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INTERRUPTING GENERATIONAL POVERTY: EXPERIENCES
AFFECTING SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF
A BACHELOR'S DEGREE

by
DONNA MARIE BEEGLE

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

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
in
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Portland State University
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The abstract and dissertation of Donna Marie Beegle for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership: Postsecondary Education were presented on July 17, 2000, and accepted by the dissertation committee and the doctoral program.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the dissertation of Donna Marie Beegle for the Doctor of Educational Leadership in Postsecondary Education presented July 17, 2000.

Title: Interrupting Generational Poverty: Experiences Affecting Successful Completion of a Bachelor's Degree

The problem addressed in this study can be stated thus: There are extremely limited numbers of students from the lowest economic class graduating from our nation's institutions of higher education. The challenge to institutions of higher education is how to improve access, support, and successful completion of higher education for students experiencing the most extreme poverty barriers.

Weber's (1946) social-class theory was selected to determine the meanings and interpretations of students from poverty backgrounds in regard to their success and

perceived barriers to success in completing college. This theoretical construct is based on the idea that collectively held meanings arise from three distinct although related dimensions of life including, lifestyles, context, and economic opportunity.

Focus group interviews with a representative group of 24 people who grew up in generational poverty were the main source of data (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). The focus group interviews were open-ended and designed to reveal the participants' subjective experience of completing a college degree (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). A demographic questionnaire administered to 56 respondents was used to complement the focus group interviews. The grounded theory approach guided the data collection and analysis process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

According to its objectives, the study results provided: (a) a description of the poverty-related conditions, (b) an overview of the early educational experiences of the participants, (c) a demographic profile, (d) an overview of perceived challenges and barriers to higher education and (e) a discussion of success factors.

The findings from this study would suggest five areas for educational improvement: (a) development of a campus climate sensitive to social class and poverty issues; (b) implementation of faculty, staff, and student social-class sensitivity training programs combined with curricular reform; (c) facilitation of connections to informal mentors; (d) articulation of connections between obtaining a college degree and earning a higher income; and an (e) exploration of expanding college partnerships with social service agencies that are geared to helping people in poverty.

DEDICATION

To the one who is ever present in my heart, mind and soul, to my daughter, Jennifer Marie Beegle (1979-1996), whose love of life and belief in the good of all people encourage me to be the best that I can be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have often thought about how I would even begin to thank the world of people that have supported me from being a 9th grade drop-out to completion of a doctorate. Describing the nurturing and encouragement that I have received could be a dissertation in itself. The following words are meant to acknowledge in a small way people who provided invaluable support.

I must begin with the person who has truly made this possible, my mother, Ruth Austin. She has played as big of a role in raising my children as I have. Many times, I would come home from college, overwhelmed with assignments and she would have dinner made, laundry done, and my entire house cleaned. When I felt I was not capable of achieving the next task, she provided invaluable encouragement and belief in my abilities. I share my degree with her.

I also share my degree with my first two children, Jennifer and Daniel. We were a team in every way. Jennifer was six and Daniel two when this educational journey began. I knew I was doing the right thing by going to college when in the first grade Daniel wrote a paper about what made him happy. In that paper he wrote,

"I am happy when my Mom goes to college." My heart nearly burst with emotion when at the age of 12, he told me he would have his doctorate in 14 years. Daniel was our family comedian throughout this educational journey. When life got difficult, he always found a way to make everyone smile. His love and affection made this journey a reality.

My daughter Jennifer took on responsibilities far beyond her age to support me in my education. At 10 years old, she sat through my three-hour biology classes diligently taking notes from the chalk board that I could not see with my poor vision. When it was mid-term or finals time, Jennifer became "Mom" to Daniel and took over the management of the house.

Jennifer not only took care of the house, but many times as she grew older, our roles reversed and she held me as I cried wondering if I could achieve my dream. Her motto was, "Anything is possible if we only believe." Jennifer was a poet and I was the recipient of much of her work. Her letters and poems were always full of appreciation and pride for me and the education I was getting. This love and encouragement made my work possible. Jennifer will not see this work. She was killed at the age of 17. Although she will not be

physically with me as I accept my doctorate, she lives on in my heart and influences everything that I do.

Tons of love and affection also go to Chuck Forbes, my life partner and the father of my two babies, Austin and Juliette. His belief in me combined with a "whatever it takes" attitude, nurtured me to fulfilling my dreams. I also thank Austin and Juliette who brought joy and optimism back to my life.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Today, as in the past, education continues to be held up as the best escape route from a life of poverty (Gans, 1995; Holleb, 1972; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1998; Myrdal, 1962). Many of those who rise to middle-class standing in the United States, do so primarily by obtaining a college education (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992). Paradoxically, people struggling with poverty are the least likely to achieve a college education (Mortenson, 1998; United States Department of Commerce, 1999). The poor tend to stay poor and have low levels of formal education generation after generation (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1998; United States Department of Commerce, 1999). With poverty continuing to be passed from generation to generation, there is a great need to understand how to increase college graduation rates for students from poverty backgrounds.

In 1947, President Truman's Commission on Higher Education identified five barriers to completing higher education (President's Commission on Higher Education,

1947). The barriers were race, gender, geography, religion, and poverty. Although all of these barriers continue to exist, research indicates that there has been some progress in diminishing the barriers of race, gender, geography, religion (Mortenson, 1993).

Mortenson (1991) studied college attendance and graduation rates for women, Blacks, Hispanics, and the poor during the period of 1940 to 1993. Mortenson found that race as a barrier to attending college, had diminished:

In 1940, a black person age twenty-five to twenty-nine had 25 percent the likelihood of a comparably aged White person of completing four years of college. By 1989 . . . the percentage had increased to 52 percent . . . (p. ix)

By 1993, the percentage had reached 54%. In 1973, a 25- to 29-year-old Hispanic person had 30% the likelihood of graduating from college as a White person from the same age group. In 1990, the likelihood for an Hispanic person had risen to 38% the chance of a White person completing college.

Gender statistics have also changed. In 1952, a woman had a 50% lower chance than a man of completing a bachelor's degree. In 1994, women were 108% as likely as males to receive a bachelor's degree (Chronicle of Higher Education Editors, 1994). The number of women completing a bachelor's degree continues to increase. By 1997, women received 62% of all bachelor's degrees awarded and were

124% as likely as males to achieve a bachelor's degree. For every 100 men in college, there were 124 women in college (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999).

According to Mortenson (1993), with improved transportation systems, increasing numbers of colleges and universities, and distance learning, geography as a barrier has declined and is close to being erased. Religion as a barrier to higher education has also declined to the point of no longer being studied as a barrier.

The one barrier that has not been partially overcome is the poverty barrier. In fact, the trend appears to be in the opposite direction. Students who have experienced poverty are eight times less likely to graduate from college than students from the rest of the population. The likelihood of graduating from college is reduced even more when students from the lowest income group are compared with students from the highest income group (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1991, 1995). In 1970, a person from the lowest income quartile had 16% the chance of completing a bachelor's degree of a person from the highest income quartile had. By 1989, that rate had fallen to 11% (Mortenson, 1991). In 1996, students from the lowest income levels in the United States have only 10% the chance of completing college as those from the

highest income levels have (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1995).

The trend of the poorest people in the U.S. being the least likely to attend college continues to worsen. Valadez (1998) examined the influences of sex, race, and class on students' decisions to apply to college. The social class variable had significant direct effects, with higher socioeconomic groups being more likely than lower socioeconomic groups to apply to college. Greenberg, Strawn, and Plimpton (1999) found that applications by welfare recipients for federal financial aid for higher education have dropped significantly since 1992. In 1992, 3.2% of welfare recipients applied for financial aid. By 1998, that number had dropped to 1.8% of welfare recipients applying for financial aid to attend college. Greenberg et al. attribute this decline to the changes in welfare policy which require recipients to enter the labor market. In the face of general improvements with gender, race, religion, and geography barriers to higher education, it is remarkable that the odds for prospective students from poverty backgrounds have grown worse.

Few strategies for overcoming the barriers that poverty poses to higher education have been reported. If the goal is to increase the college graduation rates of those in poverty, a social-class perspective must be the

framework for studying barriers to higher education. The social class perspective is the primary focus of this study. This focus examines how students growing up in poverty--regardless of race or sex--were able to achieve a bachelor's degree.

In the literature, there is no consistent definition for the concept of poverty (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Criteria used in the determination of poverty vary. Economists typically use income as the indicator. "Economists define the poor as those whose income is below minimum subsistence or minimum decent subsistence level" (Waxman, 1983, p. 1). Because the terms "minimum," "decent," and "subsistence," are relative, there is wide disagreement even among economists about the definition of poverty.

Lack of a consistent understanding of poverty presents two major concerns for researchers. First, the criteria used in the determination of poverty are not uniformly agreed upon. Second, the label, "the poor," obscures the facts that there are different types of poverty and different experiences for people who are poor. Waxman (1983) encouraged researchers to clearly state the criteria and context used to define poverty. This study uses the following criteria to define *generational poverty*:

1. poverty experienced by at least one set of grandparents of the respondent (poverty for grandparents subjectively defined by participants);
2. respondents' parents have a high school education or less;
3. respondents' parents experienced long-term spells of underemployment, long-term unemployment or lack of membership in the labor force;
4. respondents are the first in family to attend college.

These criteria are used to narrow the definition and present a clear understanding of how the term *generational poverty* is being used in this study. London (1992) discussed the complexity of poverty and noted that experiences of those in poverty vary widely. Because poverty is complex and experiences of poverty broad, it is clear that within this definition there are varying degrees of poverty and poverty experiences.

Research which does focus on poverty issues and higher education tends to focus on working-class poverty. Wilson (1996) offered a useful distinction between working-class poverty and underclass poverty. According to Wilson, people experiencing underclass poverty often share working-class experiences of underemployment, unemployment, labor-force dropouts, weak marriages, and

single parenthood (Wilson, 1996). However, those in underclass poverty are more likely to survive on funds received from unemployment, disability, welfare, social security, and underground activities (Wilson, 1987). These methods of survival create experiences that are not often discussed in the literature on overcoming barriers to completing higher education.

The experience of working-class poverty differs from underclass poverty in that working-class poverty may be temporary, and there is most often some income in working class families. Wilson (1996) suggested that working-class people tend to have the habit of working and are accustomed to control over some of their destiny. "A neighborhood in which people are poor but employed is different from a neighborhood in which people are poor and jobless" (p. xiii).

Waxman (1983) raised the issue of whether the poor being discussed by one researcher are the same as the poor being discussed by another. He suggested examining the context in which the discussion is taking place to determine whether various studies are referring to more or less the same population (Waxman, 1983). Sociologists tend to view poverty within the framework of social problems such as crime, mental illness, education, and family life (Waxman, 1983, p. 3). An example of the focus

on social problems can be found in the sociological literature linking class background and occupational status with education as the mediating variable (Sewell & Hauser, 1975).

Although few researchers have focused on class variables in access and completion of higher education, sociologists agree on the importance of education, both as a mechanism for status achievement and for reproducing class inequalities through inheritance (Collins, 1971; Good & Brophy, 1973; Jencks et al., 1979; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Stein, 1971). The education system can both promote achievement and reproduce class inequalities. Students in poor school districts may not receive opportunities to reach their academic potential. On the other hand, students in middle- and upper-class schools are often placed in educational environments which challenge and promote academic growth (Alexander, Cook, & McDill, 1978; Collins, 1971; Good & Brophy, 1973; Jencks et al., 1979; Kohn, 1969; McPortland, 1968; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Stein, 1971). How well a child performs in elementary school was found to be connected to social class background (Jencks et al., 1972). Jencks et al. (1972) found that children from upper-class families were more likely to have advantages which put them ahead of working-class families when they

entered school. These advantages include educational toys and books, and the role-modeling of reading and writing by their parents. Jencks et al. (1979) also found that teacher expectations varied toward children from lower- and upper-class families. Teachers expected more from children who came from middle- and upper-class families. These expectations led to differential treatment which led to better performance among the children from middle- and upper-class families (Good & Brophy, 1973; Jencks et al., 1979; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Stein, 1971).

McPortland (1968) determined that class background also shapes the chances of a student being "tracked" or placed into classes that prepare them for college or classes which provide vocational skills. Students from the lower classes were less likely to be placed in college preparatory courses than middle- and upper-class students (McPortland, 1968). Alexander, Cook, and McDill (1978) also examined the link between tracking and class background. Their study determined that students placed in college preparatory courses were less likely to drop out of school and more likely to attend college. Heyns (1974) argued that students are tracked into college or vocational tracks based on their intellectual skills, not their class background. Although Jencks et al. (1979)

also found students who were tracked based on their intellectual skills, they argued that because cognitive skills and academic performance are influenced by class background, tracking tends to separate students by class background.

Miller (1995) argued that social class cannot fully explain group differences in academic performances. Miller found that academic achievement gaps between minority students and White students were as large or larger in the middle and upper classes when using parental education and occupation as the social class indicators. Miller's study considered economic aspects of social class when examining academic achievement differences between minority and White students. Miller's study did not address generational poverty or consider Weber's (1946) notion of status and lifestyle, both which help to illuminate the context of poverty beyond the research framework of parental education and occupation.

The social-class factors of home environment (toys, books, role modeling of reading and writing), teacher expectations, and tracking were found to relate directly to college attendance (Jencks et al., 1972). Sewell and Hauser (1975) found that social-psychological variables also affect college attendance. Factors such as aspirations could explain 60 to 80% of the relationship

between class background and college attendance. Sewell and Hauser discovered that aspirations were influenced by parents and peers. Parents from the middle and upper classes were more likely to encourage their children to go to college. Additionally, having access to privileged peers whose parents worked in professional occupations such as doctors, lawyers, and other professionals influenced aspirations to attend college.

Sewell and Shah (1968) examined intelligence as a factor relating to college attendance. They found that 91.1% of students with high intelligence from middle- and upper-class families attended college, whereas, 40.1% of students with high intelligence from low-class backgrounds attended. In addition, 58% of students from middle and upper class families who were ranked low in intelligence attended college, compared with 9.3% of students ranked low in intelligence from the lower classes attended. Featherman and Hauser (1978) found that no matter what their intelligence ranking, 84.2% of the students from middle- and upper-class families attended college. Only 20.8% of students from lower-class background attended college. In short, class background has been found to strongly relate to college attendance, but social class is rarely the focus of studies on first-generation college students.

Collins (1971) contended that education maintains class boundaries. His work on the educational upgrading of occupations found that middle-class employment that required a high school diploma in the first half of the century, required a college degree by the late 1960s. As more middle-class people attained college degrees and more working class people attained high school degrees, the middle-class occupations began to require college degrees. A college education was once a guarantee of an elite income; it now brings middle-class position and middle-class pay. According to Collins, college education does not necessarily provide tools for a higher level occupation, but rather teaches values and styles.

The present study extends social class indicators beyond parental education and occupation to include Weber's (1946) notion of status and lifestyle. In addition to economic aspects of social class, I explore the conditions in which respondents grew up (including values and styles), their world view of education in general, and experiences which enabled them to complete college degrees.

This study focuses on people who have experienced underclass poverty as defined by Wilson (1987). It is not focused on members of the working class who occasionally experience poverty. The intent is to examine from the

students' perspectives, the factors which enable or discourage them in the completion of their bachelor's degrees.

Need for Study

Both current and past research on successful completion of a college degree reflects an overwhelming tendency to examine experiences of first generation college students in poverty from a race or sex perspective (Chaffee, 1992; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Weis, 1992). However, few studies address the link between poverty and completion of a bachelor's degree primarily through a social-class perspective (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1998).

In most studies of first-generation college students, social class is confounded with race or sex variables. Class issues are mentioned incidentally as one factor within race or sex barriers to higher education. Factors such as knowledge gaps, students' feelings of not "fitting in," poor grammar, lack of role models, preparation, and modes of attendance are presented in the literature as issues faced primarily by minority and women students. Women and minority students are described in the literature as less likely to understand fully the relationship between higher education and desired careers,

less likely to have experienced detailed preparations, and more likely to attend in non-traditional modes (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). There is little or no acknowledgment that many of the barriers identified as race or sex issues also face large numbers of White students, male and female, growing up in poverty.

Although a search of the literature found no studies focusing primarily on White poverty, the limited research which incidently includes students who are White and have experienced poverty, finds that factors such as lack of role models are common regardless of race or sex (Chaffee, 1992; London, 1992; Mortenson, 1998; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995; Weis, 1992). Although economic indicators are often foundational to sex and race bias, they are frequently overlooked. Using sex or race as the lens to study first generation students from poor backgrounds results in the development of policy and programs that are designed to address sex and race issues, but that fail to understand the core educational barriers presented by poverty (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992; Mortenson, 1998; Weis, 1992).

Researchers who study successful completion of college by disadvantaged populations tend to use the terms poverty and race interchangeably (Chaffee, 1992; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). This is

consistent with using race as a surrogate for class, in spite of overwhelming evidence that a child born into poverty in the United States regardless of race will likely remain permanently poor (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1998).

The confounding of race and class issues is clear when researchers discover class differences within a non-dominant racial group. Weis (1992) reported gaps in understanding between middle-class African American professors and poverty-stricken African American students. Students in her study expected the professors to understand and identify with their experiences of poverty because they shared race in common. The professors reported that they did not share experiences of poverty and ghetto life. Most had grown up in middle- and sometimes upper-class circumstances. The professors' and students' shared race did not enable them to identify on issues related to lack of opportunity due to material deprivation and other experiences of poverty.

Another example of the importance of recognizing class is provided in a 1992 California study of SAT scores by race and parental education (Kingstad, 1992). This study reveals that in White and Black families where the parents did not have a high school education, the White students scored up to 35% lower than Black students. The

Black students were participating in programs designed to raise their SAT scores. There were no such programs for the poor White students.

Sex- and race-based studies concerning poverty and education are illuminating for the populations being studied; however, they fail to recognize common experiences resulting from poverty which cross race and sex boundaries. Experiences such as hunger, lack of shelter, unemployment, illiteracy, high incarceration rates, lack of health care, and low education levels are common to all groups experiencing poverty (Mortenson, 1998). In 1996, 36.4 million families lived below the poverty level; fully 24.7 million of those families were White (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). It is true that the proportions of groups living in poverty are higher among minority communities. However, the actual numbers indicate that more than race issues are at play. The degree to which a community experiences poverty conditions is directly related to the socioeconomic status of the community.

Defining poverty experiences as "race" issues instead of "race-based conditions" can be destructive. Because poverty factors are often labeled as "race" issues, the various communities in poverty have difficulty recognizing their common struggles:

. . . the emphasis on racial differences has obscured the fact that African Americans, Whites, and other ethnic groups share many common concerns, are beset by many common problems, and have many common values, aspirations and hopes. (Wilson, 1996, p. xx)

In addition, researchers make assumptions and reinforce stereotypes which imply that all members of minority groups must have experienced or be experiencing poverty (Childers & hooks, 1990; Weis, 1992). In fact, many members of minority groups experience and have historically experienced middle- to upper-class lifestyles (Mortenson, 1998; Weis, 1992), and the largest numbers in poverty in the U.S. are White people (Goad, 1997). Because these facts are often left out of the discussion about barriers to higher education, stereotypes that confound race with class cloud the research on poverty and higher education completion.

Theoretical Background

Students experiencing poverty bring challenges to institutions of higher education. The challenge includes a recognition that social-class experiences influence students' abilities to be successful (Mortenson, 1995). Class theory demands a contextual examination which takes the view that economic and social factors influence behavior and conflict. Social classes are not separated by strict dividing lines. Rather, a "class" can be

labeled such according to the groups' economic or status designation. "Class" is an ambiguous term which has been used loosely in the United States. Class is a phenomenon which is distinct from caste. In societies where caste systems prevail, a person is born into a particular caste and, most often, will remain for their lifetime. An individual's place in life is well defined and clear from birth (Kerbo, 1991). However, in the United States it is assumed that a person can move in and out of different classes based on their own efforts. But the reality of social class in America is that the class position of an individual seldom changes. Some of the reasons for this immutability are due to past experiences, opportunities, and current expressions of inequality in social power and advantage (Goldthorpe, 1987).

The ambiguity of the term and its defining lines serve to obscure the "hidden injuries of class" as described by Sennett and Cobb (1973). Such injuries include limited opportunity and choice, lack of respect, and few opportunities for self development. The most common understanding of class is that "class pertains to hierarchical position in the social order and differential distribution of prestige based on that position" (Coser & Rosenberg, 1969, p. 377). Kerbo (1991) asserted that class divisions can be understood best based on the

following three criteria: (a) a person's position in the occupational structure, (b) a person's position in authority structures, and (c) a person's ownership of property. These three criteria intersect to create class divisions which are more or less distinct.

Karl Marx (cited in Coser & Rosenberg, 1969) used the following definition to explain class:

In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interest and their culture from those of the other classes and put them in hostile relationships to the latter, they form a class. (p. 385)

Marx argued that class could be defined in terms of what a person does, and what they are likely to do. In Marx's view, class related directly to ownership and the means of production.

Perhaps the most profound and lasting understanding of the complexities of class status came from the writings of Max Weber. To some extent, Weber (1946) agreed with Marx that class could be defined in exclusively economic or market terms. Weber argued that property and lack of property are the two basic categories of all class situations. But within these two categories, further distinctions exist. There are different kinds of property owners such as owners of domestic buildings, mines, and capital goods. Weber suggested that the way property is

distributed will shape life chances. People with little or no property receive little or no opportunity.

In addition to the distinction among types of property owners, Weber (cited in Coser & Rosenberg, 1969) included in his explanations descriptions of class "status" and power relations. Power and/or status were generally closely related to class. Status included everything associated with what Weber called societal honor. Societal honor required people to live a specific style of life. If they were not living in the style expected, they were looked upon as deficient. Weber suggested that class could be determined by how much a person had, and how much she or he was likely to get, that is to say, life chances. Weber felt that a person's life chances were not absolute givens, but a result of: (a) "the given distribution of property" (p. 391) and (b) "the structure of the concrete economic order" (p. 391). Weber believed that in a capitalistic society, if a person were born into a lower class, their class status would serve as an iron cage, preventing them from gaining access to most of the opportunities for upward mobility.

Weber (cited in Coser & Rosenberg, 1969) explained that status groups (classes) are phenomena resulting from the distribution of power within a community. Weber identified numerous forms of power in social structures,

including not only legitimate power or authority but also power derived from tradition, habit or custom, and fear of repression. Weber believed a person's power or lack thereof would affect their social status. Weber suggested that a status group could be recognized when "a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances" (p. 388). Each status group can expect a specific style of life. Individual expectations reflect the expectations of those with whom the individual identifies and interacts with. Because people who are poor generally interact with others who are poor, expectations remain consistent. People are set apart by where they live and their lifestyles (e.g., their house, food, clothes, car, jewelry, music, etc.).

London (1992), in his discussions of first-generation college students, reflected on the "culture" shock experienced as lower-class students come into contact with middle- (and sometimes upper-) class students. They listen to different music, eat different foods, read different materials, relate to others differently, think differently, have different expectations, different relationships to power, different experiences, and so on. The respective statuses or class norms are worlds apart.

Weber (1946) emphasized the importance of focusing on social class to explore life chances, opportunities for

income, and intergenerational social mobility. He believed that it was necessary to examine the social structure in which people live to fully understand a person's life chances. Weber also believed that people in certain classes were privileged through education and that those who did not receive an education experienced difficulty in competing in the labor market. The philosophical and theoretical perspectives of Weber's social-class theory provide a foundation for an account of students' experiences which emphasizes inequalities, power, and advantage. This framework supports the subject of this study. The focus is on examining barriers faced by those born into poverty in the U.S. and how they were able to overcome those barriers to achieve a bachelor's degree despite their class position.

Although Weber's theory addressed some of the complexities of poverty, no one theoretical framework can completely describe the life experiences of those living in poverty (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). People experiencing underclass poverty have different backgrounds, experiences, and life chances than those from other social-class backgrounds and often from each other (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992). At the same time, shared class background also creates some similar experiences (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Focusing on the similarities

of a particular class can illuminate the daily realities faced by members of that class. The nature of this research inquiry that strives to illuminate the ways in which barriers of generational poverty are overcome to achieve a bachelor's degree can best be approached by using a synthesis of Weber's social-class theory (1946) and ideas from social capital theories, social psychological, and cultural theoretical frameworks (these frameworks are discussed more fully in Chapter II). Weberian social-class theory was used as the guiding framework to examine student barriers to bachelor's degrees and the strategies they used to overcome them. Students' issues related to social-psychological and culture frameworks are also examined. This broader theoretical vision, recommended by Wilson (1996) and Foley (1990) provided the focus for my interpretation and integration of this research.

The Research Problem

The problem addressed in this study can be stated thus: there are extremely limited numbers of students from the lowest economic class graduating from our nation's institutions of higher education. As poverty rates grow and the disparity in degree attainment increases between the poorest students and others, the

next generation of poverty is perpetuated. Tumin (1953) argued that the greater the income disparity in any given society, the less likely that society would be able to discover the talent of its citizens. The extremely low numbers of people from poverty (including a high percentage of highly intelligent individuals) who become educated serves as a clear indicator of talent undiscovered. The challenge to institutions of higher education is how to improve access, support, and successful completion of higher education for students experiencing the most extreme poverty barriers.

The goal of this study is to illuminate the experiences of students coming from at least three generations of poverty who have successfully completed bachelor's degrees. A primary objective was to identify barriers to higher education for members experiencing underclass poverty and gain their perspectives on how to overcome these barriers. The focus of the fieldwork was to seek out common themes, strategies, and experiences among those who have grown up in families experiencing generational poverty who were successful in completing bachelor's degrees.

This research project was designed to augment existing research on the topic of successful college completion among students from generational poverty by

examining the perspective of the students on effective strategies. I considered the influences, as perceived by the students, within the college environment and society at large that contributed to successful completion of a bachelor's degree. The findings of this study have the potential of enabling educators, social service providers, and policy makers to reach those who have been traditionally left out of higher educational opportunities. Poverty has an isolating effect and is associated with a high level of shame in American society (Rubin, 1976; Waxman, 1983; Wilson, 1987). Because of its isolating effects, people who experience generational poverty may imagine that they are the only ones facing certain barriers. An illumination of the experiences of those who have lived in generational poverty may enable male and female students of varying races who know the experience of poverty to recognize their common struggles to achieve higher education and thus interrupt the cycle of underclass poverty. In addition, by giving voice to students from poverty, the study validates student experiences and makes it possible for others to learn that they are not alone.

Purpose and Research Questions

The primary purpose of this study was to examine effective strategies used by students from third-generational poverty to complete bachelor's degrees. The goal was to add an understanding of factors that encourage completion to the existing literature. The specific focus on third-generational poverty was an attempt by the researcher to explore the effects of long-term poverty on the attainment of college degrees. Two research questions guided the fieldwork in this study:

1. What are the institutional, environmental, and personal experiences of students from third generational poverty who have completed bachelor's degrees?
2. What strategies and experiences contributed to their success?

Definitions

These definitions apply to terms that are common throughout this study.

Social class is defined using Weber's (1946) multidimensional description of social stratification (economics, status, and power). The focus is on social relationships in which individuals and groups have daily involvement and which exert pervasive influence on their lives.

Generational poverty (underclass poverty) is operationally defined as poverty affecting a minimum of three generations who have experienced poverty according to the following four criteria adapted from Wilson's (1987) research on the underclass. The intent was to capture a reality not depicted in research focusing on race, sex, and working-class poverty:

1. poverty experienced by at least one set of grandparents of the respondent;
2. respondents' parents have a high school education or less;
3. respondents' parents experienced long-term spells of poverty, underemployment, long-term unemployment or lack of membership in the labor force;
4. respondents are the first in family to attend college.

A first generation college student is defined as a student for whom neither parent attended college.

Success is operationally defined as completion of the bachelor's degree.

Minority is used to refer to non-White populations.

Respondent is used to refer to those responding to the questionnaires.

Participant is used to refer to those participating in the focus groups.

Family of origin is used to describe parents, siblings, and relatives.

Nuclear family is used to describe spouse or children.

This chapter explored the problem of an extremely limited number of students from the lowest economic class graduating from our nation's institutions of higher education. The next chapter explores related literature.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

A large body of literature on first-generation college students provides the basis for the present study. This chapter explains the search process in reviewing that literature and then examines both theoretical frameworks and studies from the field.

Search Process

The following review was developed through a systematic process to examine how barriers faced by students from generational poverty can be overcome to enable such students to successfully complete a bachelor's degree. I began this research process with an initial review in the following areas: first-generation college students; low income and completion of a bachelor's degree; education attrition and retention; resiliency and education; welfare and education; history of poverty connected to education; socioeconomic class and higher education achievement; financial aid; academic persistence; mentoring; nontraditional students; oral and

print cultures; theories of poverty; intergenerational poverty; motivation; and class mobility. The literature that is most pertinent to this study was found in two areas: poverty theories and first-generation college students. The poverty theories illuminate how we have come to current understandings about poverty. The first-generation college student literature allows for a specific focus on higher education experiences. Much of the first-generation college literature does not focus on social class issues. However, Pascarella and Terenzini, (1991) in their review of first-generation college student literature found social class to be an important indicator of college attendance. They found that whether or not a student's parents attended college directly affected the student's socioeconomic status and background resources for attending college. Although occasional reference is made to some additional areas from the listing above when they are applicable to this study, poverty theories and first-generation college students are the focus of this review.

My research focus on students from generational poverty resulted from the initial exploration of the existing literature. Research concerning successful completion of college by those who are or were poor tended to focus on factors associated with working class students, women, and minority students. Research

indicates that women, minority populations, and those who have experienced working-class poverty enter higher education faced with financial and cultural barriers in addition to a lack of academic preparation necessary for college success (Chaffee, 1992; London, 1992; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Tinto, 1987; Weis, 1992). The research findings rarely show common experiences faced by students from generational poverty regardless of sex or race. Studies that include poor White students, find the factors attributed to race or sex are also common among poor White students (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1998). Additionally, there is little existing research which illuminates the factors which enable students to overcome generational poverty barriers to complete a bachelor's degree.

Levine and Nidiffer's (1996) research is one study that addresses poverty conditions that cross race and sex boundaries and their relation to and completion of higher education. Their research indicates that in the literature, there is no clear or unified policy toward higher education for the poor and no commonly agreed upon conception of what works best. Those born into poverty in the U.S. are the least likely to become college-educated citizens.

This is all the more disturbing as educational level has become, increasingly, a determinant of a living wage income in the U.S.:

Even one year of college can make a difference, cutting the poverty rate of African-American women heads of households by more than half from 51 percent to 21 percent; for Latinas, the poverty rate drops from 41 to 18.5 percent; and for White women, from 22 to 13 percent. (Piercy, Wolfe, & Gittell, 1998, p. B11)

Piercy et al. (1998) found the two-year college degree increased income of participants by 65% over that of high school graduates. I chose the bachelor's degree as the success indicator for this research because the literature shows that most people with bachelor's degrees will earn a family wage (as defined by the median income for a family of four) over the course of their career (Jones, 1998; Mortenson, 1995, 1998).

While some college and a two-year degree will increase income above that of a high school graduate, education which is less than a bachelor's degree may still result in poverty wages. "The unemployment rates of both low-skilled men and women are five times that among their college-educated counterparts" (Wilson, 1996, p. 28). A bachelor's degree is often referred to in the literature as a "passport to the middle class" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Jencks & Riesman, 1968; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). However, the numbers of people surviving on

extremely low-incomes who successfully achieve a bachelor's degree remain drastically low (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1998; Mortenson & Wu, 1990).

In addition to the economic benefits of higher education, research has found that the bachelor's degree increases satisfaction with work and life in general (Kates, 1991). Based on the existing literature on this topic, the bachelor's degree provides an opportunity to interrupt generational poverty (Mortenson, 1998). The goal of the study is to explore the complex conditions that must be dealt with in order to make substantial progress in providing higher educational opportunities for those experiencing generational poverty. The problems are not simple, and the factors are intertwined and often interactive. If the students are to be served, their aspirations, their problems, and their resources must be understood.

Theoretical Literature

This section provides an exploration of more recent theoretical frameworks used to explain poverty and its effects. Weber's (1946) theoretical framework (as described in Chapter I) provides the grounding for this study with ideas from these more recent theories incorporated as appropriate. Theories used to explain

issues related to poverty have, in general, not succeeded in explaining poverty (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). This section also examines advantages and limitations of poverty theories.

According to Wilson (1996) there are three critical aspects of poverty that must be taken into account to study the issue of poverty. These critical aspects are social psychological, social structural (which includes economic issues), and cultural factors that interact to influence experiences and life chances. Wilson argued that no one theoretical framework takes into account all three of these critical aspects. Instead elements of each are used in frameworks to study poverty. The social-psychological framework examines the relational aspects of poverty. This framework takes into account the context in which people are living within a given social structure, the attitudes and actions of the nonpoor toward the poor, and the effects of these attitudes and actions on people experiencing poverty (Waxman, 1983). Social-structural examinations of poverty explore the economic and situational perspectives of poverty. The focus of this theoretical framework views poverty conditions as the "normal results of situations where the dominant social structure is unfavorably disposed toward and restricts the options of the lower class" (Waxman, 1983, p. 4). The

situational view of poverty argues that although there may be differences between people who are middle class and people living in poverty, the differences do not cause poverty (Waxman, 1983). Researchers using a cultural perspective view the behavior and values of the poor as characteristically different from those of the dominant culture. Behavior and values are believed to be transmitted intergenerationally through socialization and become determinants of the lower social and economic status (Waxman, 1983). For culture-of-poverty theorists, characteristics of people living in poverty are the cause of their poverty (Gans, 1995). Each one of the following theoretical frameworks relies on the underlying principles of social psychological, social structural, and cultural frameworks in conducting research on poverty issues.

