AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

René McKenzie for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education presented on December 4, 2014
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Title: The Successful Experiences of First Generation Community College Transfer Students

Abstract approved:_____

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The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the successes of first generation, community college transfer students served by a TRiO/Student Support Services (TRiO/SSS) program. This study addresses a specific problem in higher education – there are a limited number of first generation transfer students who successfully matriculate from a community college to a university to complete a four-year degree. A large number of students attending community colleges are first generation and identified as disadvantaged students and unable to earn a degree. In 2005, there were more than 4.5 million low-income, first generation students enrolled in postsecondary education, equating to approximately 24% of the undergraduate population (Berkner et al., 2005). Previous studies focused primarily on students' deficits and not their

successes; this study gathered responses from nine study participants that were on target for a successful transfer. There are a limited number of studies that interviewed students prior to the transfer. In an attempt to gather relevant and current data reflective of the students' experiences, interviews were held during the students' final term at the Rogue Community College (RCC).

Two broad research questions were the basis for this study: (a) what successes have you experienced as a first generation transfer student while receiving services from a TRiO/Student Support Services program as you prepare to transfer to a four-year school? (b) what activities and resources provided by the TRiO/SSS program contributed to your successful experience as a community college transfer student? The study used three data collection methods: (a) semi-structured face-to-face interviews, (b) a focus group, and (c) journaling. The participants' responses were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

The data revealed five predominant themes:

1. TRiO/SSS provided a community for students that sometimes acted as family

2. Access to TRiO/SSS services had a positive impact on student success and transfer

3. A sense of belonging to TRiO contributed to student's educational success

4. Navigating college and how to "do" school was learned at TRiO and Rogue Community College (RCC)

5. Student's confidence to complete the Bachelor's degree was increased by their utilization of the TRiO/SSS program services

The study concluded that first generation community college students, served by a TRiO/SSS program, were successful transfer students. The students stated that they were well prepared to transfer to the four-year university and complete a Bachelor's degree. Furthermore, the study participants were able to articulate their successes and identify the resources and services that contributed to their success. Implications for further research include (a) this study was limited as there were no comparison subjects; a future study could compare non-TRiO students to students served by a TRiO program to determine differences. (b) the study could be repeated and the same students interviewed after they transfer to the university. (c) a future study could be conducted at other Oregon community colleges that have TRiO/SSS programs to see if the student successes and transfer rates are similar. Results of this study will provide insight for higher education administrators, policy makers, and college personnel seeking to improve student transfer services between institutions and increase degree completion at the community college level.

The Successful Experiences of First Generation
Community College Transfer Students

by
René McKenzie

A DISSERTATION

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the
degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Presented December 4, 2014
Commencement June, 2015

Doctor of Philosophy dissertation of René McKenzie presented on December 4, 2014.

APPROVED:

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Major Professor, representing Education

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Dean of the College of Education

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Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

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René McKenzie, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Alex Sanchez for his ongoing support during my pursuit of this degree. His calm demeanor and knowledge of the dissertation process kept me focused and organized. To my committee members Dr. Shelley Dubkin-Lee, Dr. Bruce Clemetsen, Dr. Kate Dins, Dr. Kenneth Winograd and finally, Dr. Steven Zielke, I appreciate your contributions to my study. You guided me through the proposal meeting and gave sound advice regarding the study specifics. Your acknowledgment of the growth of my scholarly voice inspired me to think about future research and possible contributions to the literature.

I want to extend a special thank you to the faculty of CCLP 17 who lead our monthly classes over a two-year period. I learned a great deal during the coursework and the cohort experience was always interesting.   I was always eager to return to work and apply my new knowledge after our monthly sessions.

The CCLP 17 cohort was a dynamic force of learners and our conversations were rich. The cohort support was tremendous and at times, when the degree felt unattainable, a simple phone call and an offer to help meant the world. Friendships were formed and even today, we are a network, both professionally and personally and for that I am grateful.

