Family sat at the center of this type of storyline. Families were supportive and students were connected to the culture, values and historical context from the countries of their origin throughout their college experience. Students with this storyline talked about taking advantage of the educational opportunity that being in the United States afforded them. This motivated them to persist. Furthermore, when analyzing the

frequency of themes across all interviews, “family” was the third most frequently talked about topic. Guiffrida’s (2006) modifications were suggested as changes to more accurately describe departure behavior among minority students. However, in this study, the inclusion of what he called “Home Systems” appeared to be an important part of student retention applicable to both Caucasian first-generation, low-income students and students of color. First-generation, lower-income students of color and their Caucasian counterparts may be more likely to be connected to their home social system throughout the college process, and thus better understood by a theory that includes the family social system. This finding was also evident in Beegle’s (2000) work with successful students from poverty backgrounds. She noted that, “Most participants reported increased connections and family responsibilities rather than reporting incidences of separation from their families of origin as they entered college” (p. 255). This study found that many families were helpful in supporting students emotionally, socially and financially, despite their potential lack of knowledge about the college system and their lower-status income. A minority of students described family lives that were chaotic and challenging at the time they were attending college. As expected, this pulled these students away from college.

In sum, Tinto’s (1993) model would better describe attrition for these students if several modifications were made. In addition to the cultural factors of home systems recognized by Guiffrida (2006), the elements of academic integration, social integration and goal commitment should be understood within a social class context, as previously described. Furthermore, individual factors should be given more

emphasis. Finally, variables like financial resources should be recognized as more fluid over time instead of simply a static background characteristic. These changes would build on the current theory base and enhance understanding of what might influence departure for first-generation, low income students.

Suggestions & Recommendations

In keeping with the qualitative paradigm, students and staff were asked their perspective on what both students and the university could do to help first-generation, low-income students persist. Students gave several helpful suggestions. Some of the most frequently mentioned suggestions students gave to other students like themselves included:

- 1) Have clear reasons for going to college before going. Don't just jump in.
- 2) Plan in advance as much as possible.
- 3) Be proactive and take advantage of lots of opportunities. Don't be afraid to talk to people.
- 4) Be careful of falling in with a peer group that doesn't support your goals in college.
- 5) Believe in education and keep going no matter what.
- 6) Don't be afraid of the cost and apply for scholarships.
- 7) Be ready for difficulties dealing with your family while you attend college.
- 8) Expect everything to change.
- 9) Do whatever you can to set yourself up to succeed and not fail.

At the university level, students overall talked about getting more support. Advising was mentioned most often. Specifically, students wanted more advising. If they got advising, they talked about wanting a qualitatively different kind of advising than they had received. One student complained about having to see graduate students who were always too busy to do much except tell him what courses he needed to take for his degree, something he said he could have easily looked up. Instead, many students talked about wanting advising that was aimed at helping them choose a career and select a major that fit them. Students wanted someone who could guide them through deciding which classes to take, given who they were. This type of advising seemed to be different from what is traditionally offered both at Northwestern Urban University and at many universities in the US.

In addition to advising, some students thought that the university should have a specific program for first-generation students. These students thought that they were lost upon entering college, and their stories included a lot of fears. When students were told that NWUU did have a program for first-generation students, some were surprised. The program for first-generation students at NWUU was a research project, so it was expected that few students were aware of the program. Certainly the interviewees in this study, simultaneously acting as control group participants for the research project, were not aware. A few students wanted more social connection with college. This was not uniform across all students, but some students thought there should be more dorms for students to live in and more opportunities for students to connect.

The need for more financial resources was, as expected, mentioned as well. Students wanted the university and the federal government to be more invested in the education of first-generation students. Students thought the cost of going to college was difficult to manage. This was mentioned in both the stories and when asked about suggestions for the university. Students who had come from out of state felt particularly burdened by out of state university costs. They appeared to continually be making cost and benefit determinations.

Finally, a few students actually said that the university could not do anything that the university does not already do. These students felt like it was the responsibility of the student to do what needs to be done in order to complete their degree. These students thought that students were most responsible for making it work. Perhaps because they mentioned they had done most things by themselves, they believed ultimately it was up to them. Ray expressed this sentiment.