Rational-choice theory is an explanation of human behavior developed by Glasser (1965). It emphasizes the choices made by people and the structure of the incentives that they face. Rational choice is the dominant theoretical paradigm used in economic and policy analysis (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). It suggests that individuals examine the options they face, evaluate them according to their tastes and preferences, and then select the option that brings them the greatest utility or satisfaction. The implication is that choices made by those in poverty

may result in their continued poverty. The emphasis of this theory is in understanding the choices people face. Bane and Ellwood (1994) suggest that a limitation of this theoretical framework is that those judging others' choices and preferences have the "right" answers. It also attributes motives to people's behavior from the perspectives of those who have not experienced similar conditions. The rational-choice model considers current perceptions of choices, but does not consider past experiences of successes and failures. A criticism of rational-choice theory is that it fails to recognize the context in which choices are made.

Paulo Freire (video taped speech at Santa Cruz University, 1989) discovered in his research on poverty around the world, that the poor do not choose what they want. They choose what is possible within their context. Therefore, a second criticism of the rational-choice framework is that it assumes that the breadth of choice is the same for people who are poor and for those who are middle or upper class. The belief that the poor have choice and enjoy equal opportunity in an economic system may lead to the blaming of and lack of assistance for them (Ryan, 1992; Wilson, 1996). Rational-choice theory emphasizes personal responsibility, instead of inequities in the larger society, leading to an assumption that

people are choosing their life situations. Rational-choice theory implies options without considering the constraints placed on individuals by class status (Stitt-Gohdes, 1997).

Another framework for examining poverty comes from structural functionalists. Structural functionalists argue that only a limited number of individuals in any society have the talents to master the skills that are appropriate to higher paid positions (Davis & Moore, 1945). Structural functionalists believe that stratification is a natural function of any given society. They argue that individual attributes determine a person's place in a stratified society. This theory suggests that those who have talent will rise to the top. A more thorough understanding of social-class barriers challenges the functionalist perspective. Tumin (1953) illustrated this in his critical analysis of stratification. Tumin outlined critical arguments against the structural functionalist perspective. He argued that social stratification systems function to limit the possibilities of people who are poor through unequal access to opportunities. People who are born into poverty may not discover their full range of talent due to poverty conditions and lack of opportunity. Tumin also claimed that inequalities in social rewards in any society results

in hostility, suspicion, and distrust among the various social classes and limits the possibilities for social integration.

To the extent that the sense of significant membership in a society depends on one's place on the prestige ladder of the society, social stratification systems function to distribute unequally the sense of significant membership in the population. (p. 393)

Finally, Tumin suggested that stratification systems promote apathy and lack of motivation among the poor.

To the extent that participation or apathy depend upon the sense of significant membership in the society, social stratification systems function to distribute motivation to participate unequally in a population. (p. 393)

According to Tumin, despite the fact that social-class differences affect every aspect of our lives, the concept of social-class is not well understood. People are judged based on individual traits or choices they make without considering the context in which those traits or choices developed. Rational-choice theory does not consider social class. This results in the myth that people who are poor are "choosing" to be poor or making choices which cause their poverty (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). Rational-choice theory and structural functionalism are criticized for not exploring the social-structural or social-psychological factors influencing behavior (Bane & Ellwood, 1994).

One such theory that explores social-psychological and structural factors is the expectancy theory. Expectancy theory contends that social and economic institutions shape a person's sense of confidence and of control over their fate (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). Expectancy models emphasize the individual's perception of control over a desired outcome. People will act in a certain way only if they have an "expectancy" that the action is likely to move them toward a desired result (Atkinson, 1964). People who succeed gain confidence. Those who fail lose confidence. Persons suffering repeated failure may lose "motivation" (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). According to expectancy theories, hopelessness may result when people lose a sense of control over their lives. People become overwhelmed by their situations and lose the ability to seek out and use the opportunities available.

In expectancy models, people often incorrectly perceive their level of control over their destiny. They tend to believe that life happens to them based upon their previous experiences and the experiences of those around them. Motivation depends on estimation of the likelihood of success, the likelihood that particular behaviors will result in the outcome, and the value of the outcome (Hancock, 1995). If people do not have important

information and are not exposed to situations that refute their expectations, it is likely that their expectations will be shaped by the economic and social institutions with which they are connected (Bane & Ellwood, 1994).

Life history and expectations are particularly important in expectancy theory. Expectancy theory suggests that those with better educational and work experience will have higher expectations because they have more control over their lives. Those without education and opportunity for positive work experiences will have lower expectations because they believe they have little control over their life experiences. Expectancy theory implies that people's sense of confidence and control influences life events and whether or not they are open to new experiences (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). Expectancy theory relies heavily on individuals' expectations based on their experiences to describe behavior. Poverty is described by this theory as being directly related to what a person expects from life. Yet, since expectancy theory does not analyze social-structural and cultural factors it is inadequate when used by itself for addressing the foundations of poverty (Bane & Ellwood, 1994).

Cultural theories explore values and culture and can be useful in studying centers of concentrated urban poverty. Cultural theories typically emphasize that

groups differ widely in values, orientations, and expectations (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). Values, attitudes, and styles are used to explain different experiences, behavior, and outcomes of groups. Oscar Lewis (cited in Ferman, 1965) is the most noted theorist on the culture of poverty. His research is based on personal observations of families living in poverty. Lewis attempted to show through his research that people who are poor have different personalities and values than those who are not poor. His theory suggests that people are poor as a result of these differences. Kerbo (1991) summed up the five major points to Lewis's theory:

- 1) Because of the conditions of poverty, the poor are presented with unique problems in living (compared with the nonpoor).
- 2) In order to cope with these problems, the poor follow a unique lifestyle.
- 3) Through collective interaction and in the face of relative isolation from the nonpoor, this unique lifestyle becomes a common characteristic of the poor, producing common values, attitudes, and behavior. A common culture is developed.
- 4) Once this common subculture of poverty has become, in a sense, institutionalized, it is self-perpetuating. In other words, it becomes relatively independent of the social conditions of poverty that helped produce the subculture. The values, attitudes and behavior that are a part of this subculture are passed on to the children of the poor—that is, the children are socialized into this subculture of poverty.
- 5) Because this subculture is believed to shape the basic character and personality of people

raised in poverty, even if opportunities to become nonpoor arise, the poor will retain the traits that allowed them to adjust to the original conditions of poverty. Thus the poor will not be able to adjust to the new situation through values and behavior that will allow them to take advantage of new opportunities to become nonpoor. (p. 319)

According to characterizations made by culture-of-poverty theorists, those trapped by such a culture are said to exhibit antisocial and counterproductive behavior. According to Auletta (1983), the poor are a group that:

feels excluded from society, rejects commonly accepted values, suffer from behavioral as well as income deficiencies. They don't just tend to be poor; to most Americans their behavior seems aberrant. (p. xiii)

The underlying premise of the culture-of-poverty theory is that the causes of poverty are directly related to the characteristics of the poor. Gans (1995) critiqued the use of culture-of-poverty theory as a basis for examining the experiences of those living in poverty. He asserted that the conditions of poverty often cause the poor to violate their own morals. Because of their conditions of poverty, people who are poor may not be able to live up to ideals they value equally with people who are not poor (Gans, 1995). Cultural theories are criticized for "blaming" those who are poor for their life situations. Gans argued that the conditions of poverty and external societal forces must be fully considered. Wilson (1996) also criticized the sole use of culture-of-

poverty theories. He argued that culture-of-poverty theory does not incorporate the powerful and complex role of social environment in shaping life experiences.

"Cultural factors do play a role, but any adequate explanation of inner-city joblessness and poverty should take other variables into account" (Wilson, 1996, p. xiv).

Kohn (1969) examined some of the personality and value differences suggested in Lewis' research. His focus was on child socialization practices of working- and middle-class families. He found that working-class parents were more likely to stress external conformity to external rules, less self-reliance and creativity, and a tendency to work with things rather than ideas. Middle-class parents were more likely to emphasize self-reliance, initiative, a focus on ideas and people, achievement of higher occupation, and a higher level of deferred gratification. Sociologists believe these class differences in child rearing may help to limit intergenerational mobility in the class system (Kerbo, 1991). Kohn believed that differences in child rearing are correlated with parents' occupation. Working class parents have little or no authority in their jobs and have occupations that require conformity and unquestioned obedience. Kohn suggested that adult work behavior, a structural variable, is reflected in working-class child

rearing practices. Although Kohn's work examines individual characteristics and behavior, he differs somewhat from the culture of poverty theorists by recognizing structural influences. Culture-of-poverty theories which focus on the characteristics and personality of those living in poverty are criticized for deflecting interest from root causes of poverty and from questions about the structures in our society which help produce poverty (Kerbo, 1991).

Two more recent theories used to explain aspects of poverty and adversity are resiliency theory and social capital theory. In the following section, I have provided a brief description of the strengths perspective which underlies both resiliency and social capital theories and then provide an overview of the literature on resiliency and social capital theories (Rapp, 1998). The strengths perspective underlies both resiliency and social capital theories. It is not yet a theory, but a distinctive lens for examining practice.

Saleebey (1997) distinguished between the strengths perspective and resiliency. He asserted that the strengths perspective is "an organizing construct that embraces a set of assumptions and attributes" (p. 30). It provides a way of thinking about events and interactions. Resilience is "an attribute that epitomizes and

operationalizes what the strength perspective is all about" (p. 30). According to Saleebey, the philosophical underpinnings of the strengths perspective include five primary principles. The principle belief is that every individual, group, family, and community has strengths. In order to learn what these strengths are, stories, narratives, and personal accounts must be listened to. Second, there must be recognition that life's difficulties and challenges may be injurious, but they can also be viewed as sources of challenge and opportunity. Third, dreams, aspirations, and desires must be respected even if they appear to be set too high. It must be assumed that the upper limits of capacity are not known. The fourth principle asserts that a "helper" is best defined as a "collaborator" or "consultant," not an "expert," or "professional." The wisdom and resources of all parties concerned must be respected and acknowledged through listening to stories, fears, hopes, and dreams. The fifth and final principle of the strengths perspective is that every environment is full of resources. Much of the energy, talents, ideas, and tools in individuals and communities are disregarded.

Resiliency theory is commonly used in research that is concerned with understanding how people are able to overcome extreme barriers and find success (Bernard, 1994;

McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). Aspects of resiliency theory can be helpful for the present study in exploring the question of how students from third-generational poverty were able to achieve bachelor's degrees. There are three common definitions of resiliency in the literature. The first describes the developmental nature of resiliency theory. Resiliency theory is

the process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills than prior to the disruption that results from the event.
(Richardson, 1986, p. 1)

This model places emphasis on an individual's ability to cope prior to disruptive events and any new abilities resulting from the disruption. Higgins (1994) proposed a similar definition. His work described resiliency as "the process of self-righting and growth" (Higgins, 1994, p. 1). This model suggests that as disruption occurs, the person affected will not only "cope," but they manage to find a balance between the disruption and positive individual strengths, events or people in their lives. This process results in the person having gained additional coping skills. Wolin and Wolin (1993) described resiliency in a similar way. According to them, resiliency is "the capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship, and to repair yourself" (p. 5). All three definitions have to do with having the capacity to meet

challenges and become more able as a result of the challenge.

Initial studies using resiliency theory focused on individual characteristics and traits. Vaillant (1993) conducted a 50-year longitudinal study on men whose childhood was considered severely at-risk. From this study, Vaillant identified characteristics of resiliency that included resourcefulness, humor, empathy, worry, and the ability to plan realistically. Sheehy (1986) identified four characteristics of resiliency as well. They were the ability to bend according to circumstances, self-trust, social ease, and an understanding that one's plight was not unique. Higgins (1994) found three characteristics common among resilient individuals: a positive attitude; ability to confront problems and take charge of their own lives; and faith, which gave meaning to their lives. Benard (1994) provided a profile of a resilient child. This profile includes characteristics of social competence (responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, communication skills, a sense of humor, and any other pro social behavior), problem solving skills (abstract thought, reflection, and ability to find alternatives for cognitive and social problems), autonomy (sense of identity, abilities to act independently, and to exert control over one's life) and a sense of purpose and future

(Benard, 1997). Benard (1994), in an earlier study, asserted that resiliency is not a "trait" or a list of traits. It is a

. . . matrix of capacities, resources, talents, strengths, knowledge, and skills that continues to grow over time . . . It is not a . . . set of capabilities that only a few superkids possess . . . all human beings . . . have the potential for self-righting . . . (p. 11)

Saleebey (1997) recognized common individual characteristics, but like Benard, he asserted that resilience is not an inborn attribute. He advances the notion that resiliency results from interaction within a particular context and the significance of resilience is most helpful when examined within a social context:

Further understanding of [resilience] is enriched by listening closely to the [person's] definition of what life has been and is all about: by regard for apparent potentials, expectations, visions, hopes and desires: by the meanings one gives to or finds in his or her circumstances, and not the least, the quality and extent of relationships. (p. 28)

The growing body of inquiry and practice in the area of resiliency acknowledges the importance of examining social context (Benard, 1994; Jordan, 1992; Saleebey, 1997). Researchers are becoming more and more clear that the extent to which characteristics of resiliency are present is directly related to the existence of internal and external protective factors (Saleebey, 1997). This

has resulted in studies examining aspects of various institutions that foster resiliency.

Krovetz (1999) examined aspects of educational institutions that develop and support resiliency qualities. His work determined that school culture, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher/administrator roles have significant influence on whether students develop characteristics of resiliency. Krovetz described particular aspects of school which foster resiliency. These aspects are school cultures which had caring attitudes, high expectations, purposeful support, and meaningful student participation. Schools with these attributes emphasized the following: a sense of belonging for students, an emphasis on cooperation and celebrating successes, and the importance of leaders spending positive time with staff and students. Characteristics of the school curriculum which fostered resiliency were meaningful work, work that respects multi cultural student perspectives, and having student input in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Resiliency theorists assert that resiliency is a process and an effect of connection (Saleebey, 1997). Individuals do not operate in a vacuum. The research on resiliency calls for development of environments that challenge, support, and provide protective factors

enabling people to develop characteristics that see them through difficulties. The literature on resiliency theories and models is sparse. There is a need for studies to further test the underlying principles of this theory.

Like resilience theory, social capital theory operates on the five principles of strengths perspective. Coleman (1988) introduced the theoretical model of social capital in an exploration of community effects on completion of high school. Coleman defined social capital by referring to what it does. Coleman argued that social capital exists in the relationships among people, and comes through changes which facilitate action. An example of social capital would be a person knowing someone who knows someone at a company where they wish to work. The prospective employee contacts the friend who contacts their friend resulting in an interview or a job.

It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors-whether persons or corporate actors-within the structure. (p. S98)

The social capital is the relationship which facilitates action. Social capital is not tangible and therefore, difficult to grasp. Economic capital is wholly physical, embodied in material form. Human capital is less tangible, being embodied in the skills and abilities

of an individual. Bourdieu (1986) asserted that human capital is actually cultural capital. He argued that educational attainment is generally the measure of human capital and education is a socially constructed, class-biased indicator rather than an attribute of individual merit. Bourdieu (1974) introduced cultural capital to explain social and cultural reproduction. Cultural capital is defined as institutionalized attitudes, preferences, behavior, knowledge, beliefs and values (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) defined social capital as the amount of resources an individual or group possesses by virtue of a network of relationships and connections.

Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) definition relates closely to Weber's (1946) definition of status and lifestyle. A person's income, status, or network, directly impacts her or his mobility. Bourdieu argued that the educational system excludes the social and cultural resources of people who are poor by using unfamiliar linguistic styles, authority patterns, and learning styles. Students coming from low-social capital and low-income homes and neighborhoods struggle to adjust to school and this in turn determines their ability to turn social capital into human capital (Smrekar, 1996). Bourdieu (1974) asserted that the educational system

legitimizes class hierarchy by building on and reproducing cultural practices that are congruent with the ruling class.

Social capital researchers are particularly interested in the structure of social networks. Putnam (1995) defined social capital as common networks, norms and trust that enable people to work together more effectively to achieve shared objectives. These objectives can be social, political, or economic. Coleman (1988) described three components of social capital theory: (a) social trust, developed when obligations and expectations are met; (b) communication patterns which facilitate access to information that in turn help achieve priorities; and (c) community behavior norms which reward or influence certain kinds of behavior and sanction others.

Coleman (1988) placed trust at the center of his social capital thesis. He contended that the obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of social structures are what facilitates social capital. When extensive trustworthiness exists, a person or a group is able to accomplish much more than a person or comparable group without trustworthiness. The theory of social capital presumes that the more we connect with other people, the more we trust them, and vice versa. Putnam (1995) noted

it is not easy to determine cause and effect in the right order.

Coleman (1988) believed that if social programs made use of social capital theory, we could make more efficient use of human and economic resources. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) provide an example of how to implement social capital theory in addressing poverty and isolation in neighborhoods by mapping the community assets. This process requires locating all of the local assets and connecting them together in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness. The assets are the talents, skills, and capacities of the people and the resources in the community. Asset mapping focuses on the strengths of the people and their neighborhoods. Neighborhood assets could include an inventory of citizens' associations, businesses, and services provided in the community. Asset mapping illuminates missing community assets and provides opportunities for attracting and recruiting assets which are not yet available in the neighborhood. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) contended that this method can be used to consciously create or enhance social capital.

Social capital theory provides a framework for examining the effects of relationships and social networks on the improvement of poverty conditions. Walpole (1997) used social capital theory to analyze the effects of

social-class background on college impact and outcomes for 12,000 subjects from the Cooperative Institutional Research Project. Students participated in 1985, 1989, and 1994 by responding to a survey. Walpole found that nine years after entering college, students from low-income backgrounds were earning less money, had lower educational aspirations and attainment, and fewer were attending graduate school as compared with their peers from higher socioeconomic status. Race had no significant impact.

The social capital and educational success literature found that when socioeconomic status is controlled, social capital is related to education attainment and achievement (Harker, 1984; Persell, 1992; Smrekar, 1996; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996; Walpole, 1997). DeSouza (1998) used social capital theory to examine Hispanic youth in a White suburban neighborhood. Her work distinguished social capital in rich and poor neighborhoods. The social capital in richer neighborhoods served to help leverage opportunities, while the social capital in poorer neighborhoods served as social support, helping people to "get by." However, Woolcock (1998) argued that the connection between social capital and the static nature of social class has yet to be thoroughly developed.

Critics of social capital theory argue that the tools for exploring social capital are not well developed (Woolcock, 1998). Relationships between various forms of social capital and desired results they facilitate are under conceptualized. Social capital is difficult to measure because it is intangible. Coleman (1988) explained how social capital can arise or disappear without anyone wishing it so. It is a by-product of other activities. Additionally, causes and consequences of social trust, social networks, social norms are not well understood. Woolcock (1998) argued that much of the research using social capital theory relies on survey data that examine characteristics of individuals and families as the measures of social capital. This is problematic when by definition social capital is a feature of social interaction. Edwards and Foley (1997) contended that social capital researchers have yet to clearly distinguish what social capital is from what it does. Finally, the connection between social class reproduction and social capital needs additional attention. Researchers must identify nondominant norms and values that underlie social trust which is a crucial element of social capital theory.

Although the theories discussed above have added to our understanding of the experiences of poverty, Weber's social-class theory (as described in Chapter I) remains

the most inclusive and complete and underpins the theoretical framework of this study. Social class in a Weberian sense may be seen as comprising three distinct although related dimensions. The three dimensions include lifestyle, context, and economic opportunity. Weber's (1946) social-class theory avoids some of the limitations of other theories used to examine poverty by considering the impact of social class on lifestyle, context and economic opportunity. The Weberian social-class framework examines family social status (education, occupation, connections, and income) as well as individual ability and critical intervening experiences. An examination of these variables will address Wilson's (1996) three critical aspects of poverty: social-psychological, social-structural, and cultural factors. The present study examines students' family experiences, background, educational values, and life experiences in general, as well as life experiences during college completion. Weber's social-class theory used with additional ideas from the theoretical frameworks examined above, can reveal the relative significance of the major variables affecting successful educational outcomes for those experiencing generational poverty. This broader theoretical vision guided my interpretation and integration of this research.

Studies on First-Generation College Students

The studies examining first-generation college students have focused on the characteristics of first-generation college students and four critical dynamics: factors influencing making it to college; student experiences while in college; family/community relationships/support while in college; and factors affecting degree completion (Chaffee, 1992; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Tinto, 1987; Weis, 1992). This section explores the literature in these areas.

Characteristics of First- Generation College Students

Research indicates distinct differences between first-generation college students and traditional college students. According to Terenzini et al. (1995), the variable showing the largest difference between first-generation college students and traditional students is total family income. In addition, first-generation college students tend to be older, have more dependent children, expect to need additional time to complete their degrees, and be more confident in their choices of majors than traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1987). Other differences are directly related to academic experiences

such as lower critical thinking abilities, as well as lower reading and math levels. Social relationships also differ between the two groups. First-generation students spent less time with student peers and faculty. They were more likely to report a lack of concern from faculty members. They were also less likely to receive encouragement from their friends and family. First-generation college students worked more hours than traditional students. Finally, first-generation college students reported lower degree aspirations than traditional age students (Bean & Metzner, 1987). These differences create unique experiences which impact students' abilities to make it to college and attain their degrees.

Factors Influencing Making it to College

Several major studies have examined factors related to college attendance by first-generation college students. The dominant findings include: (a) college attendance for first-generation college students represents a departure from patterns established by family and friends, who may in turn become nonsupportive or obstructionist; (b) first generation college students are often less prepared academically for college than their classmates from college-educated families; and (c) first-

generation college students struggle with insufficient knowledge of time-management techniques (Chaffee, 1992; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Tinto, 1987; Weis, 1992). In addition to these dominant findings, studies show that class issues are connected with a student's likelihood of attending college (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Ottinger, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) examined poverty barriers and students who were successful in overcoming those barriers to attend college. They interviewed 24 students who ranged in age from 18-39 and were from Caucasian (12), African American (4), Hispanic (5), Asian (2), and interracial (1) backgrounds. All were receiving full financial aid and none had parents who had gone on to higher education. The major finding in this study was that each participant attributed their success in getting to college to a mentor who strongly valued and advocated for higher education. The mentors were relatives, friends, and professional or social contacts. Of the participants in their study, 12 successfully made it to expensive high status universities and 12 made it to community colleges. In examining their data further, Levine and Nidiffer found that the students who managed to

attend the most selective universities in the United States differed from those at the community college in age (elite college students were younger), in the numbers of people who mentored them, and the age at which they were connected to mentors. Those at the elite college had mentors prior to the sixth grade and those mentors connected them to others who mentored them through the next stages of their education. Those attending community colleges had found their mentors later in life, generally through a human services agency. Not one participant reported a program as being significant in their ability to attend college. It was the human contact/mentoring in each instance that made a difference (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996).

After discovering that poverty rates in 1996 were the highest since 1961, Levine and Nidiffer (1996) also found that people who have experienced poverty attend college at far lower rates than do the rest of the population. Students from families in the lowest-income quartile are two and one-half times less likely to enroll in college than those whose families are in the highest income quartile. They are eight times less likely to graduate (Mortenson & Wu, 1990). In 1970, the chance of earning a bachelor's degree for a person from a family in the bottom income quartile was 16% that of an individual from the top

income quartile. By 1989, that proportion had fallen to 11% (Mortenson, 1991). By September 1993, that percentage had fallen to 10% (Mortenson, 1993).

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) found that the traditional paths out of poverty for their participants (following role models, finding jobs, and getting married) have become less accessible. People who are "making it" have moved to newer neighborhoods, leaving few if any role models in the neighborhoods they have left. Relatively well-paying jobs in manufacturing which required a high school education or less had disappeared. In the past 30 years these jobs have continued to decline. The consequence has been a labor market that requires more education than most poor people have and a predominance of low-salaried service jobs in poor areas (Levine, 1989; Wilson, 1987). Finally, the availability of marriage partners has dropped due to higher rates of homicide, incarceration, unemployment, and drug abuse among men living in poverty (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996).

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) compared prospects of children in poor and middle-class neighborhoods who were born on the same day. They found that children from the poor neighborhood were:

- four times as likely to have unemployed parents
- six times as likely to live in a single-parent family

- more than three times as likely not to complete high school
- twenty times as likely not to graduate from college
- four times as likely to be unemployed
- more than three times as likely to die before reaching adulthood. (p. 11)

What the numbers show is that children born in poverty will experience throughout their lives conditions that are highly correlated with continued poverty. Levine and Nidiffer's (1996) findings show that the odds against escaping poverty are growing larger. They discovered that although traditional social institutions in poor neighborhoods often exist (such as family, friends, neighbors, churches, schools, etc.), they tend to represent an extension of the poverty conditions (i.e., inadequate education, school violence, churches overwhelmed and turning people away, etc.). Social institutions are focused on helping the poor cope with living in poverty-stricken neighborhoods instead of helping them move out of poverty. This concentration of people who are poor and have ineffective social institutions contributes to further isolation (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). The increased concentration of people who are poor results in few contacts with those who are not experiencing poverty. This in turn reduces knowledge of other life possibilities. Wilson's (1987) research anticipated these findings. He found that the poor in his

research had become more isolated, and the communities in which they reside had grown increasingly poorer.

The findings of Levine and Nidiffer's (1996) study reveal the obstacles faced by those experiencing poverty who want to go to college. Levine and Nidiffer focused the rest of their study on the mentors themselves and their commonalities. The one common theme from their interviews with mentors was that all believe education is the best way to overcome poverty. Levine and Nidiffer concluded with strong recommendations for developing mentor connections to those living in poverty. Their study does not follow the students through completion of their degrees, focusing only on how students make it to college.

A second groundbreaking study designed to discover how first-generation students get to college was conducted by London (1992). London began interviewing first-generation college students to discover what motivates them to attend, and once attending, the nature of their experiences. He found varying motives for students attending college. Some attend because of family forces. They want to "break away," or "do something different" than other family members. They want autonomy. Others go to college for intellectual fulfillment, career preparation, social standing, and financial ambition.

Many first-generation college students reported attending community college just to keep pace with their parents' standard of living. They believed they could no longer earn a living wage with only a high school diploma. London found that parents recognize this and encourage the students to attend a community college, but they also encourage their children not to become snobs.

The studies examining experiences of first-generation college students illustrate some barriers these students face in getting to college. Barriers such as being less prepared academically, not having role models to follow, and not understanding time-management. In addition, the studies by Levine and Nidiffer (1996) and London (1992) illustrate specific factors related to poverty which affect first-generation college students' abilities to make it to college. The present study uses these findings as a guide for examining first-generation college students' experiences beyond college attendance to completion of a bachelor's degree.

Student Experiences While in College

The majority of literature on first-generation college students is focused on their experiences while in college. Areas of focus include: academic preparation, persistence, withdrawal and retention models,

student/faculty relationships, social integration, and understanding the college system (Chaffee, 1992; Kiang, 1992; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Mortenson, 1998; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Bender, 1986; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1987; Weis, 1992). The research findings discussed in this section illustrate the complexities of understanding the factors which contribute to college students' successful completion.

Richardson and Bender (1986) captured factors affecting retention from the perspective of low-income students. Their study focused on college experiences of low-income students. They found that low-income students do not achieve as well, persist as long, or complete programs of study in the same proportion as students from middle- and upper-income groups. These findings are common in most studies concerning first-generation college students (Chaffee, 1992; Kiang, 1992; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Mortenson, 1998; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1987; Weis, 1992). The following two studies describe research findings which are also consistent with the major conclusions in other studies conducted with first-generation college students.

Richardson and Skinner (1992) conducted a study with 107 first-generation minority college graduates to examine personal, educational, and societal variables that contributed to their persistence in finishing their degrees. The researchers set out to identify the optimal environments for assisting first-generation students in obtaining degrees. Richardson and Skinner's major findings were that first-generation minority students were

less likely to understand fully the relationship between higher education and desired careers, less likely to have experienced detailed preparation, and more likely to attend in nontraditional modes. (p. 30)

To achieve their research goals, the interviews were focused on three areas: preparation (development of expectations about higher education); opportunity orientation (students' beliefs about positive adult roles and the role of education in achieving those roles); and mode of college going (which distinguishes between traditional college paths and nontraditional college paths).

In terms of preparation, Richardson and Skinner (1992) found that the majority of first-generation students often did not know what they were expected to know. Students reported voids in their knowledge and having to work "double-time" just to keep up. The authors found that taken for granted assumptions that "everyone

knows this," or "everyone has done that" can foster feelings of inadequacy and reinforce notions held by first-generation students about whether or not they belong in the college environment. The students interviewed by Richardson and Skinner expressed anguish over this issue. They also expressed confusion with the college system (financial aid, registration, and class times). Students new to the college environment reported being expected to "know what you're supposed to do," when they honestly did not.

Time management hindered preparation for first-generation students. Unlike traditional college students, they had not developed clear expectations about how time should be used and managed. Students with positive college role models experienced this much less than those who were "on their own" (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Another issue for students in the Richardson and Skinner (1992) study was their adding the student role to other roles such as of mother, father, and full-time worker. Because many students did not attend college directly out of high school they were already immersed in these other roles. Richardson and Skinner found that the student role did not come first for participants in their study. Physical contact with the university was minimal.

The authors were amazed by the "balancing acts" performed by minority students.

Finally, Richardson and Skinner (1992) explored the area of low expectations and academic achievement. Discussions of faculty expectations revealed that first-generation minority college students were not necessarily expected to achieve. Comments concerning college faculty expectations were directly related to racial discrimination. For example, students were told "Blacks usually get Cs in this course," or their credibility was constantly challenged. Participants reported reinforced feelings of not belonging as a result. Richardson and Skinner did not explore social class.

Kiang's (1992) research with first-generation Asian college students supports Richardson and Skinner's (1992) findings. Asian students reported a lack of academic preparation and limited support systems, and they did not attend college in traditional modes. Their college experiences included on and off patterns of college going. All of these factors were significant issues affecting student success in college. Both of these studies set out to illuminate personal, educational, and societal factors which influence first-generation minority students. Although the focus was on minority students, the findings are consistent with other empirical studies on first-

generation college students from differing racial backgrounds (including first-generation White students). The participants in these studies share being first-generation college students. The common themes of lack of academic preparation, limited support systems, and nontraditional modes of college-going are factors which affect the majority of first-generation college students regardless of race (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992). One significant difference revealed in studies conducted with only minority students was that minority students in addition to facing lack of income issues. They were discriminated against based on their race (Kiang, 1992; Minner, 1995; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Weis, 1992).

In a study which examines race, class, and sex issues, Weis (1992) took a somewhat different approach to examining the experiences of first-generation college students. The focus on academic experiences was expanded to include race, class, and sex variables. Weis and her assistants conducted a one-year ethnographic study in order to hear directly from first-generation college students and to understand the cultural conflicts they faced within a community college. The location of the study was a community college on the edge of the "urban ghetto" in a large northeastern city. The college served

predominately poor Black students. Small numbers of poor and working class White students also attended. The academic focus was liberal arts, but the college offered vocational programs as well.

Weis' (1992) findings revealed that different race, class, and sex groups have different experiences in schools and that each of these groups experiences cultural conflict based upon the "constructed other." Tensions were reported most among: (a) Black and White students, (b) Black middle class faculty and Black urban poor students, and (c) Black male and Black female students. Weis discussed class tensions within the Black community as a dominant intra-institutional conflict. Weis found Black students and Black faculty to be highly critical of one another. She attributed this to underlying class tension because similar criticisms were not voiced except by Black students and Black faculty. Black students reported that Black teachers were too "hard" on them. White teachers, they reported, taught more simply and made it easier to understand the material.

Black teachers were also criticized for not "sticking" with other Black people. According to one student in the study, "They want to stay comfortable, have their wine and cheese and their nice homes, and ignore" (Weis, 1992, p. 20) what Black students are going through.

Black teachers described difficulty in relating to the education levels of Black students (e.g., not being able to write their names, poor grammar, no knowledge of history). One Black teacher said, "I didn't realize that some of these students had no orientation in studying or in being a scholar or being intellectually curious" (p. 21). Black teachers claimed that because they are Black, they were expected to have some special understanding of class issues. Black teachers reported other kinds of training and background than their students at this college. Some poor Black students said, "Hey you're like us, give us a break" to their Black teachers. Black teachers felt that the break they wanted was to "slide" through the class (p. 22). Black teachers reported this behavior from predominately Black males.