I salute the TRiO/SSS students who participated in this study. The rich descriptions of your experiences and your ability to articulate your successes left me in awe. The interview sessions left me proud of all that you have

accomplished. College is hard and you have overcome the odds. Your passion for learning and the pursuit of your degrees speaks directly to your successes. I am forever grateful for your participation and that you allowed me to venture into your lives and to hear your stories.

Finally, I want to thank my family and close friends for their support and encouragement. For all of you that cooked and cared for me when I was busy traveling to Silver Falls and conducting the endless hours spent writing and researching, I appreciate you. It is with deep gratitude that I thank my daughter Krysten and my good friend (BFF) Chris; without the two of you, this journey was possibly unattainable.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my dad, Delbert Edward McKenzie. Your

encouragement, support, and love for my pursuits of higher education are

remembered as I make this final trek across the stage.

CHAPTER ONE: FOCUS AND SIGNIFICANCE

When Lisa began her college education at age 35 she was scared and uncertain of what would come. As the first in her family to consider attending a community college, she always believed that earning a degree was an unattainable dream! Lisa had always worked retail jobs, never making enough money to support herself and her two children. Health benefits were a scarcity with the low wage part-time jobs. Lisa struggled for years, living in poverty with her own personal shame about not being able to provide adequately for her family. She wondered if college would make a difference in her life. Could she have a career; was she smart enough to be in a classroom with a bunch of young people? Would a school like Noble Pine Community College accept her? These questions Lisa pondered as she drove to her local community college to enroll in her first term of postsecondary education.

Research Problem

A large number of students attending American community colleges are first generation[1]. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) reported that 43% of students attending post-secondary institutions in the United States are first generation (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). First generation status is defined as a student whose parents have never earned a bachelor's degree or those whose parents may have some college postsecondary certificates, or associate's degrees

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[1] First generation students are those attending education whose parents have not achieved at least a bachelor's degree.

but not bachelor's degrees (Engle & Tinto, 2008). London (1996) defined first generation students as those who attend a community college or university, but whose parents have not earned a college degree.

While there is more than one definition of *first generation*; the federal definition defines children of parents without a bachelor's degree as first generation. In 2005, there were more than 4.5 million low-income, first generation students enrolled in postsecondary education, equating to approximately 24% of the undergraduate population (Berkner et al., 2005). These students are more likely to begin their education at community colleges where enrollment is open[2], college credits are less expensive, and students can often live at home while attending college (Engle, 2006).

Literature suggests that first generation students are more likely to fail than traditional college students who begin their postsecondary education directly out of high school (Engle, 2006). Author Vincent Tinto (1996) stated that most students who drop out prior to graduation do so because they are not adequately integrated into the college environment and engaged in learning. Students who are the first in their family to transfer from community college to a university lack role models and familial support and are unsure how to navigate college systems (Engle, 2006).

Demographically, these students are different and more likely than their advantaged peers to be: (a) older; (b) female; (c) have a disability; (d) come from a

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[2] Open enrollment is the unrestricted enrollment of students at schools, colleges, or universities of their choice.

minority background; (e) have dependent children and be single parents; (f) have earned a high school equivalency diploma, and (g) be financially independent from their parents (Berkner et al. 2005). These factors impede the success of first generation students, by limiting their ability to complete college and graduate with a Bachelor's degree.

Community colleges were originally designed to provide open access to education where students could complete the first two years of course work toward a four-year undergraduate degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Transferring students from the community college to the four-year university has long been a primary mission of the community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Grubb, 1991). Community colleges provide open access[3] to post-secondary education and have less rigorous admissions policies than universities; as a result, educators at those institutions are often challenged because some entering students are unprepared or underprepared students (Ortiz, 1995). Community colleges have been criticized because of the low transfer rates of students and their ineffectiveness in transferring students from the community college to a four-year university (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Zwerling, 1976). Because of the low transfer rates, institutions of higher education, state legislatures, and boards of education have questioned if community colleges are accountable to the mission of transferring students and if transfer is still a primary community college mission (Arnold, 2001).

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[3] Open access is the unrestricted access of students to enter community college.