It is an individual thing. It is just like anything. It is whatever you want to take out of it, it is however much time you want to put into it. It is not like the college's fault. How are they going to finance people to go to every student's house and make sure that they are understanding it. It is just impossible to help them and make sure they are studying and this and that. After you get so old, it is your fault for not doing it. It is your fault for doing whatever the hell you are doing and what you are not doing.

Staff and faculty were also asked about improvements that could be made to the current state of affairs. Interviewees had very good ideas and also understood, to some degree, the barriers to putting some of those changes in place, including a lack of university resources, budget issues, and historical practices that resisted changes to the system. Still, some of these changes seemed to be easily implemented if agreed upon

and adopted. Specifically, most of the interviewees talked about having mandatory advising. It was evident that both students and staff/faculty were well aware that there were advising problems at Northwestern Urban University. When asked about one improvement that would make the school better, one interviewee said that everyone would say more resources for students. She reported that although NWUU was much larger than other institutions, they had significantly less staff. Another interviewee was able to put this in a historical context.

We don't have a tradition of having required advising for our students, and that is just part of our history, coming out of World War II as a school for returning veterans, adult students. They felt like, oh, we don't want to tell them too much. For some reason, 50 or 60 years later it is still hanging around in the air. We had an advising initiative that struggled because of resources.

Another suggestion from a couple of staff was having placement tests for students. Again, resource issues were cited as one of the barriers. One interviewee talked about having orientation a couple of weeks into the year as there was so much information that students got in a four hour stretch, many students could not absorb it all. Another interviewee thought that there should be a specific program for first-generation students that included incentives for students to join because many did not recognize the problem until it was too late or they were so discouraged. A similar sentiment was suggested by another interviewee who said that first-generation, low-income students needed to be identified early in the college process. He thought all students, but particularly first-generation students, would benefit from being placed for their math level, writing level and even knowing about the university's expectations. He commented that it would be great if everyone could have a mentor,

whether that was face to face or online. Generally, most interviewees thought that the university needed to be paying attention to these students more and nurturing them through the process.

In addition to listening to the suggestions by students, staff and faculty, the data in this study also support additional changes at several levels. At the student level, recognizing the diversity of these students is important. While some students were very lost, for others there was little distinction between them and other students. Building supports that respect students “where they are at” is important, but building supports for first-generation, low-income students must recognize they may have less knowledge of college and less comfort in college. This study revealed that mandatory motivational advising would be helpful to students. A “motivational coaching” model of advising would mean that students would have someone to help motivate them through college and teach them specific skills, rather than just impart knowledge, for navigating their way through college system.

Students should also be taught about social and cultural capital. They need help recognizing that college can be useful to their futures beyond the aim of simply getting a degree. Students should be informed about the worth of what they are learning and how what they decide today impacts their future goals. They would also benefit from having college experiences in high school and learning about ways to increase their social and cultural capital before they start college. First-generation, low-income students also may need to be taught financial skills early, before they go to college, by individuals without a profit making agenda.

This study offers valuable insight to social workers who work with first-generation, low-income individuals at the middle school, high school and college level. The pathway to college through to degree attainment requires a significant amount of support and endurance on the part of students and their families. Social workers who work in educational settings need to know about the strengths and barriers facing these students. This study showed that many of the students were disadvantaged prior to gaining entry into the university. At times, they made seemingly unimportant decisions without understanding the wider ramifications of those decisions on their future life trajectory. Many students also traversed the course through college by themselves. However, the impact of having one personal relationship or social class broker who could assist them along, the impact was significant.

At the university level, NWU needs to find ways to revise their general education curricula to better align with the values and backgrounds of their students. Students may not have a clear understanding of the value of the thematically-clustered courses that were taught at NWU or this theoretical model may be problematic for the students NWU serves in practice. In several of the stories, the dislike of a clustered learning general education curriculum was mentioned. Students even left the university and took classes elsewhere just to skip over this curriculum. While theoretical support for a particular educational practice may be strong, first-generation students with low incomes who are paying for their education need to be either

brought into the decision making process or helped to see how a new style of curriculum meets their needs.

Issues of social class need to be addressed and de-stigmatized at the institutional level. Middle/upper class, non-first-generation staff/faculty should be given tools to work with social class and first-generation issues. Family also needs to be considered a partner in educating individuals. Family was important for the success for these students. Many families in this study supported students, even when they weren't able to be cultural guides into and through college. Institutions need to join with families and speak with them about how and why to encourage their children to go to college.