The middle-class faculty felt that they have worked hard to get where they are and that the students are not serious. The black underclass students reported that faculty did not take enough responsibility for them now that the faculty have made it themselves. (p. 23)

Although racism was apparent in the experiences of the first-generation college students, Weis reported that class tensions were even more pronounced. Class issues were particularly obvious in the statements made by Black students and Black faculty. Weis did not examine the similarities between poor Whites and poor Blacks due to the small number of Whites. It was not clear in Weis'

study what efforts were made to discern differences and similarities within the White population interviewed. White students were lumped with all White students, making their class experience invisible. Common backgrounds and shared class experiences of the students which cross race barriers were not examined.

Much of the literature on student experiences while in college does not focus on social class. Issues related to poverty are most often labeled as minority issues by researchers (Kiang, 1992; Padron, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Family/Community Relationships/ Support While in College

A limited number of researchers included family and community relationships and levels of support for first-generation college students as part of their studies (Chaffee, 1992; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992; Minner, 1995; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Swerling, 1992; Tinto, 1987; Weis, 1992). The major findings in this area were that first-generation students struggle to find balance between their new roles as college students and their roles in their families and communities.

London (1992) is one of the few researchers who focuses in on family/community relationships. He found

that students receive mixed messages from their families concerning college attendance. Participants in his study reported that families wanted them to go to college, but they did not want them to become too educated for fear that they might become distant. London discussed the mixed messages and student motivations in terms of structural mobility. London found in his interviews that the "breaking away" was often more than students initially bargained for.

London (1992) suggested that first-generation college students enter a new "culture." Excerpts from London's interviews indicated that students feel they no longer "fit in" with their families and friends. He suggested that students are often unaware that increased education would influence their memberships in cultural groups previously shared with loved ones. Following Weber's notion of status group, London reported that participants in his study felt that a specific style of life was expected in order to belong. London reported that as first-generation college students became exposed to people who are living differently, and to different information, they adopted new behaviors that were contrary to what was expected in their previous "circle."

Included in Weber's (1946) definition of "style of life" are: language, social conventions, rituals,

patterns of economic consumption, understandings regarding outsiders, relations with outsiders, and matters of taste in food, clothing, grooming, and hairdo. Students interviewed by London (1992), report experiencing changes in all of these areas as well as changes in taste for music, sports, cars, and recreation as a result of their education. The outcome was often a distancing from family and friends, as well as a distancing from their past. Students began to be viewed as not caring, or as being disloyal to their loved ones. London determined that for the participants in his study, becoming educated required leaving behind family members.

The first-generation college students in London's study were caught between two worlds. They were not truly accepted in the college environment (they dressed, talked, and acted differently than the traditional students), and they were no longer truly accepted by their families and friends. They struggled to conform to the norms of other college students and at the same time, they were ridiculed or looked at suspiciously by loved ones (London, 1992).

London's (1992) study illustrated how college matriculation for first-generation college students is linked to multi-generational family dynamics and how these students reconcile (or do not reconcile) the often conflicting requirements of family membership and

educational mobility. Although London examined multiple issues, he does so from a social-psychological theoretical framework and does not consider social class.

Richardson and Skinner (1992) also looked at family/community relationships and found that first-generation minority students reported being discouraged from attending college by family, friends, and even neighborhood businesses. Education was considered by many as a waste of time and not valued in their communities. Poor minority students reported being dissuaded by acquaintances who had experienced discrimination in the workplace in spite of their college degrees. Richardson and Skinner found that first-generation minority college students experience discrimination based on where they live, words they use (or do not use), subjects they discuss (or do not discuss--i.e., middle- and upper-class cultural literacy), mannerisms, orientation toward others, job history, and personal references. Levine and Nidiffer (1996) found these to be class issues that cross race boundaries. White subjects in their study also reported these experiences.

Minner (1995), Weis (1992) and Swerling (1992) also found "breaking away" issues for first-generation college students. Minner's study focused on Native American first-generation college students who had dropped out of

college. Family obligations and their abilities to offer support were cited as significant reasons for dropping out. Swerling's study focused on adult first-generation college students. Students reported that family membership conflicted with their academic experiences. Weis found students reporting overwhelmingly that family relationships and norms were inconsistent with their academic experiences.

There is no question but that students, most of whom are first-generation college attenders, encounter cultures in these colleges that exist in at least partial conflict with the cultures of their family and neighborhood. (Weis, 1992, p. 13)

Haro (1994) surveyed 151 Hispanic first-generation college students to identify critical factors in decisions to persist or to dropout. Participants in this study reported strong encouragement and support from their families as a factor in their decisions to persist. Family members provided emotional support as well as practical support. Participants also reported conflicts in their family/community roles with the higher education institution as factors discouraging college completion. These studies describe cultural conflicts between the school and the home or community as powerful influences on whether the student has a positive or negative higher education experience.

Factors Affecting Degree Completion

There is a substantial amount of research indicating specific factors which have been shown to increase or decrease the likelihood of first-generation students attaining a bachelor's degree (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Clark, 1960; Dougherty, 1992; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987). Where a student attends college plays a significant role in their educational aspirations, persistence, and in their attainment of higher degrees (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Clark, 1960; Dougherty, 1992). Students who initially enter a two-year institution were found to have lower education attainment than those initially entering a four-year institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Dougherty (1992) suggested three factors associated with attending a two-year institution that inhibited attainment of a bachelor's degree: (a) high levels of attrition in community colleges, (b) difficulties in transferring, and (c) high attrition after students transfer to a four-year college. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found in their study that these factors were related to student experiences of problems in being accepted and integrated into a new institution, problems in securing financial aid, and administrative transfer obstacles.

Brint and Karabel (1989) described the community college as a "gatekeeper" for students from low income backgrounds. They asserted that the community college was never intended to provide anything more than a terminal education to most who entered it.

Attended by students of generally lower socioeconomic status and measured academic ability than their counterparts at four-year colleges and sending well under half of their entrants to Bachelor's degree granting institutions, the junior colleges constituted the bottom track of the system of higher education's increasingly segmented structure of internal stratification. (p. 206)

Students attending private schools were found to be more likely to complete bachelor's degrees than those attending public colleges. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggested three possible reasons: first, private colleges tend to be more expensive and therefore the student may view their degree attainment as a beneficial investment. Second, students may feel a sense of loyalty (based on religion or institution mission). And finally, private institutions have higher rates of students living on campus.

The literature on institutional size as a factor in attainment of the bachelor's degree is inconsistent. Some studies suggest that size is significant while others determine size is not significant (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Researchers do agree that size does affect

involvement and involvement affects persistence (Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1987) found that smaller institutions increased the likelihood of degree attainment. Other institutional characteristics which positively affect persistence and attainment of the bachelor's degree include: high levels of cohesion among peers, high participation in college-sponsored activities, and high levels of personal involvement with teachers and teachers concerned for the individual student (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). These factors again point to the importance of relationship and personal attention.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) also used their study to examine factors which inhibit attainment of bachelor's degree. The two major factors were full-time employment and changing majors. Students who held full-time jobs reported struggles with role conflicts. Other indicators were delays in entering college, interruptions in college attendance, transfers among four-year institutions, and numbers of colleges attended. The study found that institutional continuity overall increased degree completion.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) discovered from their study that the single most revealing predictor of student success was grades. Other significant factors affecting degree attainment included: peer relationships,

extracurricular activities, interaction with faculty, academic major (technical science majors were more persistent through a four-year degree and social science majors were more persistent beyond bachelor's degree), living on or near campus, comprehensive orientation and advising services, and working on campus rather than off campus. Another factor in degree attainment is receipt of financial aid. Tinto (1987) found that economic circumstances played a significant role in degree attainment. Students in his study were making choices between earning a much-needed living in their present and the possibilities for earning a better living in the future if they could financially survive and complete the bachelor's degree.

One of the most widely tested models of student attrition/retention in college is Tinto's (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1990) student integration model. This model asserted:

That the match between an individual's characteristics and those of the institution shape two underlying individual commitments, a commitment to completing college (goal commitment) and a commitment to his/her respective institution (institutional commitment). Accordingly, the higher the goal of college completion and/or the level of institutional commitment is, the greater the probability of persistence. (p. 2)

Tinto's (1987) model of student retention asserts that students enter college with characteristics shaped by

family background, their own personal experiences and attributes, and pre-college schooling experiences. Family background characteristics include: socioeconomic status, parental education, parental expectations. Personal attributes include: academic ability, race, and gender. Pre-college schooling experiences encompass students academic and social achievements in high school. Tinto's model claims that characteristics of a college student will directly influence whether or not she or he completes a college degree. In addition to these characteristics, students' decisions to dropout or to complete will be impacted by their commitment to the institutions and to their personal completion goals.

Tinto (1987) used Van Gennep's (1960) work on rites of passage to explain student departure. Tinto believed that a student would likely dropout if their rites of passage were not completed. The rites of passage included: separation from family, transition to student life, and incorporation into the institution academically and socially. Tinto argued that when a student drops out of an institution, it can be understood as arising out of interactions between the individual with given attributes, skills, and dispositions and other members of the academic and social systems of the institutions. Positive experiences would reinforce a student's commitments to

their goals and the institution, while negative experiences would serve to weaken intentions to complete and commitments to the institution.

Tinto's (1987) model asserts that students who have little or no commitment to the institution of higher education, yet are committed to college completion are more likely to complete than those who do not have a commitment to complete. Tinto also suggested that students who struggle academically may still complete if they are integrated socially.

Tinto's (1987) model is limited in that the focus is on traditional-age students who are full-time and attending residential colleges and universities. This model presumes that students are almost wholly immersed in the academic and social aspects of the college or university. Tinto's work did not focus on first-generation college students, however, it provides an understanding of psychological, environmental, economic and organizational barriers to completion which were used to build theories of retention for first-generation and nontraditional students. The model is also limited in that it does not explore social class in any depth. Factors affecting students from poverty backgrounds are not evident in Tinto's model.

Metzner and Bean (1987) proposed an attrition model which expanded Tinto's model to include nontraditional age students. According to Metzner and Bean, attrition theories are important because they help explain why dropout occurs and at the same time, can help to identify students who are likely to dropout. Metzner and Bean identified the following characteristics of the nontraditional student in their model: age 24 and older, resides off campus, commutes, is part-time or some combination of these factors, is engaged in college social life, and is focused on courses, certificates, and degrees. This model is composed of four sets of variables which affect student attrition decisions: (a) academic variables (study habits, absenteeism, GPA, academic advising, other support systems and course availability); (b) intent to leave as influenced by the psychological outcomes of satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress; (c) background and defining variables such as age, enrollment status, residence, educational goals, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender; and (d) environmental variables such as finances, hours of employment, and family responsibilities.

Bean and Metzner (1987) found two compensatory effects that are important to students' decisions to persist or leave college. The first effect comes from the

combination of high academic success and positive psychological outcomes from school. Students non academic support compensated for low-levels of academic success, while high academic achievement contributed to student decisions to persist only when accompanied by positive psychological outcomes from the college. Retention was more likely if students saw high utility in completion, were satisfied with their learning experiences, were committed to their goals, and had minimal stress.

The second effect on decision making comes from the strength of a student's support from outside the educational institution. Bean and Metzner (1987) discovered environmental support to be more related to retention than academic support. Students with strong environmental support were likely to persist even if their academic support was weak. However, strong academic support would not compensate for weak environmental support.

Greer (1980) conducted a study which confirmed the importance of environment in retention. In his study, social integration was not the primary factor affecting retention. Older students had better grades than traditional age students, they were more certain of their goals, and they had a positive image of college, yet they still dropped out. Reehling (1980) also found

environmental factors to be primary reason for students dropping out. His study discovered that the nontraditional students had a high degree of internal motivation for college and encouragement from others, however, the environmental stresses were stronger and the students dropped out. Pascarella & Terenzini (1979) concluded that students who did not have shared background and shared norms with traditional students were likely to dropout after the first grading period. Educational institutions were not comfortable places for these students. Hughes' (1983) study added to the retention literature by further identifying characteristics of non traditional students. Hughes found three commonalities among nontraditional students in his study: (a) students had multiple commitments, (b) students were not campus focused--their family and work were higher priorities than education, and (c) students were problem solving in their learning styles. They excelled and were most excited about curriculum which required a hands-on approach to learning. Hughes' findings also supported Metzner and Bean's model of attrition for non traditional students. Environmental factors were cited most as reasons for leaving college.

Both Tinto's (1987) student interaction model and Metzner and Bean's (1987) nontraditional student attrition

model add to the knowledge of why students persist in college and why they leave. Both theories describe the complex interactions among personal and institutional factors which contribute to success or result in dropping out. The findings may have limitations when applied to understanding experiences and behavior of students from generational poverty. Research indicates that the context of poverty shapes student attitudes, values, and beliefs concerning education in ways that are not consistent with the dominant culture (Attinasi, 1989; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992).

Attinasi (1989) found Tinto's (1987) and Bean and Metzner's (1987) models to be effective in providing useful information on significant variables. However, the models do not consider the context in which students' decisions to stay in college or leave are made. Tierney (1992) also challenged the attrition/retention models. He took particular issue with Tinto's notion of rites of passage. Tierney asserted that rites of passage are socially constructed and do not apply to all cultures. College completion is a rite of passage constructed by the dominant culture and may not be part of the experience for many students. Tierney argued that Tinto:

has misinterpreted the anthropological notions of ritual, and in doing so he has created a theoretical construct with practical implications that hold potentially harmful

consequences for racial and ethnic minorities.
(p. 603)

Tierney maintained that there was a strong need for a new model which would encompass an understanding of how minority students perceive and interact within and between varying social realities. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) critiqued Tinto's model for failure to consider economic forces within the framework of the interactionalist perspective on student departure. Tinto's interactionalist perspective asserts that students enter college with various individual characteristics and that those characteristics directly influence students' departure decisions.

The studies of retention and attrition rely heavily on the effect of traditional college socialization experiences to explain dropping out and completing (Braxton et al., 1997). Although these studies reveal a great deal about barriers affecting first-generation college students, none focus on social class as the primary variable. Clearly, there is a lack of research which focuses specifically on social class. Since many students from poverty lack or appear to be disinterested in social and academic integration, a different theory explaining their attrition and retention patterns must be developed. Many students from poverty have never known anyone who completed high school. College attendance and

completion are foreign concepts to them (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992). Increasing retention rates for students from generational poverty requires a reexamination from the perception of those students of factors that affect college completion. The present study intends to provide an increased awareness and understanding of the context of generational poverty and students' experiences concerning college retention and completion.

Summary

The literature review on the characteristics of first-generation college students and the four major areas most influential in the completion of a bachelor's degree raise critical issues for educational research. Are all first-generation college students from the same social class? Social-class has been found to directly impact the experience of college completion, yet few studies examine college attendance and completion from a social class perspective. The lack of research using social class as a framework for understanding poor first-generation college students experiences, leaves a gap in the literature. To understand the experiences of students coming from poverty, an examination using theories of social class is necessary. The present study focuses on examining the

variables affecting college degree completion by first-generation college students who are from generational poverty. This focus may illuminate barriers not identified when race or sex serves as the framework for viewing poverty barriers. It may also enhance the understanding of what barriers are common across race and gender boundaries.

The literature review revealed dominant issues faced by first-generation college students which include: making it to college; the economic and social realities of college life; the impersonal; bureaucratic nature of educational institutions; conflicting obligations; false expectations; lack of preparation and support; significant separation from the past; cultural issues such as style of dress; taste in music; range of vocabulary; and struggles to renegotiate relationships and roles. With some exceptions, the major studies in this field have used a racial lens through which to study these issues. Poverty barriers while sometimes considered in conjunction with other variables are nevertheless often overlooked. My research examines these experiences from a social-class perspective.

Questions and gaps that emerge from this literature review include the following:

1. What poverty issues facing first-generation college students are common across race and ethnicity?
2. What long-term social and economic poverty barriers outside of the higher education institutions compete with academic experiences?
3. Which of the barriers that are experienced by people from poverty backgrounds are located within institutions of higher education?
4. What communication barriers are faced by students from generational poverty in completing their bachelor's degrees?
5. How are students from backgrounds of profound poverty able to complete bachelor's degrees?

This research project relies on the above literature review to guide the study. Each area was researched because of its contribution to the design, findings, and analysis of the present study. For example, the literature on attrition and retention studies helped to determine which existing theories about retention addressed the environment, context, and experiences of students from poverty backgrounds. Specifically, students from poverty backgrounds are, for the most part, older, part-time, have family responsibilities, and they commute. The minimal amount of attrition literature on nontraditional students was compared with traditional age

students in order to select the most appropriate variables to study. The dominant issues faced by first-generation college students in the literature were explored with students participating in this study. This study addresses these issues from a social-class perspective with the goal of adding knowledge to the body of literature on first-generation college students who grew up in generational poverty. The next chapter describes the methodology to be employed for this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter explains the methods to be used in carrying out the study. It is presented in six sections: (a) statement of the problem, (b) the general perspective, (c) research procedures (including sample, development of instruments, and a narrative describing the field work), (d) data analysis, (e) locating myself as researcher, and (f) study limitations.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study can be stated thus: there are extremely limited numbers of students from the lowest economic class graduating from our nation's institutions of higher education. As the disparity in degree attainment increases between the poorest students and others, the next generation of poverty is perpetuated.

The General Perspective

The literature recommends qualitative research for researchers who want to study a problem holistically, taking into account all of the factors and influences in a particular context (Creswell, 1994). This research problem is appropriate for a qualitative approach in that it seeks to understand personal experiences of students who live within the context of generational poverty. Additionally, the use of qualitative research methods can promote an environment of trust between the researcher and participants. For this study, trust was important to establish in order to gain insights into the sensitive subject of poverty. The qualitative perspective assumes that people construct meanings within a social context. This underlying assumption of the qualitative approach supports this study of how people from generational poverty are able to overcome barriers to complete a bachelor's degree.

This research design embodies a dominant qualitative perspective with support from a quantitative survey in the form of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to help inform the qualitative data collection. Denzin (1978) argued for combining qualitative and quantitative research methods in the study of the same phenomenon. His concept of "triangulation" is based on the assumption that

when these methods are combined, bias by the researcher, data sources, or methods are reduced or eliminated. Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) suggested four additional reasons for combining qualitative and quantitative methods: (a) the two designs can provide overlapping and different aspects of the problem being studied, (b) the first method can help inform the second method being used, (c) contradictions and fresh perspectives can emerge, and (d) using the two methods can add scope and breadth to a study.

Morgan (1997) also supports combining qualitative and quantitative research methods and describes four ways of doing so. The first is quantitative primary, qualitative first. This method requires the researcher to start with a qualitative approach, but use the qualitative data as the secondary perspective. The qualitative method is used for collecting and interpreting the quantitative data. The second approach, is quantitative approach as the primary philosophical underpinning and quantitative as the first technique used to collect data. This approach begins with using a quantitative method for data collection and a qualitative method for evaluating and interpreting the quantitative results. The methodology for this type of study is quantitative and the analysis is qualitative. The third approach is qualitative primary,

quantitative first. This method begins with the collection of quantitative preliminary data as a basis for collecting and interpreting the qualitative data.

Morgan's fourth method of combining the two research perspectives is qualitative primary, qualitative first. This method uses a qualitative approach as the philosophical underpinning of the research and collection of qualitative data. Although the philosophical underpinning and primary data collection are qualitative, this method draws upon a quantitative component as part of the overall data collection. This quantitative component serves to complement the qualitative data collection.

This study is driven by the "qualitative primary, quantitative first" approach. The qualitative emphasis allows for enhanced understanding of how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world. The quantitative data collection component (questionnaire) is used to inform the qualitative methods of data collection (focus group interviews). In this design, the researcher conducts the study within a single dominant paradigm (for my study, a qualitative paradigm) with one component (a questionnaire) drawn from a second (quantitative) paradigm. The questionnaire is used as a selection tool to screen participants for the focus group interviews and to inform the focus-group discussions.

Selection of participants for the focus group interviews was based on demographic data provided by the questionnaire. It was the goal of this study to gain insights into the lives and educational accomplishments of those experiencing the most profound poverty. The questionnaire provided an opportunity to select such participants. The questionnaire also provided opportunities to support or contradict focus group interview findings. Creswell (1994) argued that the use of one paradigm as dominant and another as less dominant presents a consistent comprehensive paradigm for probing the various aspects of the study. This combination design is advantageous in understanding how people who grew up in generational poverty were able to achieve bachelor's degrees.

The dominant focus on qualitative research will support gaining a detailed account of human experience. "Qualitative research employs words to answer questions" (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1990, p. 444). It operates on the assumption that the subject matter in social science research is different from the subject matter in natural or physical sciences. "Qualitative inquiry seeks to understand human and social behavior from the 'insider's perspective,' that is, as it is lived by participants in a particular social setting" (p. 445).

The methodology underlying this qualitative study is the grounded-theory approach. The grounded-theory approach was originally introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. The design was developed to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The authors believed theory needed to be rooted in the practical world it was attempting to explain. The intent was to identify the major categories, their relationships, and the contexts and process, thus providing a descriptive account of a particular phenomenon. Researchers using this approach do not begin their investigations with a theory to be proven. Research efforts begin by selecting an area of study and then allow all that is relevant to emerge. Grounded-theory data analysis procedures provide the framework for building theory. The initial goal is not to develop a theory, but to ask questions about the data; make comparisons for similarities and differences between each incident, event, and other instances of phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 74). Strauss and Corbin contended that the procedures of grounded theory are designed to:

1. Build rather than only test theory.
2. Give the research process the rigor necessary to make theory good science.
3. Help the analyst to break through the biases and assumptions brought to, and that can develop during, the research process.
4. Provide the grounding, build the density, and develop the sensitivity and integration needed to at some point, generate a rich, tightly woven, explanatory theory that

closely approximates the reality it represents. (p. 57)

The grounded-theory approach is used when the investigator seeks to understand human action and interaction in a certain context as a means to understand a social phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The emphasis on context, human action and interaction serve the goals of this study. This study seeks to explore generational poverty barriers and higher education completion. This is an area that lacks focus in the current literature. The goal is not to develop a theory, but to begin to build the necessary framework for the development of a theory. Use of the grounded theory approach can help bridge the gap between theory and practice through generating conceptual categories grounded in the context of generational poverty from the perspectives of those who have experienced it.

This research is not an attempt to prove or disprove a hypothesis. Rather, the goal is to describe experiences of students from their perspectives. Qualitative methodology allows for seeing the world through someone else's eyes. The grounded-theory approach will provide opportunities for seeing different realities as experienced by students from generational poverty.

The Research Procedures

This study was designed to follow the procedural guidelines of the grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). Grounded theory methodology research procedures require three basic operations: (a) the researcher systematically selects participants on the basis of their relevance to the emerging categories; (b) the researcher allows the emerging categories to control the data collection by continuously seeking relevant data that theoretically enrich the emerging categories; and (c) the researcher systematically codes and analyzes data--identifying categories, properties of categories, and relationships among categories.

In this section, I present an overview of the research procedures used for the present study. This includes the instruments (selection, design, and intent), the sample, data collection, and data analysis.

Instruments

The methods used for collecting data include the following instruments: (a) a pre-focus group questionnaire, (b) two and a half-hour focus groups (four total), (c) A reflection journal where decisions and reflections on the research study as it progressed were

recorded, and (d) taped reflections after each focus group session.

Three primary methods were reviewed to determine the most appropriate instruments for data collection in this study. They were questionnaire, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Questionnaires provide opportunities to reduce time and cost by gathering critical information by mail. Because it is administered by mail, a larger number of respondents can be reached from more diverse locations. The purpose of the questionnaire is to enable the researcher to generalize from a sample population to a larger population. This makes it possible to make inferences about characteristics, attitudes, or behavior of the group being studied (Creswell, 1994). Additional advantages of questionnaires include guaranteed confidentiality and more truthful responses, and respondents are not affected by the interviewer's mood, personal appearance, or conduct (Ary et al., 1990). Two disadvantages are associated with questionnaires. First there is a higher possibility of respondents misinterpreting the questions. Second, questionnaires do not elicit as high completion rates as the individual interview.

Individual interviews have been characterized in three forms: (a) the scheduled standardized interview,

(b) the nonscheduled interview, and (c) the nonstandardized interview (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). In a scheduled standardized interview, the questions are prewritten and orally administered in a particular order as a questionnaire. In a nonscheduled interview, the questions are prewritten and the probes are standardized but the order presented may vary. The nonstandardized interview uses general questions to gain specific information. The order or context in which the questions are asked is not predetermined. This interview method allows the interviewer to be more natural and responsive. For the purposes of drawing out personal experiences of the students and creating a trusting environment, the nonstandardized interview is most appropriate.

An advantage of individual interviews is that the discussion topics are well defined. Participants often feel free to discuss sensitive issues which may not be discussed in a group setting. A disadvantage of individual interviews is that they do not provide an opportunity to observe the participants' interaction with others. Interaction with others regarding the topic can trigger ideas and experiences which may not surface in an individual interview (Morgan, 1997).

Focus groups are used when the researcher wants to capture a wider range of responses than is possible with

individual interviews (Krueger, 1994). As participants share their experiences, others are reminded of similar or different experiences to share, which broadens the discussion for more topics. Focus groups help to understand how people feel and think (Krueger, 1994).

Some disadvantages of focus groups are that they do not obtain statistical projections and, due to the limited number of participants, generalizing the research findings is somewhat limited. The researcher predetermines and organizes the topics to be discussed. However, the participants define the group interaction in response to prepared open-ended questions. The flow of discussion in focus groups is influenced in a less controlled setting than individual interviews, allowing participants to share individual experiences and build on others' experiences. An additional disadvantage is participants being silenced or influenced by others in the group. The role of the facilitator is to set ground rules which encourage safety and to probe answers which seem to be influenced by others in the group (Krueger, 1994).

Because each of these methods offers opportunities to discover participants' experiences in depth in varying degrees, depending upon the research design, any would be appropriate for this study. Individual interviews provide opportunities for case studies. Since this study is

concerned with the experiences of a particular subset of people (first-generation college students who come from generational poverty), the focus is more on what common experiences were shared among the participants rather than on individual experiences. Therefore, a research design using the questionnaires and follow-up focus group interviews was selected as the most appropriate for this study. The questionnaire allowed for gathering data from a sample population so that inferences could be made to the larger population. A goal of the present study was also to illuminate poverty-related experiences from participants that are not often discussed and are the context from which students make decisions. The questionnaire provides confidentiality and encourages respondents to disclose unpopular points of view or to give information they may be reluctant to provide in a face-to-face or group setting (Ary et al., 1990). Gathering the demographic and background data in the questionnaire freed the researcher to concentrate on higher-education completion strategies in the focus groups. The questionnaire also serves as a screening tool to gain access to those respondents who have experienced the most profound poverty. The focus groups provided opportunities for participants to build on one another's

observations in a face-to-face setting and explore the relevant issues in a less-controlled setting.

Questionnaire Intent and Design

The questionnaire is one of the preferred data collection methods chosen for this study. The intent of the questionnaire was threefold: (a) to elicit background information concerning environmental and personal factors likely to have impacted a student's ability to complete a college degree, (b) to assist in shaping the development of the focus group guide by gathering descriptive data and a profile of students' experiences in achieving their degrees, and (c) to create a pool from which to select focus group participants.

Other benefits of the questionnaire include: allowing for increasing the generalizability of the study findings (Creswell, 1994), providing opportunity to gather extensive data from respondents statewide rather than just in the metropolitan area. The primary benefit was the collection of background data in the questionnaire. This permitted the focus group interviews to concentrate on the main objective of this study which is to identify common strategies used by students from generational poverty to overcome poverty barriers and complete the bachelor's degree.

The questionnaire designed by the researcher, asked questions related to the following: demographic data background information regarding the respondents' childhood experiences, barriers related to poverty and education, and strategies for overcoming these barriers to achieve a bachelor's degree (see Appendix A for an example of the questionnaire). The initial questions on the questionnaire are demographic questions. They were developed by the researcher based on a review of the literature on first-generation college students and from the literature on poverty-related barriers. Categories used to develop the questions were previously found to correlate with successful completion of college and conditions of poverty (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987). The questions explore respondents' living conditions, life experiences, and perspectives. This focus provides opportunities for understanding the conditions in which participants grew-up, the experiences they had, and how they felt about those experiences. It also provides opportunities for examining conditions, experiences, and perspectives which are shared among students from generational poverty.

There are 59 questions on the questionnaire. The first 10 questions are demographic questions which require a check in the appropriate box or filling in a blank. The

remaining questions are grouped according to the three research questions for this study: (a) pre-college life experiences, (b) experiences and challenges during college, and (c) strategies to overcome barriers. There are three types of scales used to measure the items on the questionnaire: (a) categorical scales (e.g., yes or no) which relate to particular themes, (b) rating scales (e.g., strongly agree to strongly disagree) to provide more specific and quantifiable responses, and (c) rank-ordered scales (e.g., rank from highest to lowest). The data are both nominal and ordinally scaled. Many of the questions on the questionnaire relate to highly sensitive issues. To gain an accurate understanding of poverty conditions and experiences these questions were extremely important.

The questionnaire was pilot-tested on four people who met the criteria for this study. Pilot respondents were promised confidentiality and it has been maintained. Pilot respondents reported feeling "glad" that someone was asking questions that reflected the "real" conditions they had experienced in poverty. I was surprised and delighted with the enthusiastic responses for the present study. Those who participated in the pilot thanked me for doing this work. I heard comments like, "This study is long overdue" and suggestions for who needs to read the

results. Pilot respondents requested clarity in the wording of three questions. They also made suggestions on reducing the amount of time it takes to complete the questionnaire. Their comments were incorporated into the final instrument revisions.

The questionnaire is a cross-sectional survey. The objective was to gather data concerning events and experiences which have already occurred. Therefore, data were collected from respondents who have already completed their bachelor's degrees. Respondents were sampled in a single-stage sampling design.

The questionnaire packet contained: a cover letter describing the purpose of the study, assuring respondent confidentiality, and stating that some respondents would be contacted to participate in focus-group interviews; a consent form; a self-addressed, stamped, oversized envelope; and the questionnaire. The next section discusses response rates.

The questionnaire was mailed to 50 individuals. All questionnaires but one were completed and returned within a four-week period. The one uncompleted questionnaire was returned to me, as undeliverable. After questionnaires were mailed, six additional names were provided to me for a total of 55 respondents who completed questionnaires. Ary et al. (1990) claimed that a reasonable expectation

for survey returns is 75-90%. The return rate for the present study is 98%.

Respondents in this study were exceptionally eager to share their experiences. I am convinced that two factors affected the high response rate. First, respondents expressed how deeply poverty experiences had affected their lives. Many also shared that the shame and fear of judgment associated with being poor in the United States has prevented them from sharing their experiences. The safety of a questionnaire and focus group interviews may have created an environment where individuals could let go of the shame and share like-experiences of having grown up poor. The second factor affecting response rates was the emphasis of the study on the positive experience of having completed their degrees. Respondents reported being extremely proud of their completion and therefore eager to share how they were able to accomplish the degree.

In many cases, respondents used up most of the available blank spaces on the questionnaire to write additional comments and turned the pages over to write on the back side of the questionnaire. Some checked the appropriate box and then wrote corresponding elaborations of their experiences on that particular subject. It was clear that respondents wanted to talk more about the conditions of poverty they had experienced and about their

success in overcoming the poverty to the bachelor's degree.

The intent of the questionnaire was to elicit background information concerning environmental and personal factors likely to have impacted a student's ability to complete a college degree; to assist in shaping the development of the focus group guide by gathering descriptive data and a profile of students' experiences in achieving their degrees; and to create a pool from which to select focus group participants. Therefore, the questionnaire was not designed for statistical analysis beyond the accumulation of descriptive data. The low number of questionnaires sent out confirmed that such an analysis in fact would not be meaningful despite the higher than average return rate.

Focus Group Intent and Design

Focus groups are used to understand how people feel and think about their life experiences (Krueger, 1994). The purpose of this study is to gain an enhanced understanding of the conditions and experiences of a select group of people who grew up in poverty and who have achieved bachelor's degrees. The focus group methodology was selected as the primary method of data collection. Focus groups allow participants to share their experiences and to build on one another's experiences. I wanted to

get people together who shared similar backgrounds and have the discussion about what worked for them. The questionnaires were analyzed and used as a screening tool to select focus group participants. Based on the questionnaire analysis, respondents whose profiles indicated experiences of the most profound poverty were invited to take part in the focus groups. Criteria used to determine those who had experienced the most profound poverty relative to each other were selected based on respondent responses to six specific questions on the questionnaire. It should be noted that I initially selected the following questions as criteria for the focus group interviews. However, due to the small number of participants who met these criteria, I could not isolate a large enough group to participate in the focus group interviews:

1. Completed a GED (19% response)
2. Experienced Homelessness (27% response)
3. Dropped out of high school (17% response)
4. No reading material in their home (12.8% response)
5. Stole for survival (19.1% response)

These experiences are rarely discussed in the education literature. I believe a rich discussion could occur with people who met the above criteria and who had overcome

these conditions to achieve their college degrees.

Wilson's (1987) research would support these criteria as common among people experiencing underclass poverty.

Participants who met the above criteria were invited to participate in the focus group interviews, along with participants who responded yes to four of the following six additional questions (participants meeting the above criteria also met four of the six criteria listed below):

1. How many times have you moved in your life?

(Participants who responded 20 or more moves were chosen.)