The number of colleges as well as the amount of enrolled students has grown significantly in junior and community colleges since their inception in the early 1900's. In 2001, Cohen & Brawer (2008) reported 1,076 community colleges in operation across the country. In 2013, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reported 1,132 institutions consisting of private, public, and tribal schools (American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 2013). During the 2006-07 academic year, more than 6.2 million students were enrolled in America's community colleges (IPEDS-EF:86–99). In fall of 2011, AACC reported the headcount enrollment at 4.76 million students enrolled part time and 3.27 million full-time students for a total headcount enrollment of approximately 8 million students (AACC Fact Sheet, 2013).

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the successful experiences of first generation students, served by a TRiO/Student Support Services (TRiO/SSS)[4] program, who are prepared to transfer from the community college to a university as a result of the services provided by TRiO/SSS. This phenomenological study sought to understand the essence of the first generation transfer students' experiences while at the community college and to describe students' positive experiences related to the preparation of transfer to the university. Broad, general questions are typically used in a phenomenological study to gather data that will

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[4] TRiO/Student Services is a federally funded program providing services to first generation college students to promote Bachelor's degree attainment.

lead to a rich description of the experiences and provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007).

This study addresses a specific problem in higher education – the limited number of first generation transfer students who matriculate from a community college to a university to complete a four-year degree (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). In 1995, a study by Townsend found that students tended to seek informal resources such as family and friends instead of the formal systems of support offered by postsecondary educators. First generation students may be consulting with family and friends who have little or no recent educational experience and are, therefore, unable to provide accurate or current information about college systems and the transfer process. Furthermore, Townsend and Wilson (2006) indicated that many transfer students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are steered into vocational programs and discouraged from pursuing the transfer track. Upon reviewing the literature regarding transfer students, much of the research in this study focused on the barriers and the dropout rates associated with the first generation population.

The purpose of this research was to explore the successful experiences of first generation transfer students during their final term at the community college, prior to transferring to a university. The intent of this study was to understand the students' successful experiences as they prepared to transfer to universities. The research sought to explore, through a phenomenological study, what activities and

resources contributed to student success[5] in persisting toward the goal of transfer. Students were asked to describe their experiences and their perceptions of the phenomenon and to discuss what they believed made the community college transfer goal attainable. The following questions guided the research process:

1. What successes have you experienced as a first generation transfer student while receiving services from a TRiO/Student Support Services program   as you prepare to transfer to a four-year school? A phenomenological study seeks to find significant statements or comments from study participants that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The rationale for this question is to understand the core experience of the student as it relates to preparing and planning for the actual act of transfer from the community college to the a four-year school. The positive experiences of the students preparing to transfer will be captured and useful for scholarly and practical literature. Capturing the student experience will be important for educators as they develop student support programs that serve first generation transfer students.

2. What activities and resources provided by the TRiO/SSS program contributed to your successful experience as a community college transfer student?   The rationale for this question is to understand the students' successes and how specific activities and resources contributed to their positive experiences. This information is important because future first generation students, transfer

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[5] Student success is defined as measurements in reaching educational goals where students make progress and attain success.

students, and educators will learn from the positive experiences as presented in the data analysis and conclusion of the study. This question informs educators, policy makers, grant writers, and program developers of the strengths of a TRiO/SSS program as identified by successful students.   The data will contribute the knowledge of educators and implementation of high impact, retention, and persistence strategies for future program development purposes.

Research Significance

This study is significant for several reasons: (a) first generation students face difficulties and are often unsuccessful in reaching their goal of transferring; (b) little research exists that is focused on the positive experiences of first generation community college transfer students prior to the end of their community college experience; and (c) the topic is of personal and professional interest and concern.

First generation students face difficulties. First generation students are a population that typically struggles with successfully completing postsecondary education. First generation students who have a goal of transferring from the community college to the four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree are less likely to meet this goal than students who are not first generation (Engle, 2006). Students who start at the community college are at least 15% less likely to attain a bachelor's degree than those who start at a four-year institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). First generation students often come from low-income families whose parents do not have postsecondary experience. They tend to arrive at

college with little or no support, low academic skills, and no knowledge of college systems or finances to pay for an education (Choy, 2001). All of these issues limit first generation students' postsecondary success and create barriers to successfully transferring from a community college to a four-year university. Research from this study is of practical importance due to the rich descriptions of student experiences that will be added to the existing literature about first generation transfer students.