At the higher education level, retention patterns are complex. There is both upward and downward transfer among students that makes understanding student behavior challenging. As evidenced by these data, the decision to drop out was not to be a one-time single decision, but rather a series of decisions over time. A culmination of events and experiences influenced these decisions that leaned them more towards staying or leaving. This study presented a richer understanding of what is happening with students in higher education over time and across institutions. If educators are invested in helping individuals thrive, then looking at student movement within the entire system of higher education is warranted. Institutional research looking across college campuses at students' paths would be useful in understanding this emerging phenomenon. Higher education also needs to find a way to promote both flexibility of the program and the ability to finish for students. Universities may be able to promote

messages to students about how to finish and what the costs of different types of programs are in terms of time and money. This study indicated that decisions about how to do college were sometimes based on incomplete information held by the student. Higher education can work with media to give more realistic depictions of college life for a number of different types of students and also be proactive in getting information to students about the realistic benefits of a college degree.

Finally, higher education needs to work with policy makers to recognize the heavy economic and cultural needs of students from lower-income backgrounds. It is obvious that these students need money to attend college. However, in addition to understanding students need for money, the subtle impacts of being from a lower-income background, such as not having cultural and social capital with which to navigate through life need full recognition. Helping policy makers understand the plight of these students through their stories and value systems simultaneously stimulates support and depersonalizes the effects of social class oppression. Connecting policy makers to this kind of context gives them a more holistic understanding and the ability to provide effective, targeted programs within institutions.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings from this study indicate future research directions. First, this study found that first-generation, low-income students drop in and out of institutions of higher education. Much of the previous research has focused on which individuals leave a particular college or university. This research falls short of finding ways to

adequately serve this vulnerable population. This study suggests a need to clarify research goals. If we want to determine what helps students overall succeed in degree completion, then more research into students' longitudinal experience through college and greater collaboration among institutions is essential.

Second, this study illuminated a need for research about how to deliver individualized support services for students in a cost-effective, far-reaching way for students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds. It is evident that these students are getting access to college as a result of positive directions in policy. But once many of them obtained access, they stayed on the edge of enrollment. Investigation into promising programs through demonstration projects encourages more encompassing and specifically-directed support for these students. For example, supporting research into innovative support services for first-generation students such as on-line mentoring support and podcast training videos for first-generation students as some innovative student support programs have created could be encouraged on a larger scale. In addition, research into service utilization and delivery that extends beyond students' first year may be warranted as this study found that students left or transferred after their first year. Research into how services are best delivered and implemented is essential within the changing demographics of universities across the nation.

Third, this study accentuated the need for further examination of the financial issues facing first-generation, low-income students. Several findings in this study highlighted further questions about the financial aspects of the college. For example:

1) What are the psychological and logistical barriers and decision processes related to financial aid borrowing and debt for first-generation, low-income backgrounds? 2) How does family background impact paying for college? 3) What are the long-term impacts of borrowing on middle-income students and lower-income students? 4) Is social class mobility related to students' financial attitudes and the decisions they make about college spending? 5) Do first-generation, low-income college students reap the same benefits as non-first-generation, low-income college students from degree attainment? Questions such as these emerged in the course of this research. Investigation into this most-frequently-talked-about theme by students would greatly enhance our understanding of the financial issues these students face. Findings from such research would help college administrators support students in making wise financial decisions about college based on their life context, promote policy change within borrowing institutions, advance our understanding about the importance of degree attainment, and reduce institutional leaving behavior.

We need to look carefully into social class oppression and continue to examine social phenomena through a critical social class lens. Social class differences among individuals are often subtle or unseen. While racial and ethnic differences continue to be well-researched in the practice field of education and social work, issues of class are only beginning to become the central foci of studies permeating educational literature. Although educational equity has been a central topic of research for some time, economic comparisons among individuals are often made in terms of monetary resources. Social class speaks to something qualitatively different. In this study, vast

differences in social class were seen despite all of the participants falling under the income level eligible for federal financial aid. Also interesting was the manner in which both students and staff/faculty interviewees understood their own social class in relationship to others within the social structure of the university. Social class cultural research like that of Aries and Seider (2007) who found differences in aspirations between a higher class group of students and a lower class group of students needs to be done in order to dismantle class barriers that become reproduced through higher education. Whereas many researchers have demonstrated that first-generation, low-income students are less likely to complete their degree than non-first-generation, low-income students, we are still investigating why. Social class research may be a promising step.