2. Did you or your parents receive welfare, disability, or social security?

3. Did you speak using improper grammar?

4. Have you ever gone hungry because you or your family had no money to buy food?

5. While you were in college, was there knowledge that "everyone" seemed to know what you did not know?

6. Have you or a member of your family ever been arrested?

These questions were also selected based on variables identified as part of the experience of living in underclass poverty (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Wilson, 1987). Eight participants meeting the above criteria were invited for each focus group. Krueger (1994) suggested a minimum of six participants for a productive focus group.

I over-invited to ensure a minimum of six participants in each focus group. However, one focus group had only four participants. Four focus groups were conducted to assist the researcher in drawing out rich descriptions concerning attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and experiences related to education and poverty. After the first focus group, I analyzed the data for dominant themes and categories to explore with the next focus group. Questions were modified slightly and/or questions were added to allow greater exploration of emerging themes and patterns. Additional focus groups were conducted as needed until the saturation point was reached and no new information was being reported (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

I contacted participants by phone and email and told them they had been selected for the focus group interviews. One participant declined to participate in the focus group. This participant stated that she completely supported the study, but did not feel comfortable discussing poverty in a group setting. Three focus group sessions were held at a large university in an urban city. This setting was selected because of easy access and central location. The fourth session was held in a community college training center that was one-hour traveling distance from the other sessions. The purpose was to accommodate participants who could not travel to

the first location. A trained focus-group observer was present at all sessions and recorded the sessions to increase validity and objectivity. This observer was provided with Krueger's (1994) rules for assistant moderators which specifically outline responsibilities before, during, and after the focus group sessions.

Each session began with introductions, ground rules (which included confidentiality commitments and encouragement to participants to "jump" in and share if they felt a common or different experience from one being discussed, in other words, there would be no formal order for sharing, just politeness), and an overview of the purpose of the study. Food and beverage were provided in each session.

Twenty-four participants out of the total of 56 respondents participated in focus group interviews. The demographic make up of the focus groups was as follows. Focus group one: three females and one male (all White); their ages were 26-55. Focus group two: three males, five females (one Hispanic male, an African American male, an African American female, a Native American female, a White male, and three White females); their ages ranged from 30 to 60. Focus group three: four females and two males (an Hispanic female, three White females, two White males); their age range was 27 to 49. Focus group four:

three males and three females (one African American male, a White male, an Hispanic male, an Asian female, and two White females); their age range was 22 to 46. Data concerning age were reported by age groups (21-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60+). Exact ages were not reported therefore, quotations from participants reflect their ages within the selected group. Participants wore name tags to aid the researcher and observer in keeping accurate notes of what was reported and by whom.

Upon completion of each focus group, the observer summarized the session and asked for participant contributions and clarifications. Krueger (1994) suggested that the most beneficial feedback from participants often occurs at the end of a focus group. A summary of the session allows participants to confirm or correct the oral summary. I took notes as the observer summarized each session. The participant observer and I then met to debrief and document focus group responses. Additional notes were taken in this discussion. I used a hand-held recorder to reflect on the discussions immediately following each session. These tapes were used to capture additional ideas and responses gained from the focus group. The tapes were used to reflect not only on the completed session, but also to discover common patterns and themes emerging from the various focus group

interviews. Additionally, thoughts and ideas after each session were kept in a journal. The purpose was to ensure data collection from a variety of sources.

The grounded theory approach encourages researchers to use a variety of data sources and techniques for data collection.

Different kinds of data give the analyst different views or vantage points from which to understand a category and to develop its properties: these different views we have called slices of data. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 68)

Researchers using the grounded theory approach use multiple methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the category they are investigating. The various techniques are not used to verify each other, but rather to increase the understanding of the categories emerging during the research process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The Sample

The grounded theory methodology provides the guiding procedures for selecting participants. In this method, participants are purposely selected based on their relevance to the present study. Participant selection is "very directed and deliberate with conscious choices made about who and what to sample in order to obtain the needed data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 187). This method is

called theoretical sampling. In theoretical sampling, researchers are not interested in sampling a number of individuals who are representative of the entire population. Rather, they are concerned with the "representativeness in their various forms," and look for events and incidents that can reveal multiple examples and facets of these concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 190). Thus, theoretical sampling is used when the goal of the researcher is to:

sample events, incidents, and [persons], that are indicative of categories, their properties, and dimensions, so that [one] can develop and conceptually relate them. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 177)

Theoretical sampling begins by including a wide range of participants who meet certain criteria and moves to a more deliberate targeting of specific participants to enrich the developing categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This present study began with specific criteria selection process for respondents to the questionnaire. Individuals for the questionnaires and focus groups were drawn from referrals from Portland State University's Educational Equity Program, Oregon Displaced Homemakers programs, Oregon Department of Human Resources, and referrals made to the researcher by word of mouth. This sample population was a purposive sample to ensure that the following characteristics were represented: (a)

individuals met the four criteria of coming from a background with a minimum of three generations of family members experiencing poverty and (b) were individuals who currently held bachelor's degrees.

It was a challenging task to locate people who had come from poverty backgrounds who had achieved bachelor's degrees. I contacted agencies and organizations (listed above) which typically serve people from poverty. I provided a description of the proposed study and the criteria for participation. Some of the organizations posted statewide, countywide, and citywide inner agency email bulletins which provided the information concerning the study and told them how to contact me. I screened by phone to ensure the potential participant met all criteria. Other organizations contacted people they knew who fit the criteria. After gaining permission from the potential respondents, these organizational contacts sent names, addresses and phone numbers to me. I contacted the potential respondents by phone and email to ensure they met all criteria for the study. Sample size was chosen based on the numbers of responses to the call for individuals who met the criteria for generational poverty.

The questionnaire did allow me to create a profile of the sample group. All respondents to the questionnaire are the first in their families to complete bachelor's

degrees. Respondents were 66% female and 34% male. Their age range was 22 to 60, with most falling into the 30 to 59 age group (84%). Nearly all respondents reported education had not been a goal in their early lives. Respondents in their 40s and 50s (both male and female) frequently reported in the margins that they were taught "education was for boys and girls are supposed to get married." In addition, this age group indicated that they were taught an education beyond high school would not be in their best interest. The group's racial makeup was 76% White, 14.9% Hispanic, 4.3% African American, 2.1% Asian, and 2.1% Native American. Respondents in the present study all shared data indicating that they had overcome poverty-related barriers to achieve their degrees. The next session discusses data analysis techniques.

Data Analysis

Creswell (1994) argued that there is no "right" way to analyze data. "Data analysis requires that the researcher be comfortable with developing categories and making comparisons and contrast" (p. 153). The researcher must also be open to seeing contrary or alternative explanations for the findings. Strauss and Corbin (1990) contended that doing analysis is making interpretations. Because the researcher is making interpretations, the data

analysis must be strategic and thorough. Diesing (1971), a philosopher of science, stated:

actually scientific knowledge is in large part an invention or development rather than an imitation; concepts, hypotheses, and theories are not found ready-made in reality but must be constructed. (p. 14)

To reach the goal of capturing the context and experiences of the respondents in this study, the data were analyzed using several strategies. Data collected through the survey questionnaire was analyzed with the help of the SPSS (1993) (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program for statistical analysis. The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, questionnaire data were summarized using descriptive statistics. Response frequencies were calculated on demographic and informational variables.

The descriptive statistics of the sample population provided a profile of people experiencing generational poverty. This profile produced a "picture" of who these people are, how they live, and to what demographically defined groups they belong. Respondents who, based on these data, exhibited the most profound poverty conditions were invited to participate in the focus group interviews; the qualitative phase of the study. The results from both stages of the analysis are reported though the use of percentages, tables, and narratives.

Data analysis of the focus groups was conducted using three steps suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) and the QSR NUD*IST [Qualitative Solutions and Research (QSR), 1997] computer program. First, the initial focus group interview data were numbered in chronological order according to when they were collected. This strategy assists in organizing and locating data. The process I followed for the data analysis was one of constant comparison derived from the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990), Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Goetz and LeCompte (1984). In the focus group interviews, participants were questioned about the influences that had contributed to their values, attitudes, and beliefs concerning education. They were asked to describe what it was like to grow up in poverty. They were also asked about what helped them get to college and their goals concerning college. Other questions encouraged them to reveal information about their social involvement, academic experiences, and environmental supports, as well as whether their experiences of having grown up in poverty affected their college experiences. They were asked to make recommendations to others coming from poverty backgrounds about how to achieve a college degree. Participants were also asked to make recommendations to professors, administrators, social service providers, politicians, and

activists on how they could support people from poverty backgrounds seeking bachelor's degrees (see focus group guide, Appendix B).

After multiple readings of the focus group transcripts (from observer notes and my own) and review of other empirical materials (including responses to open-ended questions on the questionnaires and my own journal notes), I analyzed the data by searching for distinct conceptual categories which could be coded. At this stage, I began looking for key issues, recurrent events, or activities that emerged as potential categories of focus. These initial categories were coded and tested by classifying and comparing responses from the next focus group interview session. Once a multitude of coding categories were identified from the texts, the categories themselves were reviewed to search for emergent themes and patterns. Data were continually reflected upon, helping to establish what seemed to be most compelling. The main categories served to divide and organize the codes.

As categories emerged, I began looking for differences in responses to the specific categories. These categories became the core subjects of journaling and further reflection as new aspects of the categories were considered and sought. A model eventually emerged within the data, and I then looked for common themes and

relationships. Final recurring categories were used to code all responses (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This constant comparative method enabled me to uncover commonalities and disparities. The categories that emerged from the coding and analysis of the data reveal the skills, strategies, and experiences that enabled these particular students to earn their bachelor's degrees. Thus, the categories reflect the participants' personal reactions to, and compensations for growing up in generational poverty. The constant comparative method of analysis is specifically designed to provide a "grounding" for theory, comparing experiences and observations, integrating categories and themes, providing structure for a common model.

Krueger (1994) suggested additional analysis techniques for use during the focus group interview, immediately after the focus group interview, and after more than one focus group interview. During the focus group, Krueger stressed the importance of listening for inconsistent comments and probing for understandings. The moderator must also offer a group summary of key questions and seek confirmation. Immediately after the focus group, the moderator should draw a diagram of the seating arrangement, review with the assistant moderator, make notes of themes and ideas, and label and file all notes.

Finally, Krueger emphasized the need to inquire about themes or ideas that emerge from earlier focus groups in the later focus groups. I employed these strategies in planning and executing the focus groups.

The QSR NUD*IST (QSR, 1997) computer program was used in addition to the above-mentioned techniques to explore and develop categories, themes, patterns and relationships. Raw data were entered, themes emerged, and categories were developed.

The focus-group data for this study is reported using narrative text and direct quotes taken from participants. In order to maintain their authenticity, the quotes have not been edited for grammar or noninclusive language. For reporting purposes, the participants are referred to by short demographic descriptions.

Locating Myself as Researcher

Research is often conducted with an "outsider" looking in to interpret the language, mannerisms, expressions, attitudes, beliefs, values, and experiences of those being studied. In the case of the present study, it is an "insider" looking in. The nature of this research is closely linked to my personal experiences and passions. Therefore, I will now share some of my experiences that are related to education and poverty in order to overtly state how my perspectives were shaped.

I was born into a family where no one was educated beyond the 9th grade. For generations, my family has subsisted on menial wage employment and migrant work. Education, in the world I come from, was simply a distraction from being able to earn the daily basic needs or from being close to family, the only thing we had. I grew up with role models who dropped out of school very young, got married and had babies. Thus, my goal in life was to be a mom. I did not know anything else. My early education experiences ranged from being good at academics (it came easy to me) to being beaten on the school playground.

At 12 years-old, I met my ex-husband and at 15 years-old, I dropped out of school and we were married. My ex-husband was 17 years-old and had a 7th grade education. That same year, I began my work life in a foam rubber factory. Over the years, I worked in pizza parlors, retail, and manufacturing. By the age of 19, I had been through three pregnancies and had one living child. My marriage lasted 10 years. During those years, we subsisted on low-wage jobs or welfare. My marriage ended in 1986, and I was left to care for my daughter who was in the first grade and my two-year-old son.

It was not long before we were evicted and homeless. I was fortunate to be told at a human service agency about

a pilot program that was connected to a Community College. The goal of the program was to help single women gain education or skills to earn a living. I came out of this program with a dream to maybe someday get a GED and take a journalism class. I was motivated by the notion of being able to take care of my two children. Program staff took me to the main campus of the community college and helped me to begin my educational journey. At this time, I began work on a General Equivalency Diploma. With a tremendous amount of personal one-on-one teaching, I was able to graduate with my GED. It was a huge moment for me and my family. My grandmother, parents, and five brothers all came to the graduation. Shortly after, my brother began work on his GED. I remember thinking that the GED wasn't so bad, maybe I could get a two-year degree and then I could really take care of Jennifer and Daniel, my two children.

I went to my welfare worker and told her I wanted to try to get a two-year degree, so that I would not need welfare anymore. She quickly told me that I needed to be available for any minimum wage job and if I were in school, I would not be available. If I went to school, the state would sanction me and cut my welfare check from \$408 to \$258. (This policy is still in effect in most states today.) The one thing that kept me from giving up

was that the program that I had gone through had given me a section-eight public housing certificate (my class was the only class these were available for). As I sat there crying in the welfare office, I was calculating how my two kids and I could survive on \$258. Not having to worry about being evicted was a huge comfort. I did not know what was ahead, but I was clear I did not want to go backward and stay in the world of welfare and poverty.

With an enormous amount of support from the program staff and my family, I entered the community college. I was absolutely terrified. I could not write a complete sentence. The professors wrote words such as "fragment," "double negative," and "run on," on my papers. I did not know what those comments meant, but I knew from the red ink, that they were bad. I also did not know most of the words in the incredibly expensive text books. The dictionary was no help, it only gave me more words that I did not know. My knowledge gaps were large and served to reinforce my internal feelings that I did not belong in college.

One of the things that saved me was my brother in prison. He had spent his 12 years in prison reading and was amazingly educated. I would write to him and ask about a subject I was studying and he would respond with 25 pages or so using words and examples that I could

relate to. I never read my text books, I read his letters and for the most part, did well in my classes. Math was another story. It almost became the subject that prevented me from completing. Fortunately, I found a friend who tutored me intensively through the required courses. With an enormous amount of support from agencies, and individuals (housing, food stamps, mentoring from numerous people, family support, and encouragement), I was able to become educated.

As I began work on my doctorate, I was offered a job in the impoverished neighborhood where I had lived in 20 different houses in 17 years, and where I had dropped out of high school. For five years, I worked to increase graduation rates in that high school. At the same time, I worked part-time as a consultant helping to develop curriculum for communicating across class, race, and gender barriers in correctional institutions. I also consulted with educators and public agencies on those topics. Over the course of my education and my work I was troubled by the limited awareness of social-class issues. Poverty-related experiences that my family members and I experienced were described as "minority issues." What I came to realize more and more through my work and my education was that there was a confounding of race and class issues both in the literature and in the educational

system. Class issues are not obvious and rarely discussed. My education, my work, and my passion is to help people from all races who are trapped in poverty. I want them to have higher education as a genuine option. I believe this can only happen if the voices of those struggling with poverty can be heard and their perspectives understood. An underlying goal of this study is to ensure that the experiences and voices of people from poverty who "made it" to a bachelor's degree are heard with the hope that knowledge of their experiences can validate and assist others who are living in poverty. A second goal is to enhance the understanding of factors leading to their successful completion of a bachelor's degree to assist in developing models for helping others from poverty backgrounds to reach the bachelor's degree. The next section discusses study limitations.

Study Limitations

Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested that "each of us brings to the analysis of the data our biases, assumptions, patterns of thinking, and knowledge gained from experience and reading" (p. 95). I have just described my experience of coming from a generational poverty background. I have experienced both variables examined in this research. While my experience can be a

strength to this study, there is also the possibility that it will limit or obscure what is "seen."

Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested several techniques to enable the researcher to use experience and knowledge in a positive manner rather than letting experience and knowledge "obscure vision" (p. 76). Their suggestions included: (a) considering potential categories to develop precise questions; (b) using a word, phrase, or sentence as the basis of analysis to probe possible meanings, reflect on assumptions, and examine and question them; (c) looking at extremes of a dimension to think analytically rather than descriptively about data; (d) using systematic comparisons early in the analysis to examine critically the researcher's patterns of thinking; and (e) being aware of the use of absolute statements and words ("never," "always") and cultural assumptions regarding roles and stereotypes. In order to minimize research-bias effects, I used these suggestions, and used a trained focus-group observer to assist in gathering, summarizing and validating data from the focus groups

Another limitation of this study is that it ignores root causes of poverty and accepts poverty as a continuing reality. It is hoped that in addition to addressing the strategies used to successfully complete a bachelor's degree, the illumination of barriers specific to this

population will allow the discussion of poverty causes and effects to broaden.

This chapter explained the methods to be used in this "qualitative primary, quantitative first" study designed to explore the experiences of students from generational poverty who have achieved a bachelor's degree. The next chapter presents the results obtained with those methods.

CHAPTER IV

The Findings

Introduction

In this chapter I describe and analyze the data gathered in this study. The goal of this study was to illuminate the experiences of students coming from at least three generations of poverty who have successfully completed bachelor's degrees. There were three primary objectives for this study: (a) to identify conditions related to generational poverty, (b) to identify barriers to higher education for individuals from poverty backgrounds, and (c) to gain the perspectives from a select group of first-generation college students from generational poverty on the strategies they used to overcome barriers. The focus of the fieldwork was to seek common themes, strategies, and experiences among those who have grown up in poverty who now have their bachelor's degrees. This chapter is organized according to those objectives.

The results that emerged from the analysis of the field work data are presented in five major sections: (a) general profile of the respondents from the

questionnaires, (b) review of participant responses to questions explored in the focus group interviews, and (c) strategies and experiences contributing to respondents' and participants' success.

Part I: General Profile of the Respondents

This section provides an overview of the results from analysis of the questionnaires. It covers the following: demographics, poverty-related conditions, early education experiences, and college experiences. Each of these areas is discussed briefly in this section based on the questionnaire findings. A more comprehensive discussion follows in the review of responses to questions.

The questionnaire was the secondary source for data collection for this study. There were two main goals for the questionnaires: (a) the questionnaires were designed to provide a "big picture" profile of the respondents in this study and to be used as a screening tool to select those who had experienced the most profound poverty to participate in the focus group interviews, and (b) to identify (through frequency analysis of the questionnaire responses) dominant themes and issues for guiding the focus group interviews. This section discusses the questionnaire findings.

Demographics

Data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed with the assistance of the SPSS (1993) computer program. Of the total population of 56, 55 completed and returned their questionnaires (a 98% return rate). The analysis shows that respondents' age range was 22 to 60, with most falling into the 30 to 59 age group (84%). Females made up the majority of the subjects in this study (66%) with only 34% male respondents (Table 1).

Table 1
Profile of Respondents' Sex

Respondents' Sex	Number	Percentage
Female	37	66%
Male	19	34%
Total	56	100%

The group's racial makeup was 76% White, 14.9% Hispanic, 4.3% African American, 2.1% Asian, and 2.1% Native American (Table 2). This racial makeup is reflective of the overall Oregon State racial makeup. It was extremely important to have a diverse population for this study in order to explore the trend in the first-generation college student literature to mislabel poverty conditions and experiences as race or gender issues as discussed in Chapter I. The next section presents

findings related to conditions and experiences of generational poverty.

Table 2
Profile of Racial Makeup

Racial Makeup	Number	Percentage
White	43	76.0%
Hispanic	8	14.9%
African American	3	4.3%
Asian	1	2.1%
Native American	1	2.1%
Total	56	100%

Poverty-Related Conditions

The poverty-related conditions which were most frequently reported were: extremely low-incomes, reliance on food stamps; constant uprooting from their homes; and working as children in migrant labor for basic needs.

This section presents the frequency analysis of the responses to poverty-related questions. All respondents and participants in this study met the criteria of growing up in generational poverty as defined by the following four criteria:

1. poverty experienced by at least one set of grandparents of the respondents (poverty for grandparents subjectively defined by participants);
2. respondents' parents have a high school education or less;

3. respondents' parents experienced long-term spells of underemployment, long-term unemployment or lack of membership in the labor force;

4. Respondents are the first in family to attend college.

The purpose of these criteria was to identify respondents who had experienced profound, lasting poverty. The majority of respondents in this study experiencing poverty were raised by two-parent families (see Table 3). Over half of the respondents reported that their families received welfare or disability assistance as their only income and most had used food stamps.

Table 3
Profile of Poverty-Related Experiences

Poverty-Related Conditions	Number	Percentage
Two-Parent Family	40	72%
Moved 30-40 Times	43	77%
Worked as Children for Survival	40	72%
Worked as Migrant Labors to Meet Basic Needs (White-33, Black-2, Hispanic-4)	39	70%
Self/Family Member has been Arrested	41	74%
Received Food Stamps	36	65%
Bad Credit	44	78%

As shown in table 3, most of the respondents had moved between 13 and 40 times in their lifetimes. This

many moves is another trend among families experiencing extreme poverty conditions (Wilson, 1987). A large number of respondents (72%) also reported that they had worked as children to help their families survive. Although migrant labor is typically associated with poor Hispanic families, many of the respondents in the present study from various races [White (33); Black (2); Hispanic (4)] reported doing migrant work as children to help their families with basic needs.

Crime is another variable linked to poverty conditions and is visible in this study. A high number of respondents had been arrested or had family members who were arrested (see Table 3 for percentages related to these conditions). The next section discusses early education experiences and higher education experiences.

Early Education Experiences

Higher education (and in some cases elementary and secondary education) was not a part of the majority of respondents' lives. All respondents had parents and grandparents with a high school education or less. More than half had parents with less than a tenth grade education (63% had fathers with tenth grade or less and 56% had mothers with tenth grade education or less).

Respondents were not exposed to formal education in general and it was not a big part of their lives (see

Table 4). Respondents reported not being read to as children (91%) and were less likely to be readers (63%). Overall, respondents did not perceive that their K-12 teachers (80%) believed in them. Sixty-two percent of the respondents did not imagine they would go beyond attainment of a high school diploma. Eighty-one percent of respondents did not know or identify with anyone who had completed high school and 98% did not know anyone who had gone to college.

Table 4
Early Education Experiences

Early Education Experiences	Number	Percentage
Not read to as children	51	91%
Did not read as children	35	63%
Teachers did not believe in them	45	80%
Did not know high school graduates	45	81%
Did not know college graduates	55	98%

A majority of respondents (89%) indicated that early education did not prepare them for their college experience (Table 4). The profile of respondents early educational experiences shows that they were, for the most part, not exposed to reading, a habit that has been shown to have a positive effect on educational outcomes. Sixty-three percent of the respondents reported that their

teachers did not think they were smart. This lack of encouragement from teachers combined with poverty conditions is associated with educational failure in much of the literature. Other variables that have been labeled barriers to success in education were also present in this profile.

The questionnaire results indicated low educational levels of parents and low educational expectations by the respondents. These issues were explored more fully in the analysis of the focus group interviews.

College Experiences

Nearly all of the respondents had informal mentors who helped them get to and through college (89%). On the open-ended question section of the questionnaire, the most frequent response to the question, "What were the three most important supports that helped you achieve your degree?" was mentors. Mentors were overwhelmingly identified as the single most important support for completion of the bachelor's degree. The mentors were not necessarily identified by the label of "mentor," by 67% of the respondents. They were described as people who helped, supported, encouraged, and guided them through their college experiences. These people included: relatives, friends, social workers, employers, professors,

and administrators (see Table 5 for supports while in college).

Table 5
Degree of Support While in College

Degree of Support While in College	Number	Percenta
Parents did not expect them to attend college	51	91%
Parents did not support them while in college	50	89%
Had informal mentors	50	89%
Believed college teachers did not care about their success	45	80%
Did not have friends in college	43	77%

Ninety-one percent of the respondents reported that their parents did not expect them to attend college and 89% reported that they had little or no parental support during college. The role that mentors played in helping respondents overcome poverty barriers to achieve their bachelor's degrees was explored in depth in the focus group interviews.

In regards to academic experiences, 80% of the respondents reported perceptions that their college teachers did not care about their success. Additionally, respondents (82%) reported having trouble with the vocabulary used in college (Table 6). The responses to the questions concerning college experiences reveal that

the respondents in this study were not socially or academically integrated into their colleges. Most reported that they did not participate in college social activities or sports (80%). Most respondents (77%) did not have friends in college. Lack of preparedness, lack of social integration and lack of academic integration are all variables identified in the first-generation college student literature as placing students at high risk of dropping out (Tinto, 1987). These variables were examined in the focus group interviews to determine what helped these students complete college in spite of these obstacles.

Table 6
Challenges While in College

Challenges While in College	Number	Percentage
Struggled with vocabulary in college	46	82%
Did not participate in social activities or sports	45	80%
Worked off campus	54	96%

Seventy-two percent of the respondents in this study attended community colleges. Additionally, 96% worked off campus during college. Lack of economic stability continued to be a factor in respondents' lives throughout

college. Eighty-three percent changed their residence at least once during college.

All respondents reported that they were significantly changed by their college experiences (see Table 7 for percentages). Almost all respondents in the present study reported that college changed their language, their relationships with others, their social behavior, and their ability to understand others. Finally, 72% reported that college changed their taste in food, clothing, and music.

Table 7
Profile of Cultural Changes

Changes as a Result of College	Number	Percentage
Language	47	83%
Relationships with Others	50	89%
Social Behavior	50	89%
Abilities to Understand Others	49	87%

This profile of poverty conditions, early education experiences and college experiences, creates a picture of a group of students who have experienced the deprivation of poverty. Against all these odds, respondents in this study were able to complete college. The dominant issues that emerged from the questionnaire analysis were used to guide focus group interviews. The next section provides

the results of the open-ended questions on the questionnaires as well as data gathered from the focus group interviews.

Part II: Poverty-Related Barriers to Higher Education

This section covers the barriers that evolved from the responses to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire and the focus group interviews. Respondent is used to refer to those responding to questionnaires. Participants is used to refer to those participating in the focus groups. The focus group interviews were conducted with 24 participants from various races (see Table 8). Ten of the participants were male and 14 were female. Their ages ranged from their 20s to their 60s. Across racial, gender, and age lines, beliefs about who they were and what was possible for their lives were directly affected by their social-class context. The poverty they experienced affected every aspect of their lives.

Participants in this study internalized the shame and humiliation of poverty. They believed their poverty was seen as their fault. It is clear from the focus group analysis that their experiences of poverty deeply impacted these participants; they faced barriers in all stages of their lives. These barriers were related to: (a)

lifestyle, (b) early education experiences, and (c) college experiences. Each of these areas is discussed in this section. The fourth part discussed in this section explores participants' strategies for overcoming these barriers and completing college degrees. Within each section, I consider the participants' reported perceptions of, and experiences with, completion of a college degree with the focus on what each one actually believes made a significant difference. The voices of students from generational poverty are not often heard. I use the narrative to let them tell their stories of their process in attaining the bachelor's degrees.

Table 8
Profile of Focus Groups

Focus Group Racial Makeup	Number	Percentage
White	16	66.7%
Hispanic	3	12.5%
African American	3	12.5%
Asian	1	4.2%
Native American	1	4.2%
Total	24	100%

Barriers Related to Lifestyle

This section provides a review of responses from respondents to questionnaires and participants in focus groups which relates to the conditions of generational poverty. Responses in this section reveal answers to my

first research question, "What are the institutional, environmental, and personal experiences of students from third generational poverty who have completed bachelor's degrees?" The purpose for illuminating poverty conditions is to provide a social class context for examining the institutional, environmental, and personal experiences of students from generational poverty. The conditions of poverty affect every aspect of life and cannot be separated. Weber (1946) argued for the importance of examining the social structure that people live in to understand their life possibilities. Class theory demands a contextual examination which takes the view that economic and social factors influence behavior.

Examining and understanding the context of generational poverty is crucial in increasing educational success rates for students from poverty backgrounds. Participants were not asked directly, "What was it like to live in poverty?" However, the context of their poverty experiences were evident in their answers to other focus group questions such as, "What did education mean to you and your family?" Or "What were your teachers like?"

Through analyzing the responses it became clear that the poverty experienced by this group had an effect on their educational experiences. Their home life in poverty followed them into education situations and into their

relationships with others. In this section, I describe data related to the conditions of generational poverty. The social class origins and poverty-related experiences were identified by this group as directly connected to internal shame and embarrassment. Participants described poverty-related experiences linked to categories such as: appearance, jobs, housing, food, health care, money, and control over their lives. The poverty-related stories of early education experiences and the role of teachers in the participants' lives are also discussed in this section.

Appearance

All participants described a world where they felt their value as human beings was judged by their appearance. Stories about appearance related to: cleanliness of themselves and family members; hair cuts or styles, clothing, and shoes:

I hated school. No one liked me. Everyone could tell I was poor by my ragged clothes, horrible shoes, and free lunch tickets.
(Hispanic female, 30s)

No one wanted us around. We didn't smell good, our hair was dirty and stringy, and most people made us feel like we didn't belong. (White female, 30s)

I went to school one day and another kid in my class said I was wearing her shirt that her Mom had donated. I wanted to die. I hated school.
(White female, 40s)

Comments about disliking or hating school were often connected to an experience in which a participant was humiliated or embarrassed by her or his poverty. It was not only their own personal appearance they felt embarrassed by, but also their parents or family members' appearances. Eighteen participants described experiences where they perceived they were judged and made fun of for their parents' appearance:

My Mom took me to a birthday party and when we got there she walked me to the door. The other Moms did not look like her. I saw kids snickering. My Mom was clean, but her clothes were old and didn't fit well. I was embarrassed for her and for me. (White male, 40s)

My Mom and Dad were not clean. There was no way to bathe. We were almost always camping because we were homeless. I did not want anyone to meet them. (White female, 20s)

Participants in this study longed to have the "right" clothing and shoes, and to be clean. The awareness of not feeling normal because of their appearance and their parents' appearance was strongly expressed by almost all participants.

Expectations for Jobs

Respondents and participants reported that their expectations for jobs were shaped by their parents and others around them. Respondents were asked, "As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?" Most respondents (87%) did not have job or career goals. Most

reported that they never thought about "being something." Comments such as "I don't have any memory of wanting to be anything," "I had no dreams of what I wanted to be," and "I never had a 'to be' fantasy," were most often reported by respondents and participants from all races.

Participants also reported not having career goals.

I just wanted to survive and grow up. I never really thought about being anything. I never considered myself to be worthy to be anything
(White female, 30s)

I had no specific career goals. No advice from parents, and high school counselors were a joke, and that's being kind. I wanted to have kids. I never pictured a husband, just babies. When I got a little older I thought maybe a vet because I loved animals. I was told you have to go to school forever and it cost too much money.
(White female, 40s)

Many (72%) of the females in the focus groups who identified a future goal stated that they wanted to be mothers when they grew up.

I don't remember thinking of myself as being in a profession. I just assumed I would get married and be a mother. It was too scary to dream of anything else. That would mean planning for the future, something that was foreign to me. (White female, 30s)

I had no idea. I helped to raise my brothers and sisters, assumed I'd have kids of my own.
(Hispanic female, 30s)

Six males also identified parenting as their future goal.

No idea what I was going to be. I knew I wanted a wife, children, and a job to support them and my parents. (White male, 40s)

When asked how they would earn a living, 85% of the participants reported that they would find "some kind" of work. Sixty-nine percent of the participants had parents who were not in the labor force. They survived on welfare, disability, or migrant work. These participants talked about jobs as abstract concepts. They did not have a specific idea about what a job for them would be.

Other respondents and participants described jobs with which they were familiar. This included: jobs they had seen performed in their communities (such as police officer, hair cutter, clerk, office worker, waitress, and truck driver); jobs that were held by people they knew (such as working in manufacturing, textiles, fishing, glass factory, cannery, sign painting, and seasonal migrant work); and jobs they had seen enacted or portrayed on television (such as Solid Gold dancer, ballet dancer, nurse, doctor).

My Mom always said getting an office job would be good. You could stay clean and it would be glamorous. (White female, 50s)

Fourteen percent of the respondents and two participants who identified professional career goals (14%) most often identified "teacher" as their career goal.

When I first became aware that I was supposed to earn a living, there was no way I was going to do what my parents did. The only other role models I had were my two elementary teachers.

Teaching became my natural goal. (White male, 40s)

What the parents did to earn money also affected the self-esteem and employment goals of respondents (82%). Seventy-one percent of the participants also reported that their personal worth was judged by the kind of work their parents did or did not do. They described feelings of wanting their parents to have "normal" jobs. Participants' perceptions of others' behavior may or may not be true. However, they were problems for these participants whether they are actualities or perceptions.

If your parents worked in the factory, that was a good thing. But if they worked in fast food or didn't go to work at all, everyone made fun of you. (White male, 40s)

My Dad drove an ice cream truck for short time. At first the kids thought it was cool. Then, after awhile they began to make fun of me and ask why my Dad didn't get a real job. (Hispanic male, 30s)

My parents did migrant work and I just always wished they were normal like the parents on TV that go to clean jobs. (White female, 30s)

Expectations of jobs or careers for respondents and participants were directly linked to their social class context. Coming from generational poverty, most did not have a future vision of what they wanted to be when they grew up. They were not exposed to professional career opportunities other than what existed within their communities, and most of those jobs did not require a

college education. Limited employment opportunities and poverty level incomes affected the participants' housing experiences.