Little research or literature. While there is a great deal of literature about first generation transfer students, most studies have been conducted after the student transfers to the four-year university and sometimes several terms into the student's university experience. Flaga (2006) stated that many questions have been left unanswered regarding transfer students who could be subjects of future research. Flaga (2006) said, "Interviewing students before transfer, as well as very soon after, may produce different results; having 'in the moment' data as opposed to retrospective information may garner different results" (p. 16). Interviewing first generation students who are on track for transfer from the community college will provide data that are rich in the students' experiences and will inform the scholarly literature via the lens of first generation transfer students who are successful in transferring from the community college to a four-year university.

Personal interest and concern. I am a first generation college student. My goal, when starting college was to become employable in a living wage career. As the first member of my family to attend college, I have a personal

understanding of what community college students, specifically first generation students, experience in higher education. The goal of this study was to give a voice to successful first generation students and allow their stories to be told.

With 23 years of professional experience working in the community college system and serving low-income first generation students, I have observed firsthand the successes of first generation transfer students. For purposes of future program design, this research will aid in developing quality programs and service delivery to students. The study will allow for an original contribution to theory and policy for community colleges related to the ways first generation transfer students are served. This research study will also inform both the practical and scholarly audience by relating the rich and lived experiences of successful first generation transfer students. My hope is that the study brings awareness to the successes of first generation students and gives readers a glimpse into their lives and their persistence to succeed. I also hope to draw awareness to the federally funded TRiO programs specifically the SSS model and the resources and support that contributes to educational successes and attainment for first generation students.

Summary

The intent of this study was to examine the successes of first generation transfer students. First generation students face difficulties in successfully completing their education and many students never transfer from community college to the university to earn a four-year degree. Through a phenomenological approach, the study sought to gather information and data from students who are prepared to leave the community college and ready to transfer to a four-year school. The study will share the essence of the lived experiences of underrepresented first generation student population that appears to be successful in transferring from the community college to the university.

This study was based on the following questions: (a) What successes have you experienced as a first generation transfer student while receiving services from a TRiO/Student Support Services program as you prepared to transfer to a four-year school? (b) What activities and resources provided by the TRiO/SSS program contributed to your successful experience as a community college transfer student?

This study examined the successes of first generation transfer students in their final term of community college as they prepared to transfer to a four-year university and earn a Bachelor's degree. First generation students are often more likely to fail and they often drop because they are not adequately prepared for college. Through support programs like TRiO, first generation students can succeed in higher education and complete degrees.

This phenomenological study focused on understanding the essence of student's positive experiences at Rogue Community College (RCC) while being served by a TRiO/SSS program. The research examined the services and resources that helped students succeed via their lens. The results may inform educators and policy makers of what first generation transfer students found valuable while attending community college.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to set the context for investigating

and analyzing the experiences of successful first generation students who intend to

transfer from a community college to a four-year institution. London (1996)

defined first generation students as those who attend a community college or

university, but whose parents have not earned a college degree. The history of the

American Community College depicts a system where all students are welcome

and provided opportunities to succeed. We know there are students who start and

never complete a degree program. The literature identifies populations of students

that are less than fortunate and therefore, unable to complete an education.

Overview of the Literature

This review explored three distinct and relevant themes that emerged from

the literature pertinent to first generation community college transfer students.

1. Access to community colleges and the transfer mission.

2. The socioeconomic and academic difficulties faced by first generation

   college students.

3. TRiO/Student Support Services programs designed to assist first generation

   college transfer students.

The three themes are presented in this order to build an understanding of

community college access and the transfer mission, first generation students, and

support programs that serve the first generation population.

Theme one provides an overview related to community college access at it was determined by U.S. President Harry Truman's Commission on Higher Education (CHE) in 1947. Community colleges evolved with the intent of providing the first two years of undergraduate courses. The transfer mission is a primary function of the community college and it matriculates students from the two-year college to a four-year school to complete a bachelor's degree (Cohen & Brawer 2008). The mission of community colleges, specifically as it relates to access and transfer is conveyed through the literature.