Finally, social work researchers need to look at these students within their own departments. Challenges retaining students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who could be more likely to enter fields like social work, is a problem for all departments of social work. The cultural tension that lies between students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds and middle/upper class academic culture might be magnified for social work students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds whose job it is to resist social class oppression. Therefore, social workers need to do research on social class issues between students in their own departments. Only by allowing students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds a voice, will schools of social work authentically align with their professional values.

Study Strengths and Limitations

One of the major strengths of this study was its ability to follow students over time. Studies of retention generally look at one point in time. The ability to follow individuals over time in this study provided the opportunity to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' educational paths and decision making processes. Another strength of this study was the ability to identify cultural issues facing students from lower income backgrounds from the perspectives of students themselves. In addition, the nuances of variables were captured through this narrative, qualitative study design. For example, the discovery that students had differing levels of desire for social connection within the university was an interesting finding that would have been difficult to uncover given a different methodological approach. Both the fine distinctions of important variables and the intensity or saliency with which they arose through stories, illustrated the complex relationships among variables and fueled future research questions. Finally, this study, unlike others previously, took a thorough look at the stories of individuals who left a specific institution of higher education. Thus, care was given to the voices of those who leave.

Although this study was beneficial in identifying the educational paths of students and revealing how first-generation, low-income students make the decision to leave college, there were some limitations. While this study captured stories over time, it may have been interesting to follow individuals for a longer length of time. As evidenced by these data, it was common for students to leave college and return. It would have been interesting to determine who actually obtained their degree and who

took alternative routes. The scope of this study did not allow for a more longitudinal account, but future research may find that following students qualitatively over time is revealing to our understanding of these students.

Another limitation of this study was the inability to generalize findings to the large population of first-generation, low-income students attending NWUU and the greater population of first-generation, low-income students across other campuses. Although qualitative studies are helpful to investigate the complex lives of individuals, it is difficult to conduct research beyond small groups. Nevertheless, this study was valuable in directing future possibilities and looking for repeating patterns on a wider scale.

Inherently challenging in this type of qualitative inquiry was the evaluation of the truth of student stories. Narrative research generally does not address the validity of stories in terms of their objective reality, but relies on the storyteller's interpretive framework and the co-construction of events by the researcher and teller. However, at times it was difficult to reconcile the varied student reactions in the face of somewhat objective data. This was most evident through looking at the quantitative data related to students' GPA. Some students reported that their grades were "very poor." Others, with equivalent or lower GPAs would report that they were doing "okay." These divergent perspectives were very interesting. Furthermore, students' perceptions of how much they studied, how much support they received, or whether they sought help also could not be verified with this study design. A larger question was why students left. Student asked why they left gave one simple, socially acceptable answer as their

first response. However, with time, some students' reasons for leaving became more complex, with more thorough answers. It is possible that certain elements of students' stories were purposefully hidden or even unrecognized by the student. While this could be interesting for catalyzing future research, it also could be problematic when trying to address retention solutions based on students' unverified accounts of their college experiences.

This collection of narratives showed that first-generation, low-income students are a diverse population of individuals who take a variety of paths through college. While most of these students expected they would go to college, their motivations and expectations varied. Students were motivated by issues around family; the aspiration for practical skills for future work; the desire to have an adventure; to find oneself; and/or to affirm who they were. The positive and negative evaluations of students' experiences over time strengthened or weakened their motivation and commitment to continuation. Financial issues, individual characteristics of self, and family were the most commonly discussed topics in students' stories. A deeper analysis of these topics showed that a select group of students possessed personal attributes that fit well within the college environment, had supportive family and other positive social influences, and were able to secure financial resources for continued enrollment. Being from a first-generation, low-income background was not a barrier for these students. At the opposite end of the continuum were the stories of students who struggled significantly in college. These students had less support, academic difficulties, challenges coping through college, difficulty sustaining motivation, and/or external life crises that pulled

them away from NWUU. For these students, the struggles they faced while in college became magnified by their lack of parental guides and financial status. In the middle of these two extremes were students for whom small experiences made large differences to their continuation or departure. This research showed that several factors could make a big difference in their success or failure - keeping strong family supports, or making new healthy supportive connections in college, having a supportive adult or network of individuals with knowledge of college who believes in them, learning how to do well academically, and/or having the ability to secure financial resources. For many of these students, it appeared that the accumulation of successes and failures in these areas push some out of college or keep some in. Small differences in situation led to big differences in outcomes.