Housing

Inadequate housing was a theme that emerged in all focus groups. The family housing situation added to most participants' feelings of being "ashamed" and increased their perception that their family was "different."

I could never bring anyone home to our dump. I never wanted anyone to know it was my home.
(Black male, 40s)

There were always extra people living at our house. It was always a mess and even if I wanted to bring someone home, there wasn't any room. (White male, 30s)

I went to a friend's house once. She had bowls that matched. I always wanted bowls that weren't Golden Soft margarine containers.
(White female, 30s)

We lived in a car most of the time. I tried so hard to hide that, but kids found out, and they could be vicious. (White female, 20s)

Eighty-six percent of the participants described their efforts to make their homes nicer. They shared stories of cleaning, building, and repairing the places where they lived, but no matter how hard they tried, most participants reported that they were "shamed" by their homes.

Food

Like housing, food was not only a necessity to this group, but also served as an important status symbol which participants associated with their own worth and belonging. Ninety percent of the participants shared stories of how food was a barrier for them. They discussed not having the type of foods that other people were eating, which made them feel inferior. Others shared stories of not having food or having to purchase food with food stamps and the embarrassment that came with that.

I had cold pancake sandwiches for lunch. They were just awful. I just wanted what the other kids had. (White female, 30s)

My Mom packed me a sack lunch. She didn't have a quarter to buy me milk so she put tea in a mayonnaise jar. Once the tea leaked and when I got off the bus, the sack tore, the jar shattered. I just stood there and cried I was so embarrassed. I completely dreaded going to school. I wanted to be invisible. (White female, 20s)

I worried about my shoes and my lunch. Both always embarrassed me. It was such a thrill to have the treats that other kids had, like Twinkies. (White female, 30s)

We got commodities, the powdered milk, peanut butter and stuff like that. I hated it. I could not understand what was wrong with our family. Why couldn't we go to the store and get milk in a jug like everyone else? (Black Male, 40s)

Most of the participants shared stories of hunger. They identified with each other as they told of feeling "weak" and "shaky" from not having food to eat.

I remember many times we would go without food for days. We would get weak and to the point of not wanting to eat. My older sister would force something down us. (White female, 20s)

This level of hunger affected not only their feelings of self-worth, but also their health. Most of the participants reported that their families were "sick all the time."

Health

Almost all participants from this group reported that they and their family members had little or no medical care. Ninety-seven percent of the participants could not remember ever going to a doctor or knowing of anyone in their family who went to a doctor. The result was a lot of sickness and early deaths:

Everyone in my family was always sick. We didn't have heat most of the time. We missed a lot of school because of sickness. (Black male, 40s)

I can't think of a single time going to the doctor. If we were too bad off, we went to the emergency room. (White male, 40s)

I didn't know people went to the doctor. I thought everyone went to the emergency room. (White female, 40s)

I never knew anyone who lived past 60. I thought that was normal. (Hispanic female, 30s)

In addition to lack of medical care, participants reported rarely having the money to purchase prescriptions or if they did get their prescriptions filled, they shared

prescription medicine, including antibiotics, with other family members and friends. Participants also reported not receiving dental or eye care:

I never saw a dentist. Didn't even know you were supposed to until you needed false teeth.
(White male, 50s)

People in my family got their glasses from a second hand store. They would just go in and put some on and say, These will do. No one had the money to go to a real eye doctor. (White female, 20s)

Participants reported that not having enough money to improve their health situations affected how they felt about themselves in general.

The Meaning of Money

All participants reported that not having money to get the basic necessities contributed to their feelings of "hopelessness." Ninety-one percent of the participants felt that without money, their lives were out of their control, and they had no power to change their life situations. When asked what money meant to them and their families, 98% of the participants associated money with safety, security, and choice.

If you have money, your problems don't seem as big. You can get help and solve them before everything is out of hand. (White male, 50s)

Money can open doors. The doors may not be sealed, but they are hard to get into if you don't have money. (Black male, 60s)

People who have money have choices. It's harder without money. No one chooses to be without money. My parents worked hard. For 10 years, they made payments on a house thinking it was the ticket to security and then found out that the bank had no deed. They lost everything. (White male, 40s)

Money was also associated with power and control. It meant more opportunities, ease of mind, and expanded choices.

I had a high school counselor who said college could help me make money. I wanted money because money meant control of your life. The counselor helped me with the paper work. (Native American female, 30s)

I had a cousin who told me I could get money if I went to college. I knew money would give me power over my life (White male, 40s)

Overall, participants felt money could improve their quality of life. Many of the participants (77%) reported feeling like they could not dream or make choices.

Control

Participants in this study did not feel they were in control of their lives. They described feelings of inner shame and humiliation because of their poverty. Most participants discussed reacting to the events in their lives rather than shaping or choosing their futures. Many of the participants shared that they felt something was personally wrong with them and that was the cause of their poverty situations.

Life just happens. No one makes plans. When you are poor, it's like life has spun out of control and there is nothing you can do.
(Hispanic female, 30s)

However, in spite of the experiences of lack of control and shame, participants were able to overcome these poverty conditions and successfully complete college degrees. How they were able to overcome these internal and external barriers related to conditions of poverty is discussed in the strategies for college completion section. The next section illuminates poverty conditions as they relate to early education experiences.

Early Education Conditions

This section explores participants' experiences with early education. The conditions of poverty continued to affect the participants' sense of self and their expectations in their educational experiences. The meaning of education--including communication about education and educational goals--are concepts most frequently discussed by participants.

The meaning of education. Participants were asked to reflect back on what education meant to them and their families. The majority (98%) of participants across race reported that education had little or no meaning in their context. For most (92%), early education was just something they "did" and never knew why. Participants

(98%) felt that education was not important. Some of the most common reasons for going to school included, "it was the law," they "had to be there" and they "just went and never gave it a thought."

Education was just some requirements that someone had made up. It had nothing to do with our life. We were struggling for survival and would be fortunate if we reached a certain age and were still here. (White male, 40s)

We went to school to eat not to learn or get educated. I didn't even know what get educated meant. I thought if I could work with my hands, I'd be fine. (Hispanic male, 30s)

Over half of the participants (69%) reported that education came easy to them. Sixty-seven percent of those participants from all races reported that they had no direction and did not understand what they could do with an education. Even though they had good grades, education had no meaning in their context. Two participants had mentors early on who provided support, guidance and direction for their educational journeys.

Communication about education. Communication about education in the home lives of this group was limited. Most (96%) recalled that their families did not talk about education. Statements such as: "There was no discussion at home"; "No one ever asked, 'How are you doing in school?'"; "There was no involvement"; "We never discussed grades"; and "We didn't talk about it at all" were the most common responses concerning communication about

Participants reported that not communicating about education in their homes sent messages that it was not important and no one cared about it.

My parents were not educated. My Mom couldn't even write her name. They were embarrassed about it and ashamed. They never talked about what was going on with me and school. (White female, 30s)

When asked, "What was important and talked about?" all participants agreed that daily problems were the focus of their lives.

Education was fear. Fear they would take the kids away. People are trying to deal with basic needs. They don't have time to deal with kid's education or filling out papers at some agency. (Black male, 60s)

One participant stated that education was important in his home, but it could not compete with the realities of poverty:

Education was important. My Mom would have liked us to get educated, but education was not as strong of a need as getting food for that day or finding a place to sleep. (Black male, 40s)

Across lines of race and ethnicity, participants reported that friends played a role in shaping what education meant. Ninety-seven percent of the participants recalled that their friends were also from poverty and shared many of their beliefs about education. Participants (97%) also shared that the peer-pressure from friends to not gain an education was especially difficult. They needed and wanted to belong and fit in with their

friends. Gaining an education meant becoming an outsider. Friendships were an unseen, internal barrier to education.

There was an unspoken agreement that no one should get any smarter than others in the neighborhood. There wasn't challenge or ambition and most of us were stereotyped into technical schools. (Black male, 60s)

I was friends with people like me. Those kids who thought education was important were from another world. We did not hang out with them. (White male, 50s)

I never associated studying with success. I just thought intelligent kids did well and others like me and my friends didn't. (White female, 50s)

For most of the participants (98%), education was not a positive force; rather it represented more problems in their already troubled lives. Education did not have meaning for them. It constituted a source of more problems with all races in their lives such as discomfort, unhappiness, and stress. Participants (98%) shared feelings of "not belonging in school" and "wanting to stay home where they belonged." Participants also did not want to become outsiders to their friends. They reported that they did not "fit in" or "feel comfortable" in the educational environment. The underlying reasons for discomfort and not fitting in were related to their poverty, and poverty-related conditions such as: not having money for school lunches (many participants refused to eat the "free" lunches because of the stigma attached);

having the "right" clothing; living in the "right" house; and riding in a "decent" car (participants nodded and shared knowing smiles when remembering "hiding on the floor" of the car so no one would see the car they got out of). Education also caused stress for many of the participants.

Education was stress to my family. I didn't do well even though I was smart. Getting all the things we needed for school and getting there every day was more pressure in our lives. I was headed toward drugs and a life of crime. (Black male, 60s)

School projects and homework were a joke. People like me never got school activities done. We either didn't know what we were doing and there was no one to help or we didn't have the right stuff to do a project and life was so chaotic anyway. We just didn't participate. (White female, 30s)

I hated school holiday parties and gift exchanges. I would look desperately through my things trying to find something I could give that didn't look too used. I just wanted to be like everyone else. (Native American female, 30s)

Wanting to belong and "be like" everyone else was a common phrase attached to the ends of stories of embarrassment related to poverty by all races. Freire (video taped speech at Santa Cruz University, 1989) discussed that what is normal in a society is determined by the middle-class. The participants in this study were not able to live up to the middle class standards of food, jobs, housing, cars, clothing, and often expected behavior

(such as gift giving or completing outside of school projects). This made participants feel like outsiders and deeply affected their educational experiences and expectations.

Educational goals. The expectations for education for this group were also affected by their parents' education levels. None of the parents were educated beyond high school, and for most (96%) any of the participants, the goal was to just do a little better than their parents. Considering that the majority of the parents had less than a 10th grade education, high school completion became the goal for many.

Just get through high school. The goal is to do better than your parents, nothing more. Education meant nothing. I went to meet the boys, nothing more. (White female, 50s)

My Mom hoped all her kids would get a high school education. That was the great expectation. She said we could get jobs better than McDonald's if we finished high school. (White male, 50s).

For my family, the 8th grade would be a great accomplishment. No one went beyond that. You needed to go to work at that point. (White male, 40s).

For some participants (59%), high school was beyond what they could imagine.

I could not imagine finishing high school and if I did it would be an incredible accomplishment because no one I knew went beyond the eighth grade. (White male, 40s)

My Dad thought high school was important. I got pregnant at 16 and at 17, then I finished high school for my Dad. (Asian female, 40s)

No one I knew believed education would make a difference for people like us. They just shoved us through the system and didn't quite know what to do with us. (Hispanic female, 30s)

How far a participant was expected to go with their education was also affected by their sex. Educational expectations were rigidly defined by gender roles for both older and younger participants in the present study. The expectations for females (89%) from their families were that they would achieve little or no education. For all males, the family expectations were that they would complete up to 10th grade or at most, finish high school. Neither sex reported being encouraged early on to aspire to a college degree. Almost all participants recalled being told education was "for the boys," and girls "get married."

Education up to high school was important for the boys but not the girls in my family. We were taken out of school a lot to work. (White female, 50s)

There are five girls in my family and one boy. We rarely went to school. My Dad said school was a social thing, and besides, girls get married; they don't need school. (White female, 20s)

A White male in his forties reported that he was taught education was for the boys and marriage was for the girls. He also commented that the expectation for the

boys getting educated was not past high school. "Why would anyone need education beyond that?" It was clear from the focus group interviews that gender roles affected the educational expectations of members of this group.

Summarily, the meaning of education is rooted in the context of poverty for participants in the present study. Attitudes, values, and beliefs concerning education were formed based on the communication and experiences of people around them, including their families and friends. Most participants could not articulate why they went to school as children and teenagers, except that it was "something you did." Communication about education was rare in participants' homes, giving them more messages that education was not important and not for "people like" them. What was important to participants was what was going on in their lives related to basic needs. This group emphasized that they did not belong or fit in at school. People at school dressed and behaved differently, they ate different foods, drove different cars, and lived in different homes. Participants did not identify with anyone for whom education made a difference; therefore, they believed it would not make a difference in their lives. Their expectations for education were "just to do better" than their parents. For females, that meant little or no education. For males, the expectation was

not more than a high school education. The next section explores participants' perceptions of their experiences with teachers.

The Role of Teachers (K-12)

This section explores the impact of K-12 teachers on this group of students from generational poverty. Participant perceptions of teachers overall were that most teachers in elementary and high school "didn't care." They had not experienced teachers who protected them or reached out to them.

I cannot pull up one teacher that cared about or encouraged me. I was afraid to speak and so far behind. The teachers just wanted me to keep low-key. (White male, 50s)

My teachers never cared. They were not human; they were rodents with no patience and no empathy. They couldn't control the class and they couldn't control me being made fun of. (White male, 40s)

Teachers already had an idea of who I was before they ever met me. I was just another black kid that they had to put up with (Black male, 40s)

Participants (94%) from all races also perceived that teachers "didn't know what to do with kids like them." They reported that they were so far behind that they were constantly being ignored or put in the back of the room. Twelve of the 24 focus group participants reported that they had learning disabilities that were not diagnosed. In some cases, those participants shared that they were

judged as not smart, when in fact it was a learning disability that had prevented them from learning.

We moved so much the schools couldn't keep track of our records. The teachers couldn't catch us up, so they just pushed us to the side. (White female, 20s)

They put me in special education. I was smart, but I had a speech problem. Years later they found out that I needed surgery on my tongue; I wasn't stupid. No one cared enough to find that out. (Black male, 60s)

My vision was bad. I didn't know it. I didn't know why I couldn't understand what was written on the board and the teachers didn't care to find out. (Hispanic male, 40s)

This group overwhelmingly felt that teachers were the "enemy." They reflected on story after story of being humiliated by teachers. Most participants reported that they were "afraid" of their teachers.

My teachers told me a kid like me would never need education. I had negative experiences, humiliating. I was sent home for being dirty. One teacher told me I was going to get an award. My parents were so happy. At the assembly, the teacher said, "When I first met this student, I thought she was the dirtiest, stupidest, kid, now she gets the most improved award." I saw my parents slump down in embarrassment. They never came to another school function. (White female, 30s)

Everyone always knew the poor kids get put in the back of the room, get their names on the board and get picked on. They made you feel like you didn't belong there. That's just the way teachers were. (Native American female, 40s)

My teachers humiliated and degraded me by reading my grades aloud. I always felt less

than perfect. I learned to be quiet and tried not to get attention. (Hispanic male, 40s)

My teacher told me that I couldn't be in the spelling bee. I was a good speller, but because of my background and she knew of my family, she didn't think I'd be good. I went to the spelling bee and I knew the winning word. I never forgot that teacher. (White male, 40s)

Out of all of the focus group interviews only four of the 24 focus group participants reported positive relationships with their teachers. One of those participants reported that she believes that going to the same school for an extended period and the fact that school came easy to her were possible reasons why she had good teacher experiences. Another participant who had positive experiences with teachers said that she knew from early on that she had a love for learning and it showed in everything she did. She believed teachers picked up on that aspect of her personality. The other two participants who reported positive experiences had no explanations for their student/teacher relationships.

Most of the participants who had negative experiences reported that they handled the teachers' behavior by "acting out" or withdrew by becoming "silent." In this group, more participants (86%) chose the silent path.

I had no confidence to raise my hand and say an answer. I felt like I just shouldn't say anything that might draw attention to me.
(Black female, 30s)

I was afraid to say anything; afraid I'd be wrong. (Hispanic female, 30s)

I always thought I needed to keep quiet. Don't know where that came from. (White male, 40s)

My clothes and my shoes drew enough focus on me. I didn't want to ever raise my hand and draw more. (White woman, 30s)

Discussing teachers raised a lot of emotion from participants. They were deeply affected by teachers' attitudes and actions. The majority of respondents (89%) reported on the questionnaire that they did not feel their teachers believed in them. This theme continued in the focus group interviews with 96% reporting that they perceived their teachers did not believe in them. Most of the participants reported that teachers had a significant impact on their lives and even today, many reported still getting upset by how they were treated and "pushed aside."

Most participants (87%) felt teachers had been socialized to believe that participants were not important and that there was no hope for them because they were from poverty. A White female in her 40s summed up this feeling:

I do not think teachers do mean things consciously to poor kids. They are just socialized to believe these kids can't be helped and many don't even realize they hold that value.

The impact of teachers on students' lives is remarkably deep and long-lasting. Stories told by this

group reveal the immense power and influence that teachers have over their students. Participants in the present study revealed that their teachers had the power to make them feel cared about, to help them feel safe from ridicule, violence, and humiliation, to create an environment in the classroom where they felt welcome, and to help them to believe in themselves. Participants reported that they believed their lives would have turned around sooner if they had experienced teachers who believed in them and treated them like they were "somebody." Participants did not want to be singled out for negative reasons, but most reported that they wished teachers had shown them what was good about themselves.

Summarily, this section has explored participants early experiences related to generational poverty. Participants shared early institutional, environmental, and personal experiences which shaped their expectations for their futures and their perception of their potential. The next section explores the next phases of their life journey by examining challenges and barriers faced by participants during college.

Barriers in College Completion

The majority of participants across racial lines reported that their biggest challenges in college to completion of their degrees were: (a) lack of money and

unstable living conditions, (b) loyalty to family of origin issues, (c) lack of basic skills, (d) lack of knowledge about the college system, (e) not fitting into the college environment, and (f) lack of understanding of social class in the college environment. This section focuses on each of these areas as it explores in depth research question one, "what are the institutional, environmental, and personal experiences of students from third generational poverty who have completed bachelor's degrees." The focus of this section is on identification of the challenges and barriers related to college completion for this group.

Lack of Money and Unstable Living Conditions

Respondents (96%) and participants (98%) in this study reported that not having money to live on was a barrier to college attendance and completion. The majority of respondents and participants struggled with money and living conditions while in college. Most of the respondents and participants in this study worked while in college. Even though they worked, they struggled with basic needs. The jobs they were able to secure were low paying and participants reported that they were supporting nuclear family members as well as members from their family of origin. Those participants who were parenting

(48%) and working during college reported fatigue and worry about their capacity to be good parents, earn a living, and learn all they needed to learn to "catch up" and stay abreast with academic demands.

Paying rent was a big problem. I ended up moving my family multiple times in with different people I knew trying to make it. That was hard for them and for me because I had no time or place to study. I couldn't participate or fulfill expectations of professors. (Black male, 40s)

I was a divorced, single parent with no work experience. I had no money for a house so I had to live with my ex-in-laws. I had no car. I had to learn everything trial and error at college. I was tired, working, raising kids, going to school with no help with day care. I had to leave my kids on their own a lot. We were so poor we barely had enough food. I worried all the time if I was being fair to my kids. I don't know how I overcame it. I don't think I did. I was just determined to keep going until it was done. (White female, 50s)

If my peers ordered pizza, I'd act like I wasn't hungry and pass. I had no money. (Hispanic female, 30s)

Money was such a huge problem. The things my college peers thought were problems seemed like nothing to me. They were all worked up about homework or some social thing. I just wanted to be able to buy food, pay my rent and keep my utilities on. (White male, 40s)

Participants struggled with basic survival needs and at the same time struggled with the demands of college. Many participants reported that their money struggles prevented them from learning. Additionally, participants

reported that they often carried the burden of being financially responsible for relatives.

Loyalty to Family Issues

Family loyalty was a concern expressed by all respondents and participants across racial lines. Those experiencing poverty do not experience it in a vacuum. The people they love and for whom they care are also in pain and struggling for basic needs. Respondents and participants reported great anguish for their family of origin members' conditions. It was important for participants to know that family of origin members were not going hungry or experiencing homelessness. The majority of participants (94%) expressed that their concern for family of origin members' living conditions and their relationships with family members presented challenges to college completion. In addition to trying to keep up with family, work, and college, respondents and participants reported that they were trying to help family of origin members with their basic survival needs.

It was hard for me to live this so called "middle-class lifestyle" knowing that my Mom, Dad, and siblings were homeless and often hungry. I couldn't sleep most nights. I sent them whatever money I could from my financial aid, then I would struggle to get what I needed for my classes and to get through the term.
(White female, 30s)

I worried for my family. They were living in horrible conditions. (Hispanic female, 30s)

My family members were desperate for money. They needed food. They needed a place to sleep. I gave them my financial aid and then couldn't buy my books for classes. (White male, 40s)

Getting the financial aid check that was supposed to last a term was not realistic for me. Everyone I knew needed money now. I couldn't very well tell them no when they needed food. (Black male, 40s)

Getting that huge loan check at the beginning of the term that was supposed to last until the next term was a joke. Credit card applications were also difficult. At home, things were difficult and I constantly received calls from my mother. One of my brothers became addicted to methamphetamine and was in trouble with the law. I'm the oldest of six. Fortunately, I had a younger brother who provided a lot of support to my mother while this was occurring. (White male, 50s)

My parents bought me a coat one winter and I couldn't help but feel guilty wondering what they gave up to get me a coat. (White female, 30s)

Changing relationships with family and friends also presented challenges for some of the participants. Most family of origin members did not understand why participants were studying or what benefit they would get from college. Some participants reported that their family of origin members did not believe they would finish college, but that they were comfortable with their attendance as long as it did not take away from family of origin relationships. Other participants reported that their family of origin members viewed them as "traitors" for even going to college.

Having enough time and money to make it and my relationships with relatives were my biggest challenges. I was the first in my family to attend and graduate college, yet I am the youngest of a large family. Many of my siblings were jealous and treated me poorly for going to school. Now two of my siblings have graduated with undergraduate degrees and two more are attending. (White female, 40s)

Changing relationships with family and friends was something that I struggled with most, especially the last two years of work on my BA. It is difficult to describe how those relationships changed because there were so many ways. With some of them, the strain was greater than with others, but all my relationships changed to some degree. Most of the people I knew had no idea why anyone would study. They just didn't understand why I couldn't be with them more. Relationships with my siblings were probably the greatest areas of change and readjustment. (White male, 40s)

My Dad thought college people were snobby and uppity. He said I'd be a traitor if I went. My Mom and another relative who had a degree encouraged me to go anyway. (White female, 30s)

Participants (97%) in this study, reported that they were caught between two worlds. Once they began to get an education, they struggled to fit in both at home and in the college environment. When they were with their families of origin, they struggled to reconcile new attitudes, beliefs, and values gained from their education, with those they had grown up believing were normal. Family and friends' attitudes, values, and beliefs had not shifted and this was a source of conflict. In the college environment, participants still struggled with knowledge gaps and different life experiences than

others. Ninety-two percent of the participants reported not fully belonging in either world.

I am still close to my family, but our relationships are different. There is a definite wall that separates us, even though they are proud of me and I love them. Our experiences, what we talk about have changed dramatically. (Native American female, 30s)

My family relations are strained because I got out of that circle. They know I care, but I have to work to make them comfortable (White female, 50s)

I am estranged from my family. They think I am strange. I do things differently (Black male, 40s)

Participants reported that they had developed a new culture to be successful in the college system and as a result, they struggled to negotiate their relationships with family of origin members.

The feeling of not fitting in persisted even after college. I am highly aware that most of my educated friends come from a different place. Even though I am educated, in most ways we are worlds apart. At the same time, I have changed a lot and do not fit into my old world. (White female, 30s)

I had to turn my back on everything I knew because everything I was taught was different than the knowledge I needed to be successful at the university. At home, I was taught that people are more important than anything in the world. At the university I learned that time is more important than people. The sacrifice is that I am now not only an outsider with people who are from middle class backgrounds; I am an outsider with my relatives. (White male, 30s)

Loyalty to family of origin members created barriers to respondents and participants achieving their degrees

and to maintaining close ties with family members. Most respondents and participants received personal encouragement and support from their family of origin members and this support was important to degree completion. Most family of origin members did not understand the importance of education. Respondents and participants faced barriers in their education as a result of changing family of origin relationships and concern for family.

Lack of Basic Skills

Across racial lines, all participants reported that even after making it through high school they reached college missing basic skills in almost every subject, including grammar, math, writing, reading, vocabulary, English, and the sciences, and they also lacked study skills. Most participants (94%) reported that throughout their college education, one of their major struggles was trying to gain missing background knowledge.

I had huge education gaps. I didn't know the names of animals, states, and simple things. I was amazed at how much other people knew. I thought I could never be like that. (White female, 30s)

I tested so far below the college level that it took me seven years to get my bachelor's degree. (Hispanic female, 30s)

I was so behind. I had information deficits in every subject. I would never say a word in

class because I was terrified I would say something stupid. (Asian female, 40s)

The language and vocabulary were so different. I did not know most of the words that people said, and I had real difficulty reading the text books. (White male, 40s)

High school did not prepare me. I didn't even know the basics. I did not know studying would help my grades. (Black male, 40s)

Lack of basic knowledge also determined some of the participants' degree selection.

I did not know anything about college. I did not know what a degree was, how to register, or how to study. High school guidance counselors were awful. I wanted to hear experiences. I wanted direction. I had no clue. I selected my program because there was no math in it. (White male, 40s)

I wanted to get into the medical field, but I had no background in the sciences, so I selected social work. (White male, 50s)

I did not know what a degree was. I just knew I wanted to help people. I had worked on the domestic hotline and I was good with helping people, but I didn't know how to take them to the next step. I thought I would be a good counselor. I did not know how to read and I was afraid someone would find me out. (White female, 50s)

Someone gave me a test once and said I'd be a good engineer. I didn't know what that was. (White female, 50s)

Mentors also shaped degree choices by the participants.

I enrolled in psychology because that's what my cousin took. I didn't know what a degree was. (White female, 30s)

I wanted to be a social worker. My foster-mother was a social worker. I wanted to help people, like her. (Black female, 30s)

Poverty has an isolating effect on those who are struggling with it (Wilson, 1987). People in poverty relate to others who are experiencing similar life conditions. Participants in this study had not been exposed to college and had little or no understanding of what was available to them. They chose their academic discipline just as they had chosen what they wanted to be when they grew up, based on what existed in their context.

Lack of Knowledge About the College System

The college system intimidated most of the participants in this study. Participants (89%) across racial lines reported not knowing how to register for college classes. Ninety-two percent reported that they believed other students had the "secrets" about the registration process.

For me, going on the college campus for the first time was really scary, just because I was never there before. I didn't know what advising was. I didn't know what registration was. There were all these assumptions that you know. Everybody assumed that I knew. I didn't want to ask them and feel like a fool. (White male, 40s)

Registration was difficult. I did not know what line to stand in. It seemed everyone else had secret information. (Black female, 30s)

The obstacles in college were overwhelming. The deadlines, registration, studying, none of that was part of the world I knew. (Native American female, 30s)

In addition to registration difficulties, 85% of the participants reported that they did not know that financial aid was available to them. The majority of participants (87%) disclosed that they had high amounts of financial debt for their college degrees and many of the participants shared that the debt has continued to burden them and "hold them back."

I thought only rich kids got scholarships. I borrowed so much and that is still keeping me down. I will be paying until I die. (Hispanic male, 30s)

I had no guidance. I didn't know about grants and loans. I thought you had to pay up front. (White male, 40s)

I never heard of financial aid. I was working and trying to catch up on all the basics without any help until a coworker told me I should apply for financial aid. (White female, 40s)

Not Fitting into the College Culture

Participants reported not fitting in with their early education experiences, and this continued through their college experiences. Most participants (95%) reported that they knew they were different from students and professors who came from privileged backgrounds. They talked about different subjects, they ate different foods, they had different relationships with their family members, they had different background experiences, and their priorities concerning what was important in life

were different. Participants (92%) reported making great efforts to "stay away" from the college as much as possible.

I didn't know what to expect. Every day I was out of my comfort zone. I really hated it when someone wanted me to talk about myself or my home life. That was a problem. (Native American female, 30s)

I have a much different world view than most college students of what is a hard life and what it is to have or not have something. I have difficulty feeling empathy for the advantaged when they have a tough time. (Hispanic male, 30s)

I wanted to be with people like me. I grew up somehow knowing that I was not supposed to get involved with people who were not like me. (White female, 30s)

As in their early education experiences, most (91%) of the participants felt silenced in the college environment.

I could never be myself in college. I felt like I needed to silence my background. People seem to judge you as less if you were poor. (White female, 40s)

A majority of the participants (96%) reported surprise at how other college students were treated by their parents, specifically, the high levels of involvement parents had with their children's college experiences.

Parents would come to see where their kids were going to college. They'd take them out to dinner. My parents were living in their car and I was sending them part of my financial aid money. (White female, 20s)

I have such a separateness from my middle class friends. They go to Europe at break and I go to my parents condemned trailer to try and help them. (White female, 30s)

I couldn't believe parents gave kids cars, allowance, paid their car insurance and gave them gas credit cards. Unbelievable. If only I had that support. Who knows how far I could have come? (Black male, 40s)

Participants reported surprise that other parents understood the importance of education. Their parents (93%) did not even understand why they were going to college. The participants' parents were not comfortable there and in the end, 52% did not realize importance of their graduation ceremony.

When it was time for me to graduate none of my family came. My Mom said, "If I come, do I have to buy you a present?" She was worried that she would look bad for not having a present for me. (Black female, 30s)

My family didn't come to my graduation. They all slept. They were living in a trailer with 14 people. They had no heat. They stayed up late because it was too cold to be still and sleep. They also had no water to bathe and no decent clothes or shoes to wear to a formal event. I didn't blame them and even though I wished they could have seen me cross the stage, I was actually relieved not to be embarrassed. (White female, 30s)

Just as in their K-12 experience, participants (92%) felt their own worth as humans was based on their background experiences.

I always felt out of place, worthless, and stupid. There was so much I didn't know. People would say things and I'd have no idea. (White male, 40s)

I never told anyone about my background at first. I figured if they knew, they would judge me as not smart. I had heard that college would "weed" out those who weren't smart. I didn't want to be weeded out. (White female, 30s)

All participants in this study believed their social class background determined whether or not people would accept them. Two participants also felt that their race affected their being accepted. Although this study asked no questions that were specific to race, the issue was raised. Two participants reported that their race as well as their social class was a barrier for becoming educated and being accepted. An African American male in his 60s reported that he often felt he was invisible because of his race.

I got arrested for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and nothing I said to the police made a difference with them. I was just another black face of which they had seen many.

This participant perceived that he was stereotyped because of his race before people ever met him. An Hispanic male in his 40s also raised the issue of race as a barrier. He described being discriminated against in high school because of his race.

I wanted to be a physician. We had a bigoted male counselor in high school. He felt that Hispanics would amount to two types of vocations: farm labor or armed forces. Therefore college preparation was not an option.

When he got to college, the Hispanic participant found more barriers related to race. He described difficulty in

meeting people and finding a support system in an "almost all" White university. He reported that meeting fellow Hispanic students and connecting with an Hispanic counselor were key to overcoming the racial barriers to college completion. These two participants, reported that they were discriminated against because of both their race and their social class. All participants told stories in which they were stereotyped, stigmatized, and harassed because of their poverty. This group, across racial lines, believed that by virtue of being born into poverty, their morals and values were questioned and that others saw them as inferior. Social class affected their sense of self-worth, their world view, and how they interacted with others.

Lack of Understanding of Social-Class in the College Culture

On the part of college staffs, faculties, and other students, the lack of understanding of social-class made almost all of the participants (94%) feel like they did not belong in college. All participants reported that there was little or no understanding of their experiences of growing up in poverty. For White participants, social class carried an additional stigma. They reported feeling that it was almost expected that people from minority groups had grown up in poverty, but for them, it was

expected that their Whiteness meant that they had led privileged lives. All White participants felt that their poverty was seen by others as a result of bad choices that they had made. In addition to the poverty being "their fault," all White participants reported that poverty-related barriers such as lack of basic skills and unstable living conditions were seen by others as personal deficiencies. The invisible nature of social class created barriers for all participants across racial lines in the college environment.

People assumed I was a White middle class male and treated me like I've always had it good. I didn't have the energy to let them know what I'd been through. (White male, 50s)

I had a professor tell me to not participate in a class discussion because she wanted to hear from the females and the minorities. She said, "You White males always get to speak." She had no clue that I came from the ghetto. I had never had a voice and no one ever listened to me. (White male, 40s)

I needed financial help. I needed tutors. There was no help for anyone unless they were handicapped or a minority. I had to struggle alone. (White female, 50s)

I knew early on that I would not fit in at college. People there assumed that I had experiences that I knew nothing about. They didn't know a thing about my life, but they thought they did because I was White and male. The only thing I might have in common with them was a class assignment. I commuted from my hometown and that made it more comfortable. Going to college was to make a better life for my family, not for fun. (White male, 50s)

Most of the participants (96%) reported feeling empowered when they gained the knowledge through their education and through their interactions with others who had different social- class backgrounds to understand their social-class positions. Participants reported feeling better about themselves and their families when they understood that they were not the cause of their poverty.