Theme two explores the socioeconomic and academic issues that first generation college students face in their efforts to attend college and eventually transfer to earn a degree at a four-year institution. The difficulties faced by some students are the stories of first generation students as they encounter: poverty, low study skills, lack of support, and difficulty understanding college systems. Socioeconomic barriers have a direct impact on first generation student success and degree completion rates. In conclusion, the reader will understand the socioeconomic and academic issues related to why first generation students fail or are less likely to meet their college transfer goals.

The third and final theme examines the federally funded TRiO programs, specifically the TRiO/Student Support Services (TRiO/SSS) model located at 949 community colleges and universities across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The goal of TRiO/SSS is to retain first generation college students as they pursue a four-year degree. TRiO/SSS programs provide academic

and personal support to first generation students and assist these students in the
transfer process from the community colleges to four-year universities.

Approach to the Literature

The Oregon State University library system was utilized to locate
historical, relevant, and current literature for this review. Academic and
educational based databases were accessed, including: EBSCOhost, Electronic
Journals Service, Academic Search Premier, and Education Resources Information
Center (ERIC). Keyword searches were explored in several academic journals,
including: *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, Sociology of
Education, American Academic Journal, and New Directions for Community
Colleges.* Key words used in the searches included: first generation students, first
generation transfer, access, socioeconomic difficulties, community college
transfer, academic difficulties, history of the American community college,
baccalaureate attainment, persistence, TRiO/SSS, and retention.

Articles and texts about the history of the American community college as
it relates to access and specifically the transfer mission were included in the search
to help readers understand the community college culture. The search focused on
quantitative and qualitative research studies that included issues faced by first
generation transfer students. Federally funded programs such as TRiO, which
provide support to first generation college students, were included in the search.
Excluded from this search were articles related to the general transfer population

who are not part of the first generation category. Additional exclusions included studies about four-year institutions graduation rates.

Information for this literature review was also gleaned from texts, research, and papers accumulated in the Community College Leadership program at Oregon State University's College of Education. Texts and articles were written or edited by professionals, critics, and advocates whose professions are immersed in these topics.

Access to Community Colleges and the Transfer Mission

This theme focuses on access to the community college and the transfer mission within two-year institutions. In July of 1946, U.S. President Harry Truman established the President's Commission on Higher Education. This Commission, comprised of civic and educational leaders, was charged with examining the functions of higher education in the American democracy and determining the ways in which education could best be performed (Presidents' Commission on Higher Education, 1947). From the work of this commission, emerged an education plan based on social justice, democracy, and an equal opportunity for all citizens to access higher education (Russell, 1949).

The final report from the President's Commission on Education (1947) stated:

> Whatever form the community college takes, its purpose is educational service to the entire community, and this purpose requires of it a variety of functions and programs. It will provide college education for the youth of the community certainly, so as to remove geographic and economic

barriers to educational opportunity and discover and develop individual

talents at low cost and easy access. But in addition, the community college

will serve as an active center of adult education. It will attempt to meet the

total post-high school needs of its community (p. 67-68).

The report supported education, service, and growth of the community college.

The statement from the President's Commission advocated for student persistence

and the attainment of a degree for all youth and adults who desired an education.

Community colleges were designed to provide open access to an education

system where students could complete the first two years of course work toward a

four-year undergraduate degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). In 1998 there were over

1,100 community colleges in the United States, with more than 1,000 being public

institutions (Quigley & Bailey, 2003). The number of community colleges

between 1960 and 1975, including branch campuses grew from 390 to over 1,000

(Quigley & Bailey, 2003). The types of students who enroll at a community

college are diverse. Minorities and immigrants are overrepresented in two-year

schools and such institutions are more likely than four-year schools to enroll first

generation, postsecondary students from low socioeconomic backgrounds

(Quigley & Bailey, 2003). Community colleges have less rigorous admittance

policies than universities; as a result, educators are challenged by unprepared

students (Ortiz, 1995).