Findings from this study also have theoretical applications. Cultural and individual aspects of student departure need attention to more fully describe the leaving behavior of first-generation, low-income students. Students talked about racial, ethnic, and social class issues within their stories. These cultural issues influenced social connection within the university and their extrinsic motivations for continuation. Individual aspects of students such as coping styles, intrinsic motivation, personal efficacy and student identity also influenced student trajectories over time. These personal attributes were influential for understanding how students made sense of their experiences in college and subsequently made future choices.

Given these findings, new policies need to be implemented to encourage students to finish. First-generation, low-income students need to be individually

assessed so that colleges can provide them with the specific information and support they need to be successful. Mandatory advising and motivational, skill-based "coaching" throughout their college experience should be provided. Furthermore, findings suggest that students need help making wise financial decisions and to be taught about how to accumulate social and cultural capital. First-generation, low-income students also need to be warned about the negative impacts of transferring institutions. Finally, schools and colleges need to gain a better understanding of social class issues and the hidden injuries of class oppression. This could include strengthening partnerships with families and helping students to understand the developmental process of college.

Being able to educate students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds and retain them until degree completion is vital to democracy and the economic well-being of all Americans. As the demographics of the US change at rapid rates, greater numbers of individuals from non-traditional backgrounds must be given an opportunity to be successful in the system of higher education. The most important finding from this study is that people do not quickly abandon their dreams of college no matter how poor or uneducated their families are. They leave when one experience after another takes away from, rather than adds to, their lives. Perhaps by listening to the small number of voices in this study we can support the diversity that exists today and strive to make our educational system inclusive, affirming and empowering.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPANTS

Invitation to Participate in an Important Research Study

This letter is an invitation to participate in an exciting research study conducted by Diane Cole from Portland State University, Graduate School of Social Work.

Being a first-generation student herself, Diane hopes to hear the educational stories of students similar to herself - like you - who came from a family where neither one of her parents graduated from college. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral degree and is under the supervision of Dr. Sandra Anderson.

Why Participate?

- Your story is unique and worthy of being told!
- You will have the opportunity to earn up to \$30.00 for simply sharing your story.
- Your participation in this study will help educate others about how first-generation students make decisions about college and navigate college life.
- Your story could help generate change in the university that makes the college experience better for other students like you.

What Would I Have To Do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to talk with Diane for approximately 90 minutes at the location of your choice. The interview will be on these general topics:

- Your experiences leading up to your decision to go to college.
- Your experiences of being a first-generation student while in college.
- Your decision about continuing or discontinuing attendance in college.
- Your plans for the future.

How Will Data Be Collected?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked for a private, confidential, one-on-one interview that is audiotaped and then transcribed.

In addition, with your permission, some background information will be collected from your student file at PSU to understand you in the context of your interview. All of the information, including the research interview, will be kept confidential throughout the study and identified with a pseudonym (code name) and project identification number only. If you agree to participate, Diane is the only person who will have access to your private information.

Are There Any Risks?

Participation in this study has the possibility of causing inconvenience and/or mild psychological discomfort. However, you may withdraw your participation in the study at any time and you are free to refuse to answer any of the interview questions asked of you without negative consequences.

How Do I Sign Up and/or Learn More?

You can reach Diane anytime in one of two ways:

- Phone: 503-725-8072
- On-line: diane@pdx.edu

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in the study, and it will not affect your relationship with any aspect of Portland State University.

Thank You!

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

Which Way? Exploring the educational paths of first-generation college students

Thank you for your interest in this research project! You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Diane Cole from Portland State University, Graduate School of Social Work. She hopes to learn more about the experiences of, and the attendance decisions made by, first-generation college students. According to the definition used by the Federal government, a “first-generation student” is a student from a family where neither parent had completed a 4-year college-level degree by the time he/she was 16 years old. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral degree and is under the supervision of Dr. Sandra Anderson. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because neither of your parents has earned a four-year college degree and you have completed one year of college at Portland State University.