It made me realize that there were clear structural reasons for the poverty and it wasn't mine or my family's fault. (White female, 30s)

I was so excited when I learned about class. Finally, I had the language and knowledge to understand and help others understand that I wasn't deficient and neither was my family. (Black male, 40s)

I felt that my experiences growing up were validated for the first time when I learned about social class. I never realized it wasn't just my family or people from my race having these experiences. (Hispanic male, 30s)

Participants reported that the lack of understanding of social class by professionals and other students presented challenges to their education completion. They felt judged and not understood.

It is offensive to me when people make comments about people who are poor. There is no recognition for the fact that my cousins were just as smart if not smarter, work just as hard as me, are just as artistically creative, intelligent, and beautiful, but they don't have degrees. I don't want to be an example of the stereotype that says, "If you just work hard, you can pull yourself up by the bootstraps." It's not true. It's not because I worked harder

than somebody else. It's not that my best friends are in prison and dead because they weren't working hard. People are willing to work hard; there are just road blocks over and over again. (White female, 30s)

In summary, the challenges perceived by the participants were varied and included: lack of money and unstable living conditions, family issues, lack of basic knowledge, not knowing the college system, and a lack of understanding about social class in the college environment. Most reported not knowing what questions to ask to gain the necessary resources and comply with college deadlines and policies. The results for this group were difficulties with degree selection, registration, and heavy financial burdens. The perceived limited understanding of social class in the college environment presented barriers to completion for this group. Students from poverty backgrounds in this study came to the campus having already experienced lifetimes of social-class inequities. Their college experiences were no different. Individuals in the present study perceived that they were judged and ridiculed for their social-class experiences (including language and knowledge gaps).

Part III: Strategies and Experiences Contributing to Participant Success

Most of the participants in this study exhibited the characteristics typically associated with dropping out of

college (Tinto, 1987). They experienced abject poverty conditions. The majority reported not being taught the value of education and they had poor early education experiences. The participants did not have parents who expected them to attend college or parental support while they were in college. Strategies and experiences that contributed to participants' success are described in this section in two parts: (a) overcoming the barriers: how they got to college, and (b) overcoming the barriers: why they stayed.

Overcoming the Barriers:
How They Got to College

Very few of the participants in this study received support or encouragement to attend college in their early years either from their home, communities, or schools. Even participants who had received good grades in school reported not being encouraged to go to college. Participants in this group overcame barriers to higher education and found their way to college in a variety of ways. Some of the triggers for getting to college included fear of a lifetime of poverty, life transitions, being introduced to the idea of college, securing resources, personal, emotional, and practical support.

Fear of a Lifetime of Poverty

Nearly all participants (98%) reported that they were determined not to be poor, but had no idea how to get out of poverty. They reported that the anxiety of living a life in poverty helped them to be more open to the idea of college when it was introduced.

I would do anything to have a better life for my family. When I was told about college by my sister-in-law, I jumped on it. I wasn't sure I was smart enough, but I was desperate. (White female, 40s)

I was determined not to live like my parents. I did not know what else to do, but I knew that hell was not life. I was hungry for some way to get out. (Black male, 40s)

Eighty-seventy percent of the participants described that they were "looking for a way out." They reported having no direction or resources to change their lives until they met someone who had gone to college and learned about financial aid.

I made up my mind that I would not be poor all my life. I would do whatever it took to get me and my family out of poverty. Fortunately, I met a woman who was educated and she encouraged me to go to college. (White male, 40s)

I was working in whatever kind of jobs I could get wishing for a better life, but I did not know what that looked like. I was encouraged to go to college by a woman I met at work. She was going to college. She encouraged me and helped me through the process. (White female, 30s)

These participants were supported to enter college by their desire to move out of poverty, having the idea

introduced to them, and securing the needed resources. They reported being more open to other life possibilities because of their fear of poverty. The desire for a better life helped the participants to take risks and enter the unfamiliar environment of college.

Life Transitions

For some participants (60%) a transition in their lives was the trigger that provoked them to go to college. These transitions included accidents, having a baby, getting a general education diploma, and recognizing that their current skills would not move them out of poverty.

I got hurt in an accident at work and they gave me a year of free tuition to college. I went not thinking about it long-term. (White male, 50s)

I left home at 16, I just got the hell out of there, dropped out, got pregnant, had a baby and needed to do something (White female, 30s)

Participants reported that prior to the transitions, college was not even a consideration. They were simply living their lives as their parents had lived. It was all they knew. Participants reported that they were more "open" to new ideas when their life situations changed and resources became available.

Securing Resources, Personal
Encouragement, Emotional,
and Practical Support

Securing resources, personal encouragement, emotional, and practical support emerged as key to all participants making their way to college. All participants in the present study identified securing financial resources as a critical factor in their getting to college.

There is no way I would have made it to college without financial aid. I was living with family and even with three of us working, we were barely surviving. When I learned I could get financial aid it opened so many doors. (Black male, 40s)

No doubt about it, I was able to go to college because they gave me money. Money was something I never had. Without financial aid I would never have gone. (White female, 30s)

I wouldn't have went. Financial aid offered me the opportunity to be able to attend college and allow me a break from the hopelessness of poverty. It was an American dream for me that became a reality. (White male, 40s)

The people who worked in the financial aid office were angels. I knew them all by name. They were the only ones in the building who knew my plight and did everything they could to get me that extra nickel. (White male, 30s)

Ninety-two percent of the participants in this study reported being treated as special as a child by someone in their lives. Because they were singled out and given personal encouragement, they perceived that they were somehow different from others who were living in poverty.

Participants reported that this feeling of being "different" helped them to gain some confidence to try new things. In addition, these participants reported that their belief that they were not like the others in poverty, helped them to be more open to people who were not from poverty backgrounds.

My cousin always told me I was smart and beautiful and that I could do anything. I believed her and was the first in my family out of six kids to go to college. (White female, 20s)

My Dad said I was his "good boy." My brother never went anywhere with his life. My Dad always told me I was the one who could do anything. (Black male, 40s)

Some participants (62%) reported that they were recognized for their potential. When they encountered people who felt that they were smart, they received emotional support and practical guidance for getting to college. They were told they were bright and encouraged to try college.

My co-worker said I should try college. She thought I was smart (White female, 40s)

I had an employer who told me I was smart and I should go to college. I had never considered it before that. (White female, 50s)

Most participants (92%) reported that they received emotional support and practical help for going to college later in their lives when they met someone who was familiar with the college system and that person or

persons helped them with encouragement to go to college and practical advice for gaining entry to college. The support people included new relatives (including relatives from new marriages and step-family members), co-workers, friends, and social service providers.

I had no personal motivation. I did it for my new stepfather. He and my mother were alcoholics and I believed that if I did what he wanted me to do, it would keep the peace and they wouldn't be angry. (White male, 50s)

I had no assistance from educators. I did have a friend who gave me hope. She told me I should go to college because I was bright and I had special gifts. (Black female, 30s)

Special programs also assisted some of the participants in getting to college. Twenty-seven percent of the participants described special programs as the reason they made it to college. The special programs included, the CETA program, a GED program, training and education programs (such as the Private Industry Council), and other employment-related programs. Participants reported receiving encouragement and practical support from program staff to apply for college.

I got into a GED program. The instructor told me about college. She said it wasn't much different from getting the GED, so I thought maybe I could go to college. (Hispanic male, 30s)

A CETA worker came to my brother's house to help him and she started talking to me. She said I seemed bright and introduced idea of college. I thought maybe I could and I wouldn't be on welfare and food stamps. (White female, 30s)

I was trying to find a job and my skills were so low. This woman working with me in the employment and training center said that I would qualify for financial aid and I was smart enough to go to college. She convinced me that I could get a good job if I did. I wanted that more than anything. (White female, 40s)

These participants explained that the encouragement and practical support provided by the staff of the special programs helped them to believe college was a possibility for them and provided them with assistance for accessing the college system.

In summary, the triggers for many of these participants getting to college were: the fear of a life in poverty; a life transition; and securing resources, personal encouragement, emotional, and practical support. The fear of a life in poverty made participants determined to have a better life and helped them to be open to new opportunities. Being more open to opportunity often involved a chance meeting with someone who believed in them and introduced college as a way out of poverty.

Many of the participants became open to the idea of college as a result of a personal change in their life situation that caused them to reevaluate the direction of their lives. The majority participants became more open to college with securing financial resources, personal encouragement, emotional, and practical support from someone in their lives. Participants reported that

financial aid was paramount to attending college. Most participants were living subsistence lives and paying for college was not within their reach. Participants reported that they believed that they were somehow special and different from others in poverty and that helped most participants to be open to ideas and behavior that was not typical in their communities.

Most participants in this study were searching for a direction and a better life. They were "ready" for opportunity when the idea was presented to them along with the necessary financial resources and nurturing from family, friends and professionals.

Overcoming the Barriers:
Why They Stayed

Once participants made it to college, all reported that they continued to need support for completion. Participants described a variety of supports that enabled them to complete their degrees. These motivators included: creating increased networks and connections, personal relationships, desire for a better life, understanding the link between a college degree and a better future, learning social and academic behavior of other students, satisfaction with college experience, gaining an understanding social class, creating increased

networks and connections, and gaining coping skills for dealing with changing family relationships.

Participants also reported that as their social networks increased, they were better able to secure needed resources and support to overcome the poverty-related barriers.

Creating Increased Networks

Participants (89%) reported that the longer they were in college, the more people they were introduced to and this increased their networks of support. Participants in this study entered college with limited support networks. Participants reported that their personal relationships played a large role in connecting them to others who could help them with financial, academic, and other specific needs.

The amount of time in the college environment not only increased networks and connections, but also helped 91% of the participants increase their knowledge about the college system. For many participants (70%) this meant learning about scholarships and additional financial aid they were eligible for. Seventy-two percent of the participants reported that once they knew the college system, they used the help they got to ease problems with their nuclear family and their family of origins' living conditions. This helped participants (68%) focus more on

their degree completion and less on worrying about family members.

I was encouraged to apply for a scholarship by my professor. That money helped me get a place to live and not worry about living with other people and/or not having a place to live.
(Hispanic female, 30s)

A fellow student told me I should go talk to the financial aid office if I needed more money. I did and they helped. I was able to concentrate much better without the worry of no money.
(White male, 40s)

I sent most of my scholarship money home to my parents and worked two jobs to make it. I couldn't sleep at night knowing they had nothing to eat. (White male, 50s)

Increased networks and connections helped students access supports to complete their college degrees. Most participants lacked the basic skills necessary to be successful in college. They reported being able to overcome this barrier by having a network of other students, professors, and mentors who helped connect them to the needed academic assistance. The academic assistance included tutoring, studying with friends, and learning about and attending special remedial classes. Participants reported learning from their networks what questions to ask and where to go for help.

Once I knew it was available, I sought help, counseling, work groups, support groups, anything that might help. I wanted a better life. (Hispanic female, 30s)

I got special help with test taking and writing research papers. A professor told me where I

could get help. I thought it was me. I believed I wasn't smart. I never would have even known to ask for help. Once I got help, my grades came up and I realized I could learn. I just needed someone to help me. (White male, 40s)

Personal Relationships

Three types of personal relationships were identified as most important to college completion by respondents and participants: (a) family members, (b) friends, and (c) professionals. Some respondents and participants had more than one supportive relationship. They reported their personal relationships provided the support, encouragement, and guidance that were essential to their college completion.

Family members cited as personal relationships that helped respondents and participants to complete included, mother, father, grandfather, aunt, children, sisters, stepfather, mother-in-law, and ex-mother-in-law. Seventy-two percent of the participants reported that family members contributed to their being able to complete their college degrees.

My ex-mother-in-law did not get beyond 8th grade and always wanted to go to college. She paid my way to law school and encouraged me all the way. (White female, 40s)

My Mom was there for me every minute, even though she was not educated herself, she wanted the best for me. She couldn't help out with homework, but she took care of my children,

cleaned my house, and always told me I could do it. (White female, 30s)

My stepfather always told me he wanted me to be more than he was. He was a truck driver. He helped me financially, but what mattered most was that he believed in me and told me so. (White male, 50s)

My kids convinced me that I wasn't as stupid as I thought. That's what got me in and that's why I stayed even when it got tough. (Hispanic, female, 30s)

Friends were reported as providing the support needed for college completion by 52% of the participants.

Friends included: fellow students that they had met while in college, friends from their communities, and co-workers.

I met an older woman at college and she just went the extra mile for me. My math was so poor I would have never made it. She spent hours helping me understand it and encouraging me that I could do this. (Black female, 30s)

My best friend was not educated, but she was my support for getting this degree. She helped out with my kids, listened to me cry late into the night because I was so overwhelmed, and she believed in me. (White female, 30s)

A woman that I became friends with at work always encouraged me. I would be tired and feeling like finishing my degree was impossible. She said things to make me feel like everything would work out and I could do it. She was my private cheerleader. (Hispanic female, 30s)

Participants (77%) reported that in many cases professionals provided the encouragement and support they needed to complete college. Professionals included:

support groups, social services providers, professors, deans, and counselors.

The women's support group on campus was my life saver. So many times I was ready to drop out. I would talk to them and everything did not seem quite so bad. (White female, 40s)

My professor took a special interest in me. She became my advocate, my tutor, and she opened more opportunities for me. She got me to present at a conference, helped me learn to write, and even listened when my home life was falling apart. I could turn to her for anything. (Hispanic female, 30s)

I explained to my history professor a little of my background. I wanted him to know I was doing the work. I just had a lot of missing knowledge. From that time on, he went out of his way to help me. (White male, 40s)

I went to counseling for the first time in my life in college. I am so glad I did. My counselor helped me to see that I did belong and I did deserve a degree. (Black male, 40s)

Ninety-six percent of the participants entered college with only a vague sense of what a degree was and what they wanted to do. They needed help in planning for their careers. Seventy-two percent of the participants were able to establish relationships with professionals who mentored them in planning for their studies. Other participants (32%) reported not having anyone to help in the beginning and getting started on the wrong path. The entered in degree programs that they were not interested in because it was "the only thing they had heard of," or they chose degree paths based on the skills required.

These participants reported that initially they did not even know they were on the wrong path. They later made connections to other students, faculty, or college staff who helped them understand the college system and helped them get on a path of studies which was more satisfying to them.

I was lucky because my mentor introduced me to the right people on campus. They helped me so much because I didn't know anything about how to pick a degree or even how to sign up for classes. (White female, 30s)

I did not know what I wanted to do. I just knew I needed to get educated so I could make some decent money to support my family. I signed up for classes that fit my time schedule. There was no reason behind choosing the classes I chose other than that. My biology professor talked with me for a long time about my interests. That was the beginning of me selecting a degree path. (White male, 50s)

Personal relationships were identified as critical to college completion by almost all participants including respondents to the questionnaire (89%). Most participants (91%) had more than one person who provided them with emotional support, encouragement, academic support, and guidance through the college system. Participants also reported that along with their personal relationships, their self-determination helped them to degree completion.

Understanding the Link
Between a College Degree
and a Better Future

All of the participants reported being motivated to continue with college because they saw college as a "ticket" to a better way life. Participants reported that even though college was difficult for them and most did not feel like they belonged, college was a better alternative than the poverty they had experienced.

You lose your benefits, be homeless, live with unhealthy family members, whatever it takes to go to school and get a better life. It shouldn't be this way; it's insane. (White female, 30s)

I lived to have a better life and help my family. That's why I got past feeling so alone. (Native American female, 30s)

It was easier to be in school than working in slave labor where no one respects you. I discovered another world I wanted to be a part of. (White male, 40s)

I was determined my family would have a better life. I knew what life was like without an education. (Hispanic male, 30s)

Keeping going was better than the alternative, living in poverty. I knew what that was like. College wasn't easy; there was so much that I did not know. But compared to life in poverty, college was a piece of cake. (White male, 30s)

My mother pushed me to do something. My sisters had babies by the age of 16. They were living in horrible poverty. It was my Mom's dream that I didn't do the same. (White female, 30s)

Fear of a life in poverty for themselves and their families, motivated all of the participants to continue

and complete their college degrees. Most participants also reported that once they were in the college setting they gained a greater understanding for what a college degree could do for their future and their families.

I was so focused on the degree. My motto was, "I won't allow failure." I read about and saw people with degrees working in nice jobs with good pay. I wanted that badly. (White female, 40s)

I really believed if I could achieve a bachelor's degree, I could support my family. That's what I was told by the college people and that became a driving goal. (Black male, 40s)

Most of the participants reported that once they were in college, they felt a responsibility to both their nuclear family (92%) and to their family of origin (78%) to complete. They talked about being the "only hope" for their families to move out of poverty.

I felt like I could not stop or it would let my family down. I knew if I could just finish, I could help them get out of poverty too. (White male, 30s)

Once I started, my family and my mentor encouraged me and I did not want to let anyone down. I had to meet their high expectations. (Black female, 30s)

Most participants in this study reported that they had close ties to both their family of origin and to their nuclear families. These close relationships served as motivators for participants to reach their goals of finishing college. They believed if they completed their education, they would be able to provide a better

lifestyle for their nuclear families and they could provide more support to their family of origin.

Most participants (92%) across racial lines reported that just knowing their poverty would end and that it "wasn't forever" helped them to tolerate poor living conditions and overcome poverty-related barriers in the college environment. Participants reported that the belief that they would have a better future with a degree, helped them overcome many of their poverty-related barriers.

It's a little less pressure to be in poverty temporarily and know that someday soon things will get better. That kept me going in spite of family and money problems. (Hispanic female, 30s)

You can see the "light" once you are in college. You meet people who are living different lives and you know that someday, if you can get through this, you will too. (White male, 40s)

Participants reported that through the people they met during their college experience, they gained an increased awareness that a degree could change their lives. Participants (78%) also reported that as their confidence in their academic abilities increased, they were more able to believe they would complete. Prior to this understanding, participants (69%) reported that they had hope that education would make a difference, but time in college, increased networks, and gaining confidence in their academic ability made that hope more concrete.

Learning Social and Academic
Behavior of Other College
Students

Participants overwhelmingly reported that they felt different and did not feel like they belonged in the college setting. One common strategy used for coping with these feelings was to imitate the behavior of those around them. Participants reported that they would make others believe that they had knowledge and experiences that they did not have.

A skill that helped me was faking it, pretending I was like them. (Hispanic female, 30s)

I had to jump in and pretend I knew words and things I didn't. I did that mostly by just nodding and not speaking. People would assume I knew what they were talking about. (White male, 40s)

Socially, and in some of my courses, I just faked it. I didn't fit in, but I was good at acting. (White female, 50s)

I was just quiet. It seemed like everyone should be able to tell that I wasn't knowledgeable in the subject, but no one had a clue. (White female, 30s)

Meeting other people who were educated was also an important motivator that helped participants to understand their own lives better and helped them develop new perspectives.

When I got a scholarship to college and interacted with and watched people of different ethnic and social classes, I knew I was missing out on a lot and that I wanted to explore more. (Black male, 60s)

I met others at college and once I got to know their stories, I felt I was as smart as them. Even though I didn't know as much, I felt I could do this. (Black female, 30s)

I met other students going against many odds and many of them had a tougher time than me. That was motivating to keep me going. (White female, 40s)

Participants reported taking on the behavior of other students as a mechanism of fitting into the college environment. They also used other students' experiences to gain new perspectives on their own lives. This helped participants to feel more comfortable in the college setting.

Satisfaction with College Experience

Even though most of the participants reported that they did not "fit in" at college, most of them also reported that college was the first place they had found where they felt good about themselves. Small successes in the academic world helped to boost their self-confidence.

The world was opening up to me. I was so excited when I did well. That motivated me to go even when it got tough. There was no place else in my life where I felt good about me. (White male, 40s)

College opened my eyes. The world opened and that was satisfaction, fulfillment, self-esteem. (White female, 30s)

As participants (98%) experienced small successes in the academic environment their confidence increased. As

they met more people, their confidence in their social abilities also increased.

I did things a little at a time. Each time I accomplished something it made the next level seem more possible. When I failed, I hung onto the times I had succeeded. (White female, 30s)

When I got to know more and more people, I felt better about myself. I wasn't so different. I had different ideas and experiences, but that wasn't a bad thing. (Black male, 40s)

Participants' interactions with other students helped them to feel like completing college was possible. Some of the participants copied the behavior of other college students to feel more like they were more accepted and belonged in the college environment. The new knowledge they were gaining from their education and small academic successes increased the confidence of many students and motivated them to stay in college. Gaining an understanding that their poverty was not their fault, also helped students to complete their degrees.

Understanding Social Class

Participants reported three mechanisms that helped them to gain a better understanding that their poverty was related to social class and not a result of personal deficiencies. The mechanisms were personal observations; learning about the life stories and experiences of other students from middle class and lower-class backgrounds; and studying social class.

The first mechanism of personal observations was the beginning of social class consciousness for most participants (96%). Participants reported their personal observations provided the beginnings of an understanding that poverty was not their fault.

People who are born with privilege continue to have privilege no matter how they act. People who are born poor, stay poor, no matter how hard they try, no matter how hard they work (Black male, 40s)

I heard the saying all my life, "if you just work hard, you can get ahead." It's not true. People I grew up around worked very hard. I have seen so many middle-class people who have it made and they never worked hard. They were born with advantages. (White male, 50s)

My cousin was the hardest worker I have ever met. He is not educated or trained in a special skill and could not get a good job. He tried to work and do the right things but it did not matter, he was always poor. (Native American female, 30s)

The personal observations were validated for most participants when they got into the college system where they came into contact with others from poverty backgrounds and with people from middle-class backgrounds. Listening to experiences of middle class students and professors and listening to other students who came from poverty, helped many of the participants broaden their perception of why they had experienced poverty.

For the longest time, I actually believed that we were to blame for the way we lived. I thought that we had done something wrong and that's why we did not have food. As I met more

and more people I learned it was much more than behavior or choices. Some people in this society are privileged; they have not done anything special to earn their class standing. Just like people who are poor have not done anything to earn their poverty. It is about who has the opportunity and generally, that is the people from upper-classes. (White female, 40s)

I couldn't believe how some people I met in college lived. They never had a days worth of struggle. What they thought were problems I just couldn't empathize with. I had been fighting my whole life for just the basics, for them it was a given that they would be taken care of. That meant the best house, education, and anything else they needed. No wonder they were ahead of me. (White female, 30s)

This externalizing of the poverty helped them to re-frame much of the shame and pain they had experienced as a result of living lives in poverty. Some participants reported (37%) that they learned about social class from studying it.

Before I learned about class, I believed poor people were defective and just needed to work harder. It's more comfortable for people to believe that as opposed to recognizing that some people will work really, really hard every day of their lives and still be poor. Not that there aren't lazy poor people, because there are a bunch of them, but there are a bunch of lazy middle class people too, but they stay middle class. (White female, 30s)

Once you understand class, you realize that if you are in the upper class, it doesn't matter what your grades are or how talented you are. When you graduate, you are going to get a nice high paying job. If you are in the lower class, you might get an OK job, but your not going to get a high paying job. It's the networking they have. People who have money know other people who have money. (White male, 50s)

Many of the participants (76%) came to a deeper understanding of their family members once they learned about class. This in addition to helping them externalize the shame and pain of their own poverty; it helped many of them to be more understanding and empathetic with family members.

My brother is the best artist I have ever met. He is truly amazing. He has worked ever since he was 12 years-old, backbreaking jobs. He is angry at the world. I was angry too, but I put it inside. My brother puts it in peoples' faces. People respond differently to him.
(White female, 30s)

I used to be convinced that if my Mom would just make better choices we would not be poor. When she bought something I thought was foolish, I judged her pretty harshly. When I gained an understanding of class, I realized she was doing the very best she could. Those little splurges she had now and then were her only break from a world of suffering and struggle. (White female, 30s)

Through personal observations, learning others' stories, and studying social class theory, participants in this study were able to come to a greater understanding of social class. Participants reported that this understanding helped them to externalize the shame and pain of poverty.

Coping with Changing Family of Origin Relationships

Relationships with extended family members was a barrier to college completion identified by participants

in this study. Most participants reported that the relationship struggles with family members did not end while they were in college, but they found coping strategies to overcome the barrier. Coping strategies included severing the relationships with family members; accepting new ways of relating with family members; and becoming advocates and mentors to family members.

Twenty-three percent of the participants shared that they had stopped contact with their family of origin. These participants reported sadness for the loss of their families.

I lost my family. I learned some things in college that were wrong and I told them. I became an outsider. (White female, 40s)

My family just couldn't deal with me being different. I did not like the way they treated me and they did not like the way I acted around them. So we just stopped seeing each other. I miss them, but I cannot go back. (Black male, 40s)

Other participants (77%) reported that they stay in contact with extended family members, but they learned to accept that their relationships with those family members would never be the same.

I love my family, but our relationships are different now. They are proud of me and brag about me being educated, but everything has changed so much. We have a lot less in common. (Black male, 40s)

My family has been affected by me going to college. We don't have the same connections,

but they are now doing their best to become educated. (Black female, 30s)

My family treats me like they are intimidated by me. No matter how I try to be just me, they see me different. (White male, 40s)

These participants reported being able to negotiate becoming educated and middle-class and still maintaining close ties with their extended family members. They were able to maintain family relationships by involving family members in their lives as they were becoming educated. Their relationships changed, but they and their family members accepted the change and remained committed to one another.

My family remains uneducated, but they take credit for my education. That helps us stay connected. They really did go through it too. They watched my kids, cleaned my house, fixed my cars, ran errands for me, and support like that. My Mom says they should give her a degree (White female, 30s)

I love my family. They don't understand a lot of what I do, but they support me because they know it makes me happy. (White female, 30s)

Many of the participants (74%) reported that as they became educated, they took on advocacy and mentoring roles for extended family members. They helped them to get needed services for their families and in some cases, they mentored family members into the educational system. Advocating and mentoring helped participants cope with their guilt and concern for family members.

I empower my family since I've become educated. I can stand up to doctors and other professionals. I am the translator in many cases for them. (White female, 40s)

I do a lot of communicating for my family. The people in power make people who are poor feel bad. They are condescending giving you a "you don't know any better feeling." I just interrupt and tell them differently now. (White female, 30s)

Me going to college has affected my family tremendously. My sister-in-law has just started a transition program to go to school. My niece and nephews, I know they will go to college. It will be second nature to them just like middle-class people. They come to school with me to do whatever. My friends, they now know it is possible and that's just the way it happens. It is natural to give certain information and they get cultural capital. It's just when you are poor, you just don't have it. You don't have the same connections. It's not middle-class peoples' fault that they can call so and so and call them up to get their kids an internship, of course they are going to do that for their kids. It's just that we don't have the same connect to call up so and so. (White female, 30s)

Participants in this study found three strategies of coping with family of origin relationships. They were disconnecting from family, accepting new roles and relationships with family members, and becoming advocates and mentors to their family of origin members. Some of the participants used two of the strategies for coping. For example, they accepted their changing roles and relationships and became advocates or mentors to their family of origin members. These coping skills enabled participants to overcome the pull between education and

their family of origin. This reduced stress and allowed them to complete their degrees.

Summary

Participants in this study were able to complete college by increasing their financial resources. They were also encouraged and supported to complete college by their personal relationships. Participants used personal relationships to increase their networks and connections in order to gain necessary financial resources for completion. As their social networks increased, participants were able to learn the college system and obtain additional resources, including financial, academic, and personal support. Through increased confidence, networks, and connections, participants reported linking a college degree to a better future. Increased networks and connections helped not only them and their nuclear families, but helped their families of origin as well. Other factors in their completion included understanding the link between a college degree and a better life. Most cited the end goal of obtaining a degree and being in a position to provide for their nuclear families and help their families of origin as motivators for helping them through the poverty-related obstacles.

Interacting with other students in their college classes became an important aspect of participants' completion. Some participants adopted behavior from other students to feel more comfortable in the college setting. Others gained new perspectives on their own lives as a result of their interactions. Almost all participants shared that they developed the ability to make people believe they had more knowledge than they actually did. Most participants relied on small successes to help them through difficult times.

As participants reflected on personal observations concerning social class, learned about others' life stories, and studied social class, participants reported a better understanding of their own social class experiences. This enabled them to overcome some of the shame and feelings of inferiority that were barriers to their completion. Participants also reported being more open to others as their shame from poverty decreased.

Participants came to terms with their relationships with members of their family of origin. Three coping mechanisms were identified. Some participants ended relationships with family of origin, while others learned to relate in new ways to family of origin members, and many participants became advocates for their families of origin.

Participant Responses to Request for Recommendations

One of the major goals for this study has been to open a space in which the voices of students who had grown up in generational poverty could be heard. Participants and respondents were eager to share their experiences in the hope that some of the information could be used to inform and improve the situations for those from similar backgrounds who might follow. Participants in this study were asked to make recommendations to specific groups (including people from poverty, professors, administrators, social service providers, politicians, and activists) for improving the college graduation rates for students from generational poverty. Their responses were insightful and reflective. I have compiled the most frequently suggested recommendations and they are presented in their words.

Participant recommendations. Participant recommendations to people from poverty backgrounds:

1. Get started even if it's a small step. You don't have to be perfect the first try. You are there to learn. Do it one day at a time. One paper at a time.
2. Believe in yourself. Don't accept being told you can't; ask why, how, what can I do to make this work?
3. Latch onto a mentor who tells you that you can do anything and helps you through the system.

4. Tap into your survival instincts and learn the system. Make a point of understanding the rules and policies and make them work for you.

5. Stay after class and talk with professors.

6. Meet people and let them know your situation. Don't think others are perfect. They have just had different opportunities. Listen to other people's stories. It helps you gain a different perspective on your experiences. Then you can look at yourself and the world in context.

7. Don't be afraid to ask for help, everyone does.

8. It is OK to break out from your old familiar world and broaden your horizons.

9. Make sure you connect with at least one professor. Force yourself to remember you have a right to learn. If a professor isn't working, there may be better ones for you. You are the consumer.

10. Talk to people who work in the field you desire.

Participant recommendations to professors.

1. Acknowledge students' growth wherever they start. It gives hope and builds confidence. Ask yourself if this is a poverty issue at the root of a student's struggling. Examine how it may hold them back. Look at where they come from and praise successes from there.

2. Reflect on your own biases. Recognize poverty as a diversity issue. It is a way of life and may not be obvious. Pay attention to class issues like you would for obvious differences, like race or gender.

3. Make the place comfortable. Start on the first day by stating everything clearly even if you think everyone already knows or that the information is obvious.

4. Be approachable. Don't just have office hours. Open the door for people who aren't used to going to a professor's office. Tell them in class that you really want to help them succeed and your door is open for any questions no matter what. Walk there with them. Call them by their first name and make a point to get to know them.

5. Diversify your curriculum and make education relevant to not only the lives of middle-class students. Include experiences of people who are poor and incorporate concrete learning styles.

6. Remember if your students can't learn your subject it's your responsibility. Examine ideas about who can learn and what is the role of the professor in the learning process. Find out who in your class is struggling or doesn't seem to be fully participating. Talk to them, link them in. Ask people what is difficult for them (both privately and in class)

7. Know not everyone is the same. Don't assume everyone shares middle class experiences.

8. Help students become aware of resources such as tutoring, social services, scholarships, mentor programs, and housing. Make it a class assignment to find resources and report back. Have the right attitude and show a willingness to help.

9. Share your stories of how you came to be educated and have others in the class share theirs.

10. Join a support group for professors who need help helping students from diverse backgrounds.

Participant recommendations for college administrators.

1. Use policies to serve people, not to exclude them. Rethink rules and broaden to include poverty realities.

2. Make sure there are scholarships based on class.

3. Understand that without help, people who are poor won't get anywhere.

4. Mandatory class-sensitivity training for all professors and staff.

5. Support and reward professors for exploring the subject of class.

6. Don't overfill classrooms. Give professors time to connect with students.

7. Create a climate that recognizes the injustices of poverty.

8. Get more services on campus specific to the needs of students from poverty.

Participant recommendations for social service providers.

1. Don't ignore poverty realities. They won't go away. Address the real situations people are in. Connect with people. Build relationships and trust. This demands more time and energy from social service staff.

2. Encourage further education as much as or more than low-wage jobs. Know about financial aid process and be able to simplify and help people get into college. Develop programs that meet people's basic needs so they can focus on education. Help to get early basic skills with funded extracurricular activities that make sure students can read and understand math and science. Encourage interim steps to main goal.

3. Work to change negative perceptions of people who are poor. Build relationships and understanding with them instead of judging. Operate on the assumption that people in poverty are doing the best they can in their situations. Understand each case and do not label people. Make staff sensitive to poverty. Get rid of stereotypes.

4. Change some rules. Make the rules less based on middle class values and priorities. Understand what the world of poverty is like. Study cases and change the criteria to fit the realities.

6. Be more aggressive with outreach for access to health care, housing, and basic needs for those experiencing poverty-including while they are trying to climb out as students. Understand that people who are poor may have fears or negative attitudes about social service. Work to give them a new positive frame of reference.