Transferring students from the community college to the four-year

university has long been a primary mission of the community college (Cohen &

Brawer 2008; Grubb, 1991). Over the past two decades, administrators, faculty and researchers have argued that the fundamental role of community college is to provide open access to lower division collegiate education (Quigley & Bailey, 2003). Townsend and Wilson (2006) described the community college as unique in its transfer mission; the community college prepares students to transfer to four-year institutions of higher education by providing the first two years of the four-year degree. Community colleges have been criticized for low transfer rates of students and their ineffectiveness in transferring students from the community college to a four-year university (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Zwerling, 1976).

Data from a *Beginning Postsecondary Student* survey looked at all the students who entered community college in 1989. In 1994, five years later, 49% had left college without a degree; 37% had earned some kind of a degree, and 15% were still enrolled (BPS:89/94) Institutions of higher education, state legislatures, and boards of education have questioned if community colleges are being held accountable to the role of transferring students and because of the low rates, whether or not transfer is still a primary mission of the community college (Arnold, 2001).

While the intent of transfer is strong within the mission of the community college, some critics have described a function coined as, "cooling out" (Clark, 1960). In the cooling out function, students who indicated transfer as their initial intent, particularly those from a low socioeconomic background, were encouraged

by guidance counselors to enter vocational programs instead of pursuing their initial goal of transfer. Alba and Lavin (1981) concluded that community college attendance worked to gradually dampen students' educational aspirations, regardless of their academic performance.

Despite criticism, student enrollment in the community college system has continued to grow. During the 2006-07 academic year, more than 6.2 million students were enrolled in America's 1,045 community colleges (IPEDS-EF:86–99). In fall of 2011 the American Association of Community Colleges (2013) reported a total headcount at approximately 8 million students enrolled part and full time at community colleges. In 2013, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reported 1,132 institutions consisting of private, public and tribal schools (AACC, 2013).

The ease of community college admissions and entry allows advantaged and disadvantaged students access to education. A variety of students attend community colleges, including first generation students. First generation students are those whose parents have not attended college or obtained any formal degree. This population of students is more likely to begin their education at community colleges where enrollment is open with no admissions fees, college credits are less expensive, and students can often live at home while attending college (Engle 2006).

In a qualitative study, Flaga (2006) conducted interviews with 35 community college transfer students. These interviews took place during the

students' second semester at a university and focused on the students' past

community college experiences and the first semester at the university. The

student interviews led to the development of five dimensions of transition that

emerged from the data:

1. Learning resource: A variety of tools used by students to gain
   information, learn the campus environment, and understand the
   academic systems.

2. Connecting: Development of relationships with others in academic,
   social, and physical environments.

3. Familiarity: Transfer students become comfortable, over time, with the
   university structure; eventually the university becomes what the student
   knows.

4. Negotiating: Students adjust their behavior in order to become more
   successful academically and socially.

5. Integrating: A developmental shift or change in identity by transfer
   students as a result of the four previous transition themes.

The five dimensions were coded according to three environments:

academic, social, and physical for a comparative look at how students behaved in

each environment. The study concluded that there are steps community colleges

and four-year universities can take to smooth the transfer process. The study

determined that students must take initiative to seek out and utilize resources. This

study is limited because there were only 35 students in the sample size attending

one institution; and thus, results could not be generalized to all community college transfer students, much less those who are first generation students. Nevertheless, the results pointed toward possible dimensions that could be explored in future studies.

In 1999, the Oregon Joint Boards of Education accepted and endorsed a report about community college transfer and the articulation of credits between Oregon community colleges and universities (Arnold, 2001). In that report, past concerns regarding the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of the transfer process for community college students were exposed, and the board sought to resolve the problems. The report initiated HB 2387 which eventually became Oregon law. In an effort to monitor the new law, the board stipulated that ongoing data collection and research efforts were necessary. Arnold (2001) identified the number of Oregon transfer students, who had attended a community college the previous year to determine whether or not they transferred and if so, were they formally admitted into a program of study at the university.