What Will I Have To Do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to talk with the researcher for approximately 1.5-2 hours. The interview will be on these general topics:

- Your experiences leading up to your decision to go to college.
- Your experiences of being a first-generation student while in college.
- Your decision about continuing or discontinuing attendance in college.
- Your plans for the future.

How Will Data Be Collected?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked for a private, one-on-one interview that is audiotaped and then transcribed by the researcher. After the interview has been transcribed, you will be given the transcribed interview and asked if there are any comments you provided that you would like to change, delete, or elaborate upon to reflect what you would really like to convey.

In addition, some background information will be collected from your student file at PSU. Specifically, your age, ethnicity, gender, number of credits taken per term, and grade point average will be used to understand you in the context of your story. This information will be kept confidential throughout the study and identified with a pseudonym (code name) and project identification number only. Only the researcher will have access to what information belongs to you personally.

Are There Any Risks?

Participation in this study has the possibility of causing inconvenience and/or mild psychological discomfort in the form of anxiety, stress, sadness and/or embarrassment when sharing your personal experiences. However, you may withdraw your participation in the study at any time and you are free to refuse to answer any of the interview questions asked of you without negative consequences. Furthermore, you will have an opportunity to review and revise your interview answers after the interview has been transcribed.

What Are The Benefits?

If you decide to participate in this study you will be given an honorarium of \$30 for your time and thoughtful reflection during the interview. You will be paid in cash as soon as the interview is completed. In addition, the information gathered in this study has the potential to increase knowledge about first-generation college students and their decisions to continue or discontinue college attendance. This information could be used to support positive changes in the university which lead to better support for students.

How Will You Protect My Privacy?

All of the information collected from you in this study will be kept confidential. Your name will only be used on the consent and personal contact information forms. These will be kept in a locked box in the researcher's office separate from all other data. Any other information collected from you (e.g. interview audiotapes, computer files, transcribed data) will be assigned a project identification code and/or pseudonym. When reporting data, any unique identifiers that could possibly reveal your identity will be changed or omitted to maintain your confidentiality.

Any Questions?

If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research participant, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288. If you have questions about the study itself contact Diane Cole at Portland State University, Child Welfare Partnership, 440 University Center Building, 520 SW Harrison Street, #440, (503) 725-8072.

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in the study, and it will not affect your relationship with any parts of Portland State University. You may withdraw from this study at any time without affecting your relationship with Portland State University.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree to take part in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that, by signing, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own records.

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

1. What are some of the things that are going on in your life right now?
 - 1a. How is that different from last year?
2. How did you make the decision about whether or not to go to college? What was that like? For instance: what kinds of things were you thinking about, what was going on in your life at that point, what kinds of things influenced you to do one thing or another?
- 3a. Tell me a little about what it was like growing up for you and what your family thought about formal education.
- 3b. What were your family's ideas about education in terms of their expectations for your life?
- 3c. What about you, what was your attitude towards school?
4. Once you were in college, what was it like for you – what were some of the positive and not so positive aspects of that?
5. Some students from different backgrounds say that entering college is like entering a whole different way of life than what they were used to before college. Did you notice anything related to this idea when you started to attend college?
 - 5a. Did being from a first-generation background impact your experiences in college or at home in any particular way?
6. [Only non-returning students] Tell me about the whole process of not going back to college, when did you first start thinking about that?
7. Is there anything more you think the university could *have done* [*be doing*] to support your success in college?
8. What advice would you give to other first-generation students, like yourself, about going to college?
9. Suppose the next two years go the way you hope they will – that things work out pretty much the way you hope they will. What would that be like and where would you be two years from now?
10. If you were to give your educational life story a title, what would it be?

APPENDIX D
STUDENT TRAJECTORIES

Pattern 1: Max

Pattern 2: Dana

Pattern 3: Lailani

Pattern 4: Kia

APPENDIX E

TRIANGULATION INTERVIEW GUIDE

Triangulation Interview Guide

1. In your experience, are there any salient differences between first-generation, low-income students compared to non-first-generation students?

If yes, what have you noticed is unique to this population?

2. Research has found that first-generation, low-income students have more difficulty completing college than non-first-generation students?

In your opinion, what do you think this is due to?
How did you come to your beliefs?

3. What do you think these students need to be successful?
4. How you think PSU is supporting these students?
5. Is this support effective?

Why or why not?