7. Help with life skills and fitting into middle class culture. Help to understand what is normal behavior in that culture. They need to know what do you eat, how do you talk, dress, act, and speak in middle-class environments. Set up mentor programs where it's safe to ask questions about these things as well as health care, basic needs and education.

8. Be an advocate and make connections for people who do not have networks of support.

Participant recommendations to politicians and activists.

1. Offer tax breaks for student loans.

2. Make the first two years of college free and part of the K-12 system.

3. Give education as an option to people on welfare.
4. Set up internships where people from poverty can participate in government.
5. Examine policies that are barriers to moving out of poverty. Make the policies work for people not against them.
6. Know that poverty is not a permanent condition and people can move forward if the right help is available.
7. Talk about how life in poverty really is--smash myths.

In sum, the voices of these participants provide opportunities to understand from their meaning systems and their world view the mechanisms that may support other students from poverty to degree completion. The next chapter provides an analysis of these findings, and discusses implications and conclusions. It also outlines limitations of the study and offers recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER V

Analysis, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study explored first-generation college students from poverty backgrounds and their college completion, a phenomenon that lacks a conceptual basis and is poorly investigated. Although the majority of first-generation college students are White, the available research in this area focuses on race as the framework for studying first-generation college students. Social class has been found to directly impact the experience of college completion, yet few studies examine college attendance and completion for a social-class perspective (Mortenson, 1995). To broaden our understanding of the experiences of all students coming from poverty, an examination using social-class theory is necessary. This study was designed to explore from a social-class framework, the conditions, barriers, and strategies for college completion for a select group of participants and respondents from third-generation poverty.

The study was prompted by the disturbing educational disparities between the social classes. Students who have

experienced poverty are eight times less likely to graduate from college than students from the rest of the population. The likelihood of graduating from college is reduced even more when students from the lowest income group are compared with students from the highest income group (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1991, 1995). The goal of the present study was to provide a deeper understanding of higher education completion from a study of the perceptions of those who have experienced poverty. I believe this understanding is crucial both to inform and to increase efforts to reverse these inequitable demographic trends.

The study was guided by two research questions:

1. What are the institutional, environmental, and personal experiences of students from third generational poverty who have completed bachelor's degrees?
2. What strategies and experiences contributed to their success?

These questions were explored using Weber's (1946) social class theoretical framework (including lifestyle, status, and power). The study used constructs from social capital theories (including connections and trust), resiliency theories (including context), and social psychological, social structural, and cultural frameworks.

Data were collected during eight weeks of field work. Focus group interviews with a representative group of 24 people who grew up in generational poverty were the main source of data (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). The focus group interviews were open-ended and designed to reveal the participants' subjective experience of completing a college degree (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Other sources of data used to complement the focus group interviews included: a demographic questionnaire administered to 56 respondents; field notes that recorded the researcher's observations and reflections; outside observer notes; tape-recorded reflections by the researcher after each focus group session; and a journal of researcher reflections. The additional sources were used to inform data analysis. The grounded theory approach guided the data collection and analysis process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

According to its objectives, the study results provided: (a) a description of the poverty-related conditions as perceived by participants, (b) an overview of the early educational experiences of the participants, (c) a demographic profile of the participants, (d) an overview of perceived challenges and barriers to higher education and (e) a discussion of success factors

perceived by the participants as impacting their abilities to obtain bachelor's degrees.

This chapter has four parts. Part I provides analysis of the study findings. In this part, I explore common themes which emerged from the data and six success factors related to the common themes that were identified by participants as crucial to their success. Part II, discusses the findings within the broader context of the first-generation college student literature, including characteristics and retention models. Part III offers the implications and recommendations from the study. Part IV offers suggestions for future research and describes the study limitations.

Part I: Analysis of the Study Findings

A review of the data provided an abundance of information on conditions that are related to generational poverty, barriers to higher education, and the common strategies used by this group to overcome these barriers. This section provides an analysis of findings. Successfully overcoming the poverty-related barriers related to higher education completion was largely dependent upon the participants and respondents' abilities to secure financial resources and establish personal relationships. Receipt of financial aid, mentors'

(including family and friends) support and belief in the participants and respondents, social capital, and determination, were identified as common success themes.

Participants and respondents reported multiple strategies that they used to overcome the barriers of their social-class origin to complete higher education. Based on the analysis of their responses four major underlying themes appeared to be crucial to their completion: (a) acquisition of financial aid, (b) connecting to mentors, (c) maintaining their determination, and (d) expanding up their social capital. This section explores these themes and concludes with a discussion of the critical success factors that emerged from this analysis.

Acquisition of Financial Aid

The findings of this study show that acquisition of financial aid made a crucial difference for these participants in their college completion. Participants in the present study struggled financially even though the majority were working. For most, securing financial aid was critical to meeting their basic living expenses, helping family members, buying books, paying tuition, and having transportation to school. Financial aid included work study positions, loans, and scholarships. In addition to financial aid, some participants reported that

securing jobs with higher pay made college completion a reachable goal. The assistance received made it possible (but not easy) for the students to attend and complete college.

There were four components involved in the acquisition of financial aid. These include: (a) learning that financial assistance was available, (b) learning the means to gain access to these resources, (c) understanding scarcity of the resources available, and (d) managing the resources they were able to secure. The findings of the present study reveal that financial aid did help the participants overcome some of the barriers to higher education completion by, for example, helping them to pay tuition and get necessary supplies, helping them to pay some of their living expenses, and helping them to send survival money to their family of origin members. However, exploration of the participants' context makes it clear that accessing and acquiring financial aid also created additional stress. This stress included difficulties in knowing that the financial resources were available, where and how to access the financial resources, competing with others students for scarce resources, and not having enough resources to meet their needs.

Participants also worried about taking loans. Many saw their current earning potential as what they would earn when they finished college. They were unfamiliar with the kinds of jobs they would be able to obtain with their degrees and what level of pay would come with those jobs. Most participants did not know people who earned middle-class wages and therefore had no frame of reference for career possibilities. This made the thousands of dollars in loans seem impossible to pay back. The data reveal that informal mentors were instrumental in helping students to make the link between current earning power and the possibilities for earnings after degree completion. One concrete way to make this link is to provide current earnings information such as the Census Report on earnings by degree which summarizes earnings that range from \$17,975 for high school dropouts to \$81,400 for doctorates (see Table 9).

Table 9
Average Earnings by Degree

Degree Reported as of March 1997 - Ages 35-44	Average Earnings
High school dropout	\$17,975
High school graduate	\$25,613
Some college, no degree	\$29,640
Associates' degree	\$30,438
Bachelor's degree	\$43,830
Master's degree	\$58,624
Doctorate	\$81,400

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce (1999).

There were three main mechanisms for linking the degree to a higher income: (a) mentors introduced participants to people in careers and through this exposure, participants gained an understanding of earning potential; (b) through mentor connections, participants received an internship or job opportunity that exposed them to higher paying jobs which required college degrees; and (c) mentors linked participants with career centers where they learned current employment projections.

The data show that in addition to fear of not being able to repay the loans, participants struggled to manage the limited amounts of financial aid they were able to secure within a context of extreme family need. Most participants reported they were helping their family of origin with basic needs such as food, heat, and shelter, as well as trying to support their nuclear families. While this family stress did not end for most participants during the course of their education, they were able to overcome the barrier through securing increased financial aid, support networks, and access to additional services.

Connection to Mentors

This study clearly showed that for students from poverty backgrounds, mentoring was pivotal to their successful completion of a college degree. Levine and Nidiffer (1996) also found mentoring to be a common

success factor among students from poverty backgrounds. Although mentoring was not always defined in a formal manner by participants in the present study, they consistently identified their relationships with key people as critical to their success in getting to and through college. The present study used Levine and Nidiffer's (1996) definition of mentor. A mentor is someone who was instrumental in assisting a participant to degree completion.

Since the mentoring concept received a high degree of attention in the literature pertaining to first-generation college students from poverty backgrounds, I chose to address it directly in the questionnaire. I asked a specific question of whether or not the respondents had mentors who helped them complete college. The response was an overwhelming "yes" (89%). In the focus group interviews, the mentoring concept emerged before I mentioned it and arose repeatedly throughout all four focus group interviews. Participants were particularly adamant that mentors were most critical in their getting to college and through the first two years.

The three types of mentors described by participants were: (a) family members, (b) friends, and (c) professionals. Some participants and respondents (84% of the focus group participants) had more than one informal

mentor. As in Levine and Nidiffer's (1996) study, the mentors played various support roles and some mentors served in multiple roles. Some mentors served a practical role of helping with environmental factors, such as, help with child care and housework. This kind of support enabled the participants and respondents to focus more on their education. Mentors were also described as encouragers, providing emotional support and helping the participants to believe in themselves and to keep going in spite of the poverty-related barriers they faced. Other mentors played the role of translator or advocate. These mentors helped participants and respondents to understand the college system, to get the necessary resources including tutoring, to learning basic knowledge and vocabulary, to know what questions to ask and to know to whom to direct the questions. By speaking to the mentoring concept in a wide variety of ways (usually more indirectly, than directly) the participants and respondents often revealed its personal significance for them.

Participants and respondents reported that informal mentors provided support, encouragement, and guidance that was essential to their college completion. In some cases, the support was in the form of practical support (i.e., helping out with housework or daycare). In other cases,

the support was in the form of belief in the participants and encouragement that they could do whatever they wanted. Finally, some mentors helped participants and respondents to understand and navigate the college setting. In many cases, participants and respondents' mentors used their connections and networks to facilitate the success of the participants. A White woman in her 30s suffered an illness while in college and did not think she could finish. She attributes her completion to her mentor and her mentor's connections.

I would have dropped out but the dean who understood me and my situation, got together all my professors and designed a plan allowing me more time to complete the work so I could finish. (White female, 30s)

Other participants shared stories of mentors using their own networks and connections to assist them in their pursuit of college degrees. The importance of social capital to the success of these participants was most evident as they described mentoring relationships.

My cousin was my role model. When I tried to transfer to a four-year college from a community college I got all kinds of road blocks. My cousin had gone to both schools and she was well-liked and respected. She called people she knew at each school and after that my transfer was smooth. I got advice on what was the best program and they made it personal to me and I got a scholarship from the department I was interested in. All I had to do was mention her name and that I was her cousin and "poof," all of a sudden everyone wanted to help. Before she called I got nothing but run around. (White female, 20s)

My mother-in-law was active politically. When I and my children were being evicted she made phone calls and we got a low-income apartment. That saved my education. (Hispanic female, 30s)

Mentoring is the primary contextual key unlocking an understanding to how participants were able to achieve their bachelor's degrees. The mentor connections allowed many students to overcome the shame they reported about having grown up in poverty. Most participants reported that having someone believe in them and accept them made a significant difference in their confidence. This in turn enabled them to seek out and recognize other opportunities that they might not have had the courage to try for. In addition, for some students, having someone believe in them and support them unconditionally freed them to share their struggles with others who had connections which resulted in connections to other necessary resources (housing, tutoring, personal counseling, job connections). This social capital identified by most participants included the trust that they shared with their informal mentors.

Expanding Their Social Capital

The findings of this study reveal that although mentoring was crucial in the success of these participants, an important component of their relationships with mentors was the powerful social capital

that came with the mentoring relationship. Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) definition of social capital relates closely to Weber's (1946) definition of status and lifestyle. Weber believed that a person's income, status, or network, would directly impact her or his mobility. Bourdieu and Wacquant defined social capital as the amount of resources an individual or group possesses by virtue of a network of relationships and connections.

Participants and respondents in this study initially experienced little or no income, low-status, and limited networks. The forms of social capital that they did have were not rewarded. They were, for the most part, isolated and experienced limited opportunities due to their generational poverty status. The data reveal that the development of increased social capital (through their mentors and other connections), enabled participants to gain status and build networks which facilitated completion of their degrees.

Participants in this study began their education with social capital not valued in the educational system, coupled with low self-confidence. The findings of this study reveal that mentoring relationships and exposure to others from poverty and exposure to middle-class people within the educational institution helped participants to externalize much of their poverty-related pain and gain

increased self-confidence. The exposure to others who had experienced poverty helped participants realize that their poverty was not a personal defect. The exposure to middle-class people helped participants understand that there were privileges afforded to the middle class which enabled them to be in the positions of higher status. Identifying these privileges, often invisible to those born with middle-class status, informed the participants as they were designing their strategies to overcome the barriers that they faced. Observing and interacting with middle-class people in the college setting provided participants with cultural artifacts and helped them understand the norms and the language that dominate the college culture. They learned to imitate the social behavior of the middle-class.

This study found that adjusting to the college culture was particularly important to this group's success. The behavior norms of people from poverty whom they had grown up with were not rewarded in the college setting. Participants and respondents in the present study modified their learned behavior including, linguistic styles, authority patterns, and learning styles (Bourdieu, 1974). In modifying their behavior, they acquired new linguistic styles and new behavior which were rewarded in the college environment.

Analysis of the data in the present study reveals that grammar and vocabulary impact college completion for students from poverty backgrounds. Participants and respondents reported that non normative grammar was part of their first language learned in the home. Learning a language requires more than learning the structure of that language. It requires opportunities to converse, to be corrected (in a supportive way), and to practice the language (Adler & Rodman, 1991). The findings of the present study revealed a need for grammar assistance similar to the assistance provided for English as a second language.

In addition to linguistic barriers, communication style presented challenges to college completion. Ong (1982) found that most people who live in poverty exhibit characteristics of oral culture. In other words, they get most of their information verbally. This shapes how a person thinks and interacts with others. Ong identified characteristics of oral culture as relationship based, spontaneous, holistic, comfort with emotions and physical touch, and repetition. Oral culture people are relationship based because that is how they get their information. This puts the relationship at the heart of everything they do. People who are oral culture tend to be spontaneous. They are not focused on one idea, but

tend to bounce from idea to idea which is the nature of verbal communication. Ong found that people who get their information primarily from reading exhibit characteristics of print culture, they tend to be linear, analytical, individualistic, and focused. Education is designed for people who exhibit the characteristics of print culture. When students from poverty backgrounds enter the print culture world of education, their communication styles are likely to clash with the formal nature of print culture communication. Ong emphasized that people are not either oral or print, but generally tend to be dominant in one direction or the other.

Another aspect of the data also suggests a social capital theoretical interpretation of the importance of obtaining information to access needed resources for achieving the end goal of college completion. Putnam (1995) suggested that communication patterns which facilitate access to information that in turn help achieve priorities is a large component of social capital. The data reveal that mentors, and in some cases, the mentors' connections were pivotal to linking participants in the present study to information which facilitated their success. For example, participants and respondents reported mentors that helped them to learn the college system which in turn increased their access to resources.

These resources in some cases, were used to assist participants' families of origin with their living conditions, thereby reducing the guilt and worry of participants and allowing them to focus on their studies. How or whether a student perceives that support is available was studied by Zill (1977). In Zill's study, parents and children were interviewed about numerous factors associated with support. More than half of the parents reported that their children had supports, but only 30% of the children reported that they had supports. Zill determined that the children may not realize that they have the supports or they may have compelling reasons not to seek out supports. Social support may facilitate students' abilities to seek the necessary resources, but only if the student perceives that the support is available.

The data reveal that social capital provided by mentors expanded not only networks of support and connections to necessary resources, but helped also, to generate trust that became an important component of the experiences of participants in the present study. The theory of social capital presumes that the more we connect with other people, the more we trust them, and vice versa (Coleman, 1988). The findings of the present study show that the trust established in mentoring relationships

facilitated opportunities for participants to identify with others and in many cases to share their own experiences of poverty. Participants reported that once they felt safe and trusted their mentors, they were able to share their poverty-related experiences. This resulted in people in the college setting providing more assistance to them. Additionally, through their mentors and connections, participants and respondents were to learn new communication styles and behavior that helped them to fit into the college environment. The trust that developed with mentors helped participants to externalize some of their shame and pain from poverty.

Determination

Determination combined with acquiring the necessary resources was key to gaining a bachelor's degree. Participants reported that their determination in many situations carried them through the educational process. Common references to determination included determination to learn, determination to care for family, determination to rise out of poverty, and determination not to let people down (including family, friends, and professors). The findings show that making the link between a college degree and a better life, increased determination to complete. The findings support the resiliency theoretical perspective that asserts whether characteristics of

resiliency are present is directly related to the existence of internal and external protective factors (Saleebey, 1997). This perspective was instrumental in examining participants' environmental supports along with individual traits.

In the literature on first generation college students, this determination is described as "goal commitment" (Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1987). The research indicates that when students are personally committed to completing college, they are more likely to complete. The findings of the present study reveal the complexity of the goal commitment success factor for students from poverty. For example, a commitment to learn and a commitment to not let others down may be common among college students in general, but determination to rise out of poverty and concern for family's welfare may be unique to students from poverty backgrounds. The data also reveal that determination alone would not have been enough to help participants achieve college degrees. Determination as described by the participants in this study transformed goal commitment from a fixed personal trait into a dynamic process that was continuously fueled by many other factors such as acquiring the necessary resources and support and emotional encouragement from their mentors (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996).

Success Factors

The findings show seven success factors that emerged from the experiences reported by participants. This section describes these success factors: acquiring financial resources, mentoring combined with determination, being open to cultural change, sharing life circumstances, segmenting the educational experience, and understanding that poverty is not a personal defect.

1. Acquiring financial resources.

Without financial assistance for themselves and their families, participants and respondents reported that they would have never attended college. They did not have advanced skills to earn a living wage. The jobs that participants and respondents were able to secure were low-paying and only allowed for subsistence living. Securing higher paying jobs, scholarships, and financial aid through their increased networks enabled respondents and participants to become educated, to help their family of origin members, and to break out of the cycle of poverty.

2. Support from mentors combined with personal determination.

A major determining factor for college completion was their ability to make personal connections to mentors which resulted in their obtaining the necessary resources, emotional support, and guidance. The data show that the

mechanisms identified for assisting participants to make needed connections were exposure to other lifestyles and being treated as special. The personal determination that was reported by participants was fueled by both internal and external influences. External influences included: securing the needed resources, desire for a better life, wanting to please others, and wanting to help their families. Internal influences included: wanting to prove they were smart and believing they were different from others in poverty. The findings reveal that a participant's personal determination combined with mentor support were essential to college completion.

3. Being open to cultural change. The data show that the majority of the participants had survival strategies such as copying the behavior of middle-class students to fit in or being silent in order to prevent others from finding out what they did not know. These strategies helped participants feel more like they belonged and enabled them to approach new experiences with an open mind. Participants also reported an openness to certain cultural changes. They entered the college setting with life experiences, attitudes, values, and beliefs that were different from most of the people they met in the college environment.

Once participants were in the college setting, they were exposed to a new way of thinking about their own life situation, new ways of relating to others, and new ways to understand their educational experiences. Most of the participants reported significant changes in their language, social behavior, relationships with others, abilities to understand others, taste in music, food, clothing and cars. The findings also reveal that over time, participants' openness to cultural change increased their ability to become more adept at interacting in an unfamiliar environment. Consequently, they were better prepared to deal with poverty-related barriers in the college setting.

4. Sharing the circumstances of their lives. The findings show that participants saw the sharing the circumstances of their lives with someone in the college environment as critical to obtaining the necessary support for completion. Most of the participants did not initially share their experiences because of the shame associated with poverty. As others were unknowing of what they needed and did not have an understanding of where they were coming from, participants struggled and felt alienated. The data reveal that as the participants gained trust in their mentors, they became ready to share the circumstances of their lives. Determination combined

with development of relationships allowed for overcoming the shame of poverty that was preventing them from sharing their circumstances. Participants reported that this sharing opened up many financial opportunities for them as people seemed more ready to help once they knew their stories. This, in turn, increased participants' access to a type of social capital which was compatible with college success.

5. Segmenting the educational experience.

The data show that most participants in this group had not experienced educational success. It was extremely important for them to break their college experience into smaller steps to make it manageable. As one White male in his 30s reported, it was important to break the education process down into "one day at a time, one paper at a time." Breaking the experience into small steps combined with getting the necessary supports, helped the students overcome feelings of being overwhelmed and making them able to achieve and celebrate small successes. They were also able to put less emphasis on failure, knowing each assignment was only a small part and that they would have other chances. The findings reveal that these small successes added to their confidence and motivated them to complete (Tierney, 1992).

6. Gaining an understanding that poverty is not a personal defect.

In addition to all previous factors the data analysis of the present study showed that understanding that poverty was not a personal defect was a key factor for success. Participants in this group had grown up isolated from people who were educated. Most of the people they interacted with lived in conditions similar to their own. The findings show that this concentration of people experiencing similar conditions of poverty combined with isolation, served to limit participants' understanding of how other people were able to be successful. It also perpetuated the myth that people in poverty are to blame for their poverty. Ryan (1992) described the blaming the victim mythology which dominates the American culture:

The generic process of Blaming the Victim is applied to almost every American problem. The miserable health care of the poor is explained away on the grounds the victim has poor motivation and lacks health information. The problems of slum housing are traced to the characteristics of the tenants who are labeled as "Southern Rural Immigrants" not yet "acculturated" to life in the big city. The "multiproblem" poor, it is claimed, suggest the psychological effects of impoverishment, the "culture of poverty," and the deviant value system of the lower classes; consequently, though unwittingly, they cause their own troubles. From such a viewpoint, the obvious fact that poverty is primarily an absence of money is easily overlooked or set aside.
(p. 365)

The dominant view that people who are poor are to blame for their poverty affected participants in hurtful ways. Participants in the present study internalized the poverty and it affected their self-confidence. Some participants reported gaining a new perspective on their poverty experience through course work which focused on class theory.

The findings of the present study show that curricular content developed that specifically addresses social-class, may serve two purposes. First it could have the effect of educating other students, future teachers, and faculty to social-class injustices and the conditions of poverty. The mass media dramatize the sensational aspects of poverty, violence, drugs and alcohol, and deviance and this is often the only view of people who are poor. Middle- and upper-class people rarely engage in close personal contact with those who are poor and consequently there are few challenges to the images of people who are that are presented in the mass media. Few people are able to appreciate the tensions and anxieties of a poverty situation and fewer still appreciate the life styles that develop in these surroundings. Course-work which exposes stereotypes and myths of poverty and provides a structural understanding of poverty-related conditions was found to be related to college completion.

The present study also revealed a second benefit of curriculum inclusive of social-class theory. Participants were freed from poverty-related some trappings when they came to an understanding of the structural causes of poverty. This consciousness helped participants to understand their lack of academic preparation, family struggle to survive and their own struggle for success. A major finding of this study was that externalizing the poverty in this way served to build confidence and helped participants to overcome some of the pain and self-doubt resulting from poverty experiences. Another result was that most participants experienced reassurance in the sense of belonging. In addition, the data show that most participants felt reassured by the realization that poverty is not a personal defect and that they can belong in the college setting.

7. Learning to negotiate the college system.

Participants struggled to know what questions to ask and where to go for assistance in the college system. Many of the participants missed early opportunities for financial assistance and for assistance in understanding educational policies and practices because they lacked information. Learning how to negotiate the college system was essential to their college completion. There were multiple supports required for participants to overcome

their lack of knowledge about this system. These supports included interactions in the college environment, the college experience itself, and informal mentors.

Most participants reported that just being a college student increased their self-confidence and status with others. Many of the participants reported that they were treated with more respect than they had ever received in their lives when they told people they were in college. Participants reported being more open to meeting people because of their newfound status. Meeting more people resulted in increased networks of support and more informal mentors. These informal mentors and those connected with them shared the "secrets" about what questions to ask, where to go, and what was available in the college setting. In short, these interactions and connections helped to demystify the system for the participants. This contributed greatly to participants' accessing and securing resources and supports for college completion. The findings reveal that it was crucial to successful college completion to have help in understanding the rules, policies, and available opportunities.

Summary

This study found seven success factors identified by participants as having significant impact on their

completion of their degrees. They included acquiring financial aid, support from mentors combined with personal determination, being open to cultural change, sharing the circumstances of their lives, segmenting the educational experience, understanding that poverty was not a personal defect, and learning the college system.

The data show that acquiring financial aid and more income made attendance and completion of college possible. Participants and respondents in this study struggled with basic needs and concern for their families of origins' basic needs. Securing financial resources for themselves and their families enabled participants and respondents to focus more on their education and relieved them of some of their poverty-related barriers. Mentoring combined with personal determination was identified as a crucial support. Almost all participants in this study reported that their personal determination combined with the support of significant people kept them on their educational path in spite of other barriers they faced. Participants reported that their determination was often called into question by environmental pulls, but when this happened, mentors often provided the inspiration and additional resources enabling them to continue their educational journeys.

Participants struggled with knowledge, language and lifestyle differences. As they began to build relationships and identify with others who were not from poverty backgrounds, many used their survival strategies (such as mimicking the behavior of middle-class students) to help them fit in and to learn new ways of thinking. This new knowledge and insight into the college culture allowed them to better understand their college experience. At the same time, the new attitudes, values, and beliefs created barriers for some of the participants in their home lives. Participants' willingness to accept cultural change was thus part of what enabled them to succeed.

The findings show that most participants adopted the strategy of segmenting their educational experience to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed. Many of the participants were dismayed by the gap between where they were starting in their education and where instructors expected them to be. They addressed this barrier by taking their educational journey in smaller steps. For example, participants did not focus on the entire semester of work, but on the assignment required for that day or that week. This helped make the academic work more manageable.

The data reveal that participants also felt strongly that telling others about their situation made a difference for them. Many of them expressed embarrassment and shame, and did not want others to know of the poverty-related barriers they faced. However, their determination as they built trust and connections with mentors and others helped them overcome the shame to a point that they were able to share their struggles. Sharing their experiences resulted in facilitated access to needed resources.

Similarly, participants reported that their gradual recognition that their poverty was not their fault and was not a personal flaw was important to their overcoming many of the barriers to higher education. They went into the system believing that there was something wrong with them and their families. The mechanisms for reaching this understanding included: personal observations, learning about the life stories and experiences of other students from middle class and lower-class backgrounds, and studying social class. The findings reveal that gaining an understanding of structural causes of poverty allowed participants to let go of much of the shame they had been carrying.

Finally, the data show that gaining an understanding of the college system was critical to their success.

Participants felt that when they were assisted in understanding the rules, policies, and the availability of resources they were in a much better position. These success factors were woven throughout the experiences of the participants in this study and emerged as critical to college completion.

Part II: Discussion and Conclusions

On the surface, the participants in the present study reflect characteristics identified in the first-generation college student literature. They are older, have less income, many of them took longer to complete their degrees and most were not prepared for college (Chaffee, 1992; Kiang, 1992; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Mortenson, 1998; Padron, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1987; Weis, 1992). Many of the experiences and concerns of participants in the present study are also similar to those reported in the literature, including lack of encouragement and family support, lack of basic skills, not fitting into the educational environment, and not understanding the educational system (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Tinto, 1987). Despite these similarities, the characteristics, experiences, and concerns and relationships that are reported in this study take on

additional meanings when examined from a social-class framework. This section locates the findings within the broader literature on first-generation college students.

Family Support

According to the findings of this study, the role of family members in the lives of first-generation college students from poverty backgrounds was often misrepresented in the literature. This literature focuses on two areas of family influences: family support and separation from family (London, 1992; Minner, 1995; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Tinto, 1987).

The first-generation college student literature indicates that these students often experience a lack of encouragement and family support (London, 1992; Minner, 1995; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). London (1992) found that college attendance for first-generation college students represents a departure from patterns established by family and friends, who may in turn become nonsupportive or obstructionists. In the present study, family support was mainly identified as a success factor influencing college completion. When examined from the social class theoretical perspective, data from the present study reflect a different meaning system as it relates to the context of poor people's lives. The present study shows that family members are were in fact,

key to college completion for this group of students. They provided much of the encouragement and support needed by students. Although these family members, in many cases, apparently held little or no value for education, they wished for positive outcomes for all family members. What they were missing was that they did not have a frame of reference that education could be the way to a better life (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Unlike, in the case of middle-class families, "being supportive" to family members was not necessarily related to educational support.

In most of the literature on first-generation college students from poverty backgrounds, family members have been identified as not supportive of first-generation college students and in some studies this lack of support is interpreted as uncaring. In contrast to most studies which identify family members as obstacles to higher education completion, the data from this study show that family of origin members provided a great deal of love, encouragement, and practical support. Haro's (1994) work on first-generation Hispanic students is one of the few studies that identified family support and encouragement as key to college completion. Haro found that students had family support but they struggled with family role conflicts. Richardson and Skinner (1992) found that

students were discouraged from attending school and that education was viewed as a waste of time. It is possible that a similar type of support that emerged in previous studies was misunderstood by other researchers because it was not conceptualized in terms of students from generational poverty. It is possible that the lack of a social class framework in much previous research made this misinterpretation more likely. The participants and their families, as reported by the participants, apparently did not view education or family support in the same way that people from the middle-class view it. Gans (1962) provided a rich description of social class differences in the valuing of education.

The purpose of education is to learn techniques necessary to obtain the most lucrative type of work. This the central theme of American, and all Western, education--that the student is an individual who should use {her or} his schooling to detach {herself or}himself from ascribed relationships like the family circle in order to maximize {her or} his personal development and achievement in work, play, and other spheres of life-is ignored or openly rejected {by the lower-classes}. (p. 447)

Participants in the present study identified the meanings of education, support, and money from a unique perspective. Their understandings of these concepts differ greatly from most middle-class understandings of these concepts. For participants in this study, education had no meaning and for the most part, education created

additional stress in their lives. Most middle-class students have an understanding of the meaning and purpose of education. It makes sense in their context. In this study, the findings show that the problem is not necessarily family support as identified in the first-generation college student literature, but rather it is familial understanding of the meaning and value of education and support in that family's context. Although, some of the literature on first-generation college students acknowledges the differences in meanings of education, they do not consider differences in meanings of support, which may be key to college completion for students from poverty. To understand a concept clearly and provide necessary help, one must examine it from the perspectives of those they are trying to understand.

Separation from family was yet another issue often discussed in the first-generation college student literature that did not find support in the present study. Tinto (1987) identified family separation as one of four "rites of passage" that students must experience for successful completion of college. The other three "rites of passage" include: transition to student life; social integration; and academic integration. Tinto described separation from family as a time in the students' life when they move toward adulthood. Tierney (1992) argued

that separation from family as "rite of passage" is culturally constructed by the mainstream and does not fit within every culture. All a person has when they are poor is their family and all their family has is them. Their way of life is based on social relationships with relatives (Gans, 1962). The present study agrees with Gans (1962) and Tierney (1992). It shows that, in general, staying connected with the family was a necessary and needed condition for college completion. Financial hardship forced many of the participants to continue to live with family of origin members well into their adulthood. Participants reported as many as three generations living in one household. For them this was normal. Not only did most participants not separate from their families as a statement of their independence, poverty-related conditions forced them to take on adult responsibilities as they relate to the family at very young ages. Most participants reported increased connections and family responsibilities rather than reporting incidences of separation from their families of origin as they entered college.

Moreover, the present study shows that even when participants struggled with conflicts between their responsibilities to their family of origin, their nuclear families, and their education, connection to rather than

separation from this family fueled their determination. Many wanted to obtain a college degree to make a better life for both their nuclear family and their family of origin.

To the extent that participants in the present study experienced family relationship as a barrier, it tended to be due to participants' attempts to maintain their emotional connection to these families. It was primarily their guilt and concern about the living conditions of loved ones that were major barriers for them to overcome. Participants reported difficulty in focusing on their educational process when they knew their relatives were homeless, hungry, or experiencing some other poverty-related crisis. The participants sent financial aid money to parents, siblings, and other relatives as a way of relieving suffering and assuaging their own guilty feelings.

The findings reveal three sometimes conflicting strategies participants developed in order to cope with changing family relationships. A few participants separated from their families of origin as a coping strategy. For these participants who reported separation, the findings reveal that the gaps in cultural understanding between the participant and their families became too great as they advanced in their educational

process, and in these few cases separation actually occurred. Yet, even for these participants, separation from family was very different from separation from families as described in Tinto's (1987) retention model.

For participants in the present study, it was not natural to separate from family, but rather a difficult decision they felt they had to make in order to move out of poverty. They believed that maintaining contact would prevent them from achieving that goal. The data show that as participants became more educated they adopted new language, behavior, and ways of interacting. Their family of origin members had not changed and continued to expect similar interactions with them. When this was the case, tension and conflict overwhelmed participants' efforts to stay connected. In addition, these participants reported inability to secure resources to assist their family of origin members with living conditions. The stress of family members relying on them, coupled with the changing family relationships, forced participants to sever relationships in order to complete their college degrees.

The other two strategies that participants used to cope with changing family relationships were accepting new ways of relating with family members and becoming advocates and mentors to family members. These participants were able to negotiate concern for family of

origin living conditions and cultural changes and remained connected to their families.

The ability to cope with negative disruptions and continue on a positive path are characteristics described in the resiliency theory. Saleebey (1997) advanced the notion that characteristics of resiliency result from interaction within a particular context, namely supportive relationships. Participants in the present study were supported and encouraged by mentors, including family and friends. This support may have provided them with opportunities to develop resiliency characteristics.

In sum, the findings of this study reveal the importance of understanding family support and family relationships and their impact on college completion from the perspectives of those coming from generational poverty. Separation from family holds a different meaning when examined within the context of generational poverty. Family members cling to one another for support in a world of insecurity. When family members take on the new role of student and their behavior begins to differ, students are under tremendous pressure to find coping skills for addressing the changing relationships. Students from poverty backgrounds are also under extreme pressure concerning the living conditions of family of origin. They struggle with internal conflict of living a somewhat

more stable life as a student and their guilt that they should be attempting to earn money to help the family.

London's (1992) study found that students separated from their families because of cultural divides. This was also true of some participants in the present study. London does not explore the poverty-related causes which have led to the cultural divide. The data in the present study show that family of origin relationships have tremendous influence on decisions to complete college. Most participants did not separate from their families, and struggled hard against the separation. When they did separate, it was more the result of tremendous pressure. The findings show that family support is key to college completion for most respondents and participants.

Retention Models

Models of retention and attrition capture important variables related to college completion. Social-class theory was not used as a framework in the research on retention and attrition for first-generation college students. Therefore, contextual experiences reported in the present study such as lack of income, hunger and housing issues, internalized shame from poverty, as well as concern for family of origin's welfare are absent from this literature. The retention and attrition research focuses on the individual student without considering

their income, lifestyle, or responsibilities to family of origin members.

Two common characteristics of the first-generation college students reported in the literature are that these students tend to take longer to complete their degrees and that they are less prepared for college. Without a contextual basis for these findings, there is little understanding of the reasons and values behind the observed behavior. Weber's (1946) social-class theory used in the present study reveals that many of the respondents and participants took longer to complete because they began their educational journey with little understanding of the meaning or purpose of education. Their poverty and social-class origins required that they and their families focus on subsistence. Most of the respondents and participants reported negative experiences with early education experiences. They perceived that they were judged and disliked because of their poverty. The data show that participants had internalized their poverty as a personal failure and had little self-confidence to do well in the educational system.

Examining the affect of social-class and poverty on respondents and participants' early education experiences provided insights into the role of education and the perceptions of teachers within the context of poverty.

Respondents and participants perceived that teachers did not care about them. Their perceptions were shaped by the context in which they lived and based on their interpretation of teacher behavior such as having them sit in the back of the room or not paying personal attention to them. The contextual analysis revealed that participants did not know the expected behavior norms and felt that their lifestyles were worlds away from those who benefitted from education.

The focus of the present study on social-class origins and poverty experiences reveals a more complex understanding of concepts such as inadequate academic preparation. During college, participants perceived that their lack of basic knowledge (such as not knowing the names of animals, where states were located, having limited vocabulary, reading and math skills) meant that they were not smart or that they did not belong in the college environment. Transition to student life and social integration are labeled "rites of passage" by Tinto (1987) in his retention model. These variables did not fit the experiences of participants in the present study. The data from this study show that although respondents and participants took on the role of students, the demands of poverty on them and their families of origin did not allow for immersing themselves in that role. Participants

prioritized family and work responsibilities over student responsibilities, a conclusion also reached by Hughes (1983) in his work on nontraditional students. He found that students were struggling to balancing time with family members and commitments to their jobs. The context of poverty increased the complexities of family and work responsibilities for participants in the present study. Most respondents and participants were focused on subsistence issues such as food and shelter, as well as issues of balancing time with families and fulfilling work requirements.

Although participants and respondents in the present study reported a love for learning and described how their newly acquired knowledge gave them confidence, they also reported that they focused only on completing assignments and were not able to immerse themselves in the deeper meaning of the material because of their poverty. These findings show that educational experiences were intertwined with social-class and poverty-related realities. These responsibilities affected respondents and participants learning as well as their abilities to participation in college activities.

The present study reveals that students were not socially integrated into the college setting. Participants also reported that they would "stay away"

from the college setting as much as possible because of their discomfort in that environment. They were not socially integrated as Tinto (1987) discussed in his retention model. The data show that a majority of the participants were not involved in social activities or sports. Most did not have friends at college. An important insight from these data was that the college setting was mainly used for observing the social behavior of middle-class students and learning this behavior to raise comfort levels when they were in the college environment.

The Bean and Metzner (1987) retention model more closely captures the experiences of participants in the present study with the exception of their findings that students who stay in college are more likely to be engaged in social life. Their model is composed of four sets of variables which affect student attrition decisions: (a) academic variables (study habits, absenteeism, GPA, academic advising, other support systems and course availability); (b) intent to leave as influenced by the psychological outcomes of satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress; (c) background and defining variables such as age, enrollment status, residence, educational goals, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender; and (d)

environmental variables such as finances, hours of employment, and family responsibilities.

The data reveal that all four sets of variables from the Bean and Metzner (1987) retention model were identified as important to completion for participants in the present study. The data show that academic variables were barriers to completion. Most participants struggled academically. Many of the participants reported not knowing that studying and good grades were connected. They had come to believe that smart people got good grades and people who were not smart did not get good grades. Although the Bean and Metzner retention model describes some of the experiences and characteristics of participants in the present study, they do not capture experiences related to social class and poverty. There is no discussion in their model about subsistence issues or concern for family of origin's welfare as described by the respondents and participants in present study.

In spite of academic struggles, participants reported that they "felt better about themselves" once they were in college. This is concisely stated in the words of one participant:

Before I was a college student, I was a nobody. No one listened and no one asked me what my opinions were. Being in college gave me a chance to be somebody. (White female, 40s)

Weber's (1946) social-class theory discusses the power and status that come with social-class privilege. Participants and respondents in the present study reported a lack of power and status. Becoming college students added status in their lives. Most of the respondents and participants remained in poverty through much of their education, but having the title of "college student" carried both status and increased power. The data reveal that commitment to degree completion increased once participants gained a full understanding of what a degree could mean to their lives. The findings show that this commitment to completion compensated for lack of academic preparation, not fitting in, and environmental pressures.

Tinto (1987) identified commitment to a personal goal as a completion variable for first-generation college students. In Tinto's model, this goal commitment is linked to institutional commitment. Tinto argued that the stronger the personal goal, the stronger the commitment to the institution. Institutional commitment did not arise as a success factor in the present study. Overall, the data reveal that participants were disconnected from their colleges and universities. Their social class origins combined with continued poverty limited their abilities to have institutional commitment.

The data show that mentoring (including family support), securing needed resources, and determination for a better life compensated for academic struggles. This finding concurs somewhat with an earlier study that found that first-generation college students were more likely to complete with strong environmental support (Bean & Metzner, 1987). In addition to the environmental supports, the data in the present study reveal that small academic successes helped to build confidence needed for degree completion. This finding supports Tinto's (1987) findings that positive academic experiences reinforced first-generation college students' commitment to their goals.

Bean and Metzner (1987) found two compensatory effects that were important to students' decisions to persist or leave college. The first effect comes from the combination of high academic success and positive psychological outcomes from school. Students non academic support compensated for low-levels of academic success, while high academic achievement contributed to student decisions to persist only when accompanied by positive psychological outcomes from the college experience. Retention was more likely if: (a) students saw high utility in completion, (b) students were satisfied with their learning experiences, (c) students were committed to

their goals, and (d) students had minimal stress. Participants in the present study faced high levels of stress. The data reveal that the support of informal mentors who in many cases, helped participants to access necessary resources combined with the first three retention factors identified by Bean and Metzner assisted participants in overcoming the stress barrier. Participants reported that the stress in their lives resulted primarily from economic conditions, concern for family of origin members welfare, and emotional and physical exhaustion.

The present study shows that overcoming barriers to completion depended largely on accessing needed resources and strong support from outside the educational institution. The findings show that the support was not necessarily support for academic achievement, but rather it was in the form of added financial resources, encouragement and emotional and practical support.

Bean and Metzner (1987) discovered environmental support to be more related to retention than academic support. Students with strong environmental support were likely to persist even if their academic support was weak. However, strong academic support would not compensate for weak environmental support. This finding is important in the study of students from generational poverty in that it

speaks to both the impact of economics and stressors on college experiences as well as the meaning of environmental supports.

In sum, the findings of the present study support some of the findings of Tinto's (1987) student interaction model and Metzner and Bean's (1987) nontraditional student attrition model. Both theories describe the complex interactions among personal and institutional factors which contribute to success or result in dropping out. However, the social-class framework used in the present study to examine college completion reveals that retention models have some limitations when applied to understanding experiences and behavior of students from generational poverty. Findings in the present study indicate the need for understanding the complexity of the context of the poverty conditions in which decisions to complete or stay are made.

Research indicates that the context of poverty shapes student attitudes, values, and beliefs concerning education in ways that are not consistent with the dominant culture (Attinasi, 1989; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992). The data from this study show that participant's experiences are not fully understood when interpreted out of context. The meaning behind student decisions to persist or leave must be better understood

from the perspectives of those students. Attinasi (1989) found Tinto's (1987) and Bean and Metzner's (1987) models to be effective in providing useful information on significant variables. However, the models do not consider the context in which students' decisions to stay in college or leave are made (Tierney, 1992). It is difficult to meet the needs of students from nondominant culture when their experiences, ideas, and values are not understood. In general, middle-class people have felt entitled to and benefitted from education. Subsequently education and support represents different values and meanings than they do for many people from poverty backgrounds who have not benefitted from education and do not see it as a possibility for them or their family members.

The substantial lack of research using social-class theory, despite the fact that nearly every study on first-generation college students reveals that social economic status is a crucial variable in college completion, leaves a gap in this literature. The present study examined the context, lifestyle, and opportunities for economic mobility for a select group from generational poverty. The social-class framework combined with other theoretical frameworks, allowed for capturing retention patterns for this group. The social-class framework provides the lens

for examining context, lifestyle, and economic opportunities. Using the ideas from social capital theory and resiliency theory enhanced this view of participants' experiences. Without the social capital framework, the importance of networks, connections, and trust may have gone unnoticed. This finding was critical as it provides opportunities for colleges and universities to create networks, connections, and trusting relationships in order to support college completion for students from poverty backgrounds. Resiliency theory offered the perspective that whether characteristics of resiliency are present is directly related to the existence of internal and external protective factors (Saleebey, 1997). This perspective was instrumental in examining participants environmental supports along with individual traits.

Part III: Implications and Recommendations

Several implications and recommendations follow from the findings of this study. This research has demonstrated that with much financial and personal support, it is possible for students from generational poverty to complete college degrees. The critical question is: Can the financial and personal supports used by participants in this study be reproduced thereby providing college opportunity and access for all people

from poverty backgrounds? The findings of the present study reveal that the answer to this question lies in placing more focus on breaking down social-class barriers to educational mobility.

Breaking down social-class barriers would require systematically baring the causes of existing individual, social, and economic problems in the structure and fabric of society, rather than disguise these causes, as is done now, by blaming individuals and groups for their problems and deprived circumstances (Gil, 1992, p. 113).

Increasing graduation rates for students from poverty backgrounds requires policies designed to overcome the unequal access to education, housing, and work. American society lacks a comprehensive system of educational and social policy that would be favorable to realizing the inherent potential of all humans. People born into poverty in the United States will likely remain poor throughout their lives (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). The gap between their basic needs and resources ensure that without increased incomes, those born into poverty are unlikely to achieve higher education degrees. Societies whose policies inhibit the realization of people's basic needs may, therefore, be considered

structurally violent . . . To overcome and prevent such ills and problems, prevailing social policies would have to be transformed into alternate policies, conducive to the

fulfillment of basic human needs and real human interests. (Gil, 1992, p. 19).

Social class theory was selected as a guide for this study in order to best determine the meanings and interpretations of first-generation college students from poverty backgrounds in regard to their success and perceived barriers to success in the college system. This theoretical construct is based on the idea that collectively held meanings arise from three distinct although related dimensions of life including lifestyles, context, and economic opportunity.

The social-class framework employed in this study has allowed for a thorough exploration of behavior and experiences of first-generation college students within their social-class context. This exploration reveals the structural inequities such as low incomes, inadequate housing, experiences of hunger, and limited access to resources that prevent students from poverty backgrounds and their families from social-class mobility and perpetuate the cycles of poverty.

The political ideological reasons behind poverty must be challenged to promote an environment of equity. The inhumanity of the current paradigm that emphasizes the underservingness of people from poverty rather than the faults of the current economy that cause poverty is

revealed through the stories of respondents and participants in the present study.

Students from poverty backgrounds have a lot to tell us about the influences and experiences that support college completion. Colleges and universities would do well to go to the source--that is, to the students who are the focus of their concerns--in order to make informed decisions about policies and practices designed to increase college graduation rates for students from poverty. The findings of the present study support many of the findings in the literature on first-generation college students. However, a social-class analysis uncovers new meanings and can lead to new understandings about the root causes of educational inequities.

The data reveal previously undetected motives for respondents' and participants' decisions to complete college degrees such as securing additional income and resources fueled a strong determination to complete college in order to rise out of poverty and bring family of origin members along with them. In addition to the continuing efforts to change the structural conditions which cause poverty, there are a number of things that colleges and universities can do to ameliorate the situation of poor students from poverty backgrounds and to increase the likelihood that they will be successful.

Although a single case study cannot provide a sound basis for educational practice, the findings from this study would suggest five areas for educational improvement for students from poverty backgrounds: (a) exploration of partnerships with social service agencies to increase income and resources for students from poverty backgrounds and their families; (b) development of a campus climate sensitive to social class and poverty issues; (c) implementation of faculty, staff, and student development programs combined with curricular reform; (d) facilitation of connections to formal and informal mentors (e) articulation of connections between obtaining a college degree and earning a higher income.

Exploration of partnerships with social service agencies to increase income and resources for students from poverty backgrounds and their families of origin.

All respondents and participants in this study were able to secure additional income and resources to overcome inadequate income, housing, and knowledge barriers to complete college. The majority of respondents and participants needed additional resources for both themselves and their family of origin members. In almost every case, the resources were secured through networks and personal connections. These networks and personal connections helped respondents and participants to locate

and secure better paying jobs, more affordable housing, and more financial aid. In many cases the additional resources served the purpose of helping family of origin members of participants and respondents. This support beyond the individual student was crucial in their successful degree completion.

Colleges and universities have a responsibility to ensure the supports for higher education completion are available for all students. Partnerships should be formed between colleges and universities which facilitate increasing the income and resources for students from poverty backgrounds and their family of origin members. Colleges and universities have made significant efforts to accommodate the needs of middle-class students and their families. The same effort is needed for students from poverty backgrounds and their families. Locating social services (such as welfare, food stamps, and HUD housing) on college campuses could be one step to increase access to resources for students from poverty backgrounds. It could also assist first-generation college students from poverty backgrounds in reducing the amount of time they spend traveling to these agencies for help. These services should not be limited to a student's own use. Family of origin members should be encouraged to avail themselves of college resources. This could serve an

additional purpose of exposing people from poverty backgrounds to the college setting and increasing their likelihood of college attendance.

Development of a campus climate sensitive to social class and poverty issues.

It is clear that if we wish to create a welcoming climate for people from poverty backgrounds, then strategies must be established which support and encourage this climate. Acknowledging and confronting the issue of social class bias, on the part of students, staff, and faculty on campus are the first steps for most institutions. Development of a nonjudgmental supportive climate in colleges and universities must include a campus wide effort. Suggested steps include:

1. Develop an annual campus awareness month for poverty and social class issues. This would include speeches and lectures by experts on the subject (including those currently experiencing poverty) and providing materials for faculty, staff, and students. Materials could include information on local poverty statistics and issues.

2. Provide regular workshops and trainings to enhance understandings of poverty that bring faculty, staff, and students together to encourage interaction and cross-class dialogue.

3. Create a public dialogue by having a feature section in the campus newspaper devoted to faculty, staff, and student views and comments on poverty and social class.

4. Develop a no tolerance policy toward social class discrimination that is similar to institutional policies on racial discrimination. Regular surveys should be conducted in the campus environment to solicit views of faculty, staff, and students concerning the climate for those from poverty backgrounds.

In addition to a campus wide effort to reduce social class and poverty bias, colleges and universities must create and adopt policies that send strong messages of welcome to all students, including traditionally excluded groups such as those from poverty backgrounds. It is evident from the data that faculty and staff have tremendous potential to support students from poverty backgrounds to college completion. It is also clear that faculty and staff are perceived as not understanding poverty-related experiences. This finding indicates a strong need for sustained staff, faculty, and student development on social class and poverty awareness. One avenue for increasing the skills and abilities of faculty and staff to nurture students from poverty backgrounds is to adopt mandatory social class sensitivity trainings.

These trainings would be required for all paid educators and staff. Attendance of social-class sensitivity trainings along with implementation of the ideas from the trainings should be linked with professional advancement. A component of these training sessions would include workshops for faculty and staff designed for the purpose of learning about non normative grammar and communication styles.

Systematic review and revision of all curricula to reflect a sensitivity to poverty and class.

The findings of this study show that awareness of social-class theory can be facilitated by curricular reform. Participants were able to overcome poverty-related barriers by coming to an understanding of the injustice and of the inequities of social class divisions. All curriculum should be examined for insensitive language and stereotypes concerning poverty. Additionally, curriculum should be reviewed to ensure that the voices of those experiencing poverty and their poverty-related experiences are included.

Facilitation of connections to mentors.

Colleges and universities can facilitate connections to mentors both formally and informally. When first generation students from poverty backgrounds enter the college or university system, every effort should be made

to link them to a mentor or college buddy. Such mentors must: (a) be sensitized to conditions, experiences and communication styles of students from poverty backgrounds; (b) make a one year commitment to personally orient the student to the college setting; and (c) mentors must have complete knowledge of college resources, including academic resources, financial resources, and local social services. Mentor duties should be clearly stated. For example, mentors could be responsible for taking the student to the career center and exploring career opportunities and possibilities. It is important that students are not "sent" to the career center on their own or introduced to the career center on an informal tour. The findings of this study reveal a great need for personal connections. Participants reported being more able to step out of their comfort zone and enter unfamiliar territory when they had established rapport and personal connections. Every effort should be made to ensure that students are aware of any available assistance and that mentors are fully knowledgeable.

Colleges and universities could also facilitate informal mentoring. One suggestion is to develop a reward system for faculty and staff who mentor students from poverty backgrounds. These mentor connections could occur in the classroom or in other college settings. While some

faculty and staff are motivated to assist students from poverty backgrounds on their own, all will need encouragement. A second suggestion for making informal mentor connections is to schedule campus events which facilitate cross-class interaction and dialogue. An effective model for achieving dialogue with people who come from different background experiences is the "Commons Café" developed by Abdullah (1999). This model invites people from diverse backgrounds to reflect on their own social-class histories and their attitudes concerning social class and poverty. This model has been successful in bridging social-class differences and developing relationships among people from the middle- and upper-classes and people from abject poverty. These relationships also have the potential to evolve into informal mentoring relationships.

Articulating connections between obtaining a college degree and earning a higher income.

Connections between obtaining a college degree and higher incomes must be made clear for first-generation college students from generational poverty. The findings of the present show this to be a critical motivator for students from poverty backgrounds. In their context, most do not know people who have careers or jobs that require higher education and offer middle-class wages. A second

strategy for linking college degrees with better career possibilities, is to increase paid internship opportunities for students based on social class. These students are less likely to have social capital networks that connect them into the professional world. Many institutions have unpaid internships. Students from poverty backgrounds miss out on these opportunities because of time and money constraints.

Limitations of the Study

This section discusses five possible limiting factors relating to the design of the study that may affect the quality of the results and conclusions. Every effort was taken to minimize limitations, however, as is the case with all studies of the social sciences, this study has some limitations that need to be recognized.

First, since this study relies to such a large extent on the participants' own words, the findings reflect their perceptions. Perceptions may or may not be true. However, they are true for the participants and that was one of the goals of this study; to understand how students from poverty backgrounds make meaning and experience the educational world.

Second, Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested that "each of us brings to the analysis of the data our biases,

assumptions, patterns of thinking, and knowledge gained from experience and reading" (p. 95). As a first-generation college completer and as an individual from generational poverty, I have experienced both of the central elements examined in this research. While my experience can be a strength to this study, there is also the possibility that it may have limited or obscured what is "seen." In order to minimize this limitation, and to use my experience and knowledge in a positive manner rather than letting experience obscure vision, I followed the suggestions of Strauss and Corbin which included: (a) considering potential categories to develop precise questions; (b) using a word, phrase, or sentence as the basis of analysis to probe possible meanings, reflect on assumptions, and examine and question them; (c) looking at extremes of a dimension to think analytically rather than descriptively about data; (d) using systematic comparisons early in the analysis to examine critically the researcher's patterns of thinking; and (e) being aware of the use of absolute statements and words ("never," "always") and cultural assumptions regarding roles and stereotypes. I also used a trained focus-group observer to assist in gathering, summarizing, and validating data from the focus groups.

Third, the focus of this study was to examine social class barriers which cross race boundaries. Therefore, there were no race or gender questions on the questionnaires or in the focus group interviews. This may have been a limitation in that members from minority populations could have been influenced by the absence of race-specific questions. Although two minority members raised the issue of race without being prompted, this absence may have made it less likely that others would raise issues of racism.

Fourth, the reliance of the study on the focus group interview technique as the primary source of data extends the limitations of this technique to the entire study. In the focus groups technique, the researcher predetermines and organizes the topics to be discussed. This may influence the direction of the conversation and result in perspectives being left out. However, the participants define the group interaction in response to prepared open-ended questions. The flow of discussion in focus groups is influenced in a less controlled setting than individual interviews, allowing participants to share individual experiences and build on others experiences thus, to some degree, mediating this limitation. An additional limitation of focus group technique is that participants may be silenced or influenced by others in the group. A

study design using individual interview technique may have encouraged participants to discuss sensitive issues which they were not comfortable discussing in a group setting. I attempted to compensate for this limitation by establishing ground rules to encourage safety and to probe answers which seem to be influenced by others in the group (Krueger, 1994).

Finally, a possible limitation mentioned in Chapter III, is that this study ignores root causes of poverty and accepts poverty as a continuing reality. It is hoped that in addition to addressing the strategies used to successfully complete a bachelor's degree, the illumination of barriers specific to this population will encourage the examination of root poverty causes and the structural effects to broaden forces which perpetuate generational poverty.

Future Research

Many of the study's findings warrant further investigation. Underlying any research on poverty, the principle subject should be the forces, and processes that decide who will be poor. This focus would include studies concerning the larger economy, class hierarchy, and the various social agencies which in one way or another create and maintain the economic and social inequality that helps

to produce poverty. Six specific concerns for future research emerged from this study.

First, this study pointed out that first-generation college students from generational poverty backgrounds need additional resources in order to successfully complete college. These resources include more income, increased financial aid for themselves and their families of origin, and affordable housing. Research is needed to examine the economic realities faced by students from poverty backgrounds to determine more realistically the resources necessary to complete higher education.

Second, the findings show that students from poverty backgrounds are affected by many contextual variables, including shame from poverty, lack of economic, social and academic stability, family of origin poverty conditions, and the class-based culture of the educational system. More research is needed to examine, in more depth, the impact these contextual factors have on the students' ability to complete college degrees.

Third, this study revealed that the welfare of family of origin members impacts the college experience for students from poverty backgrounds. Research is needed to illuminate the nature of these relationships and the related support factors necessary to increase the likelihood of college completion. Research must also

focus on the findings of this study that most respondents and participants did not separate from their families of origin.

Fourth, this study provided the perceptions of educational interactions from the perspective of the students only. More studies are needed to explore the impacts of social class context from the perspective of the various groups that are continuously in contact with the students, including teachers, family of origin members, other students, and social service providers. Together, these perspectives will provide a more complete view of the context of poverty and its impact on college completion.

Fifth, future research should use multiple frameworks for examining the complexities of poverty and higher education completion. The social-class framework provides the lens for examining context, lifestyle, and economic opportunities. Using the ideas from social capital theory and resiliency theory enhanced this view of participants' experiences. Without the social capital framework, the importance of networks, connections, and trust necessary to overcome economic and social-class barriers may have gone unnoticed. This finding was critical as it provides opportunities for colleges and universities to create networks, connections, and trusting relationships in order

to support college completion for students from poverty backgrounds. Theories used to explain poverty such as social psychological, social structural, and cultural theories enhance the understandings of the historical nature of poverty and perceptions of its root causes. These frameworks provided opportunities to examine participants' perceptions and experiences of poverty and how it impacts their lives. To shed light and depth on the complexities of poverty, all existing related theories must be used.

Finally, future research must examine success factors identified by students from poverty and help institutions incorporate those factors into policies and practices. The present study offers the beginning insights into the experiences of those from generational poverty who have completed the bachelor's degree. More studies are needed in this area. Researchers need to focus on models of retention and attrition which are rooted in the contextual experiences of students from generational poverty. These models can be implemented by colleges and universities part of efforts to increase the numbers of students from poverty backgrounds who are graduating from their institutions.

Summary

The present study contributes to our understanding of first-generational students from generational poverty who must assume the challenging task of completing college while bridging social-class, cultural, and academic gaps. It encompasses an understanding of how students perceive and interact within and between varying social realities. Listening to the voices of participants in this study forces us to confront the inadequate ways in which we, as a society and in educational settings, deal with social-class differences. The extremely low numbers of people in poverty who achieve college degrees combined with the voices from this study, forces us to examine the limited progress we have made with educational equity in this area.

The pain inflicted by poverty conditions on students and their families of origin extends into interactions within our educational institutions. In fact, this study reveals a contradiction between our stated values of equity and the experiences of injustice and exclusion reported by respondents and participants.

Schools and the quality of education will change and improve in significant ways when our social order is transformed thoroughly into a way of life in which, ". . . humans will be the measure of all things," a way of life in which all humans will be considered equal in worth and rights and will thus be equally entitled to

develop and use their innate capacities. (Gil, 1992, p. 176)

It is hoped that the findings from this study can serve as a starting point for dialogue on the harsh realities of social class for people who have the misfortune to be born into poverty in America. These discussions must encompass the root structural causes of poverty and inequity which prohibit college completion and perpetuate the cycle of generational poverty.

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APPENDIX A

PRE-FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

PRE-FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

Personal Information

Name _____ Date _____

Please put a check on the appropriate space (questions: 1-14).

1. Age: ___ 21-29 ___ 30-39 ___ 40-49 ___ 50-59 ___ 60+
2. Gender: ___ Female ___ Male
3. High School Completion: ___ Dropped out of school
 ___ Did not drop out
4. Education Level and Date Achieved:
GED	Date _____
Associate's degree	Date _____
Bachelor's degree	Date _____
Master's degree	Date _____
Doctorate	Date _____
5. Current Income Level:
___ Less than \$15,000	___ \$15,001 - \$25,000
___ \$25,001 - \$45,000	___ \$45,001 - 75,000
___ \$75,001 or more	
6. Race/Ethnic Identification:
___ American Indian/Alaska Native
___ Asian/Pacific Islander
___ White
___ African American/Black - Non Hispanic
___ Hispanic/Chicano/Latino
7. How many siblings do you have? _____

8. Were you raised mostly in a:

___ Single parent home

___ Two parent home

9. Parents highest grade completed?

___ Mother's

___ Father's

10. Grandparents highest grade completed?

___ Grandmother's

___ Grandfather's

___ Grandmother's

___ Grandfather's

11. How many times have you moved in your life?

___ 0-3 moves

___ 4-7 moves

___ 8-12 moves

___ 13-19 moves

___ 20-40 moves

___ 41+ moves

12. How old were you when you learned to read?

___ 3-6

___ 7-10

___ 10+

13. As a child, what was the highest grade level you could imagine completing in school?

___ 8th grade or less

___ 9th or 10th grade

___ 11th or 12th grade

___ some college

___ college degree

14. What kinds of reading material were in your home as you were growing up? Check all that apply:

___ newspapers

___ tabloids (like Enquire or Star)

___ fiction books

___ non fiction books

___ comics

___ none

___ other

Please check Yes or No: (questions: 15-27)

	Yes	No
15. Did you or your parents receive welfare, disability, or social security?	___	___
16. Have you ever gone hungry because you or your family had no money to buy food?	___	___
17. Did you ever work as a child to help your family survive?	___	___
18. Did your family ever pick fruit or vegetables to earn a living (beans, cherries, etc.)	___	___
19. Have you ever stolen to help your family survive?	___	___
20. Have you ever been homeless?	___	___
21. Have you experienced poor credit?	___	___
22. Have you ever used a check cashing place instead of a bank to cash checks?	___	___
23. Have you or a member of your family ever been arrested?	___	___
24. Did your parents vote when you were a child?	___	___
25. Did you speak improper grammar (e.g., "I anin't got not itme for this")?	___	___
26. Have you ever used food stamps? ___ ___	___	___
27. As a child (up to the age of 18), did your parents ever own a home?	___	___

Pre-College Life Experience**Please check the space that most closely applies: (questions: 28-34)**

	Not at all	Some	A lot
28. As a child did you read often?	___	___	___
29. Did your parents read to you?	___	___	___
30. As a child did you know people who graduated from high school?	___	___	___
31. As a child did you know people who graduated from college?	___	___	___
32. As a child did you have teachers who believed in you?	___	___	___
33. Did your parents expect you to go to college?	___	___	___
34. Did your parents support you when you did go to college?	___	___	___

Experiences and Challenges During College

Please check the space that most closely applies: (questions: 35-45)

		Not at all	Some	A lot
35.	While you were in college, was there knowledge that "everyone" seemed to know that you didn't know?	___	___	___
36.	Did you have trouble with the vocabulary in college classes?	___	___	___
37.	Do you feel that your early education prepared you for college?	___	___	___
38.	Did you have a mentor or mentors who helped you through college?	___	___	___
39.	Did you participate in college social activities or sports?	___	___	___
40.	Did you receive tutoring or supportive services to help you with college classes?	___	___	___
41.	Did you work on campus while you were going to college?	___	___	___
42.	Did you work off campus while you were going to college?	___	___	___
43.	Did you have friends who were also in college?	___	___	___
44.	Did your college teachers care about your success?	___	___	___
45.	Did lack of childcare ever prevent you from attending college?	___	___	___

Please check Yes or No (questions: 46-51)

		Yes	No
46.	Were you a parent while you were attending college?	___	___
47.	Were you caring for or supporting any relatives while you were in college?	___	___
48.	Were you able to get the necessary books and supplies while you were in college?	___	___
49.	Did you change your place of residence while you were in college?	___	___
50.	Did you attend a Community College?	___	___
51.	Did you receive a GED?	___	___

Strategies to Overcome Barriers

52. In which of the following areas do you feel you changed because of your college experience (mark all that apply)?

- ☐ Language
- ☐ Social behavior
- ☐ Traditions
- ☐ Relationships with others
- ☐ Understanding of others who are different from you
- ☐ Taste in Food
- ☐ Taste in Clothing
- ☐ Taste in Sports
- ☐ Taste in Cars
- ☐ Taste in Music
- ☐ Recreation preferences
- ☐ All of the above

Please respond in writing to these questions: (questions: 53-59)

If you need additional space, please use the back of this page or another piece of paper

53. As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

54. What made you decide to get a bachelor's degree?

55. How were you able to pay for college?

56. What was the hardest thing for you academically while you were in college?

57. What were the most difficult challenges in your home life while you were in college?

58. Was there anything that almost prevented you from finishing college and if so, how did you overcome it?

59. What were the three most important supports that helped you finish college? Please list them in order of importance.

Most important: _____

Second most important: _____

Third most important: _____

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Moderator's Focus Group Guide

The focus group questions flow from three research questions and will be used to guide the focus groups. Each question will be asked from the perspective of the participant's experiences in overcoming generational poverty barriers to achieve a bachelor's degree. [This guide is adapted from a focus group guide developed by the California Public Education Partnership, Priority one: Schools that Work -- Research findings of a statewide survey and focus groups, May 1996. It also incorporates the work of Krueger (1994).]

Beginning the Focus Group Discussion

Welcome
Overview and topic
The ground rules

Research Question I: What are the institutional, environmental, and personal experiences of a selected group of students from generational poverty, who have completed their bachelor's degrees?

Focus group questions addressing Research Question I:

1. When you think back on your childhood, what did "getting an education" mean to you, your family, and your friends?
2. Tell me about experiences in your childhood that shaped your educational expectations?
3. Think back on your experience of poverty. How did that effect your ideas about education?
4. Where did you get the idea for going to college?
Probes:
 - After you got the idea, did you seek more information?
 - What role did others have in your decision to go to college?
 - What slowed you up?
 - What helped you to keep going?

Research Question II: What experiences and strategies helped participants to overcome poverty barriers to education and contributed to their success?

Focus group questions addressing Research Question II:

1. What was it like for you when you decided you wanted to go to college?

2. Tell me about your experiences once you got into college?
3. During your college experience, what was the most difficult barrier to overcome?
4. Briefly tell us about how you feel you were able to achieve your bachelor's degree?

The next questions ask you to reflect on your successful completion of college

1. What advice would you give to others from similar backgrounds who may wanted to get a college degree?
2. What would you suggest college administrators do to increase graduation rates people from poverty backgrounds?
3. What would you suggest college faculty members do to increase graduation rates people from poverty backgrounds?
4. What would you suggests to social service providers to increase college graduation rates of those from poverty backgrounds?
5. What would you suggest to policy makers and political activists to increase graduation rates of those from poverty backgrounds?