The study concluded that in Oregon the transfer between community colleges to universities was fairly stable. Fifty four percent of the students transferring from the community college were women and students of color. Only 10% of the *All Transfer* category transferred with an associate's degree, and 55% of the *All Transfer* students earned a baccalaureate degree in any given year. During the transfer process, 65% of the students lost transfer credits due to taking remedial or developmental education courses at the community college. Fifty-one

percent of students with a high school GPA below 3.0, who attended a four-year college, achieved a baccalaureate degree, while only 37% of community college students with a GPA above 3.5 who attended a two-year college achieved the degree.

While the Oregon outlook appeared to be good, based on the 54% who transferred, there were contributing factors that demonstrated Oregon's success. The Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer (AAOT) degree was a model that was articulated to support student transfer and to guarantee junior status in general education credits at any public four-year school in Oregon. Moreover, HB 2387 forced the State to gather and report education statistics which the legislature could access in order to make recommendations for improvement. One final limitation was that Oregon represented just one state in the country and could not therefore be seen as the norm in other states.

Summary. This section of the literature review relates directly to the issue of transfer from the community college to a four-year college or university. The literature demonstrated that historically, community colleges were designed to provide access to education for all United States citizens. The transfer mission has been in place at community colleges throughout its history. All types of students access the two-year educational track, many with a goal of transferring to a university to earn a bachelor's degree. First generation, minorities, and those with low socioeconomic status often struggle in meeting the transfer goal and are less likely to succeed. Each state and Oregon is one example, has different degrees and

articulation and may impact transfer rates based on the local state system. The literature concluded that there was a need to study first generation community college students who are prepared and on track to transfer in order to develop a better understanding of what systems, resources, and assistance have had a positive impact on their success.

Socioeconomic Differences and Academic Issues Faced by First Generation Transfer Students

This section of the literature examines the impact on students who have a low socioeconomic status (SES) and who are underprepared academically and socially to attend college. Higher education is one of the few ways for people living in poverty to better themselves and their quality of life. Attainment of a degree provides better job opportunities and living wages. The National Center for Education (2006) concluded that the four-year degreed person will have more opportunities and higher median earnings than those without a degree. The completion of a degree fosters life changing opportunities and quality of life improvements for both the students and their families (Wang, 2009). Students whose parents are college educated, even those from low income families, are still more likely to persist than students whose parents who have limited or no college experience (Ishitani, 2006).

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics' *Beginning Postsecondary Study* (BPS:96/01), indicated that there are more than 4.5 million low income, first generation students enrolled in postsecondary education, representing 24% of Americas undergraduate population (Heuer, Link, Talbric,

Whitmore, & Wine, 2001). The study found that first generation students, who are most often low income, were nearly four times more likely to leave higher education after the first year than students who came from more advantaged backgrounds. Choy (2001) studied students in 1995-96 and determined that 34% of the students entering a four-year institution and 53% of the students entering a community college were first generation. Choy (2001) also reported that, in a 1992 study, 27% of the high school graduates were from families where neither parent had attended college.

Students begin at a two-year college for various reasons according to Zwerling and London (Hsiao, 1992) – including, (a) their academic preparation is not competitive enough to gain admission to a four-year institution, (b) they cannot afford the tuition costs at a four-year institution, or (c) they need the flexibility of class schedules at a two-year institution to meet their other responsibilities as workers, spouses, and parents. The number of first generation students attending college is high and the barriers that limit their ability to be successful are many.

A study using three waves of longitudinal data from the National Education Longitudinal Study data surveyed a sample of 25,000 eighth graders in 1988 (Curtin, Heuer, Ingels, Owings, & Wu, 1988). This study used a descriptive analysis of socioeconomic differentials including high school achievement, educational expectations, financial constraints, and first year college experiences among transfer students. The study sought to determine if socioeconomic backgrounds were instrumental in the students' rate of success.

Using logistic regression, the researchers predicted whether or not a student would ever transfer from a community college to a university, including lateral and reverse transfers. The study concluded that 33% of the students transferred at least once within eight years of high school graduation. Nearly one in every five students or 19.5% transferred laterally and 15% transferred in a reverse pattern at least once. The lateral transfer group was more likely, at 69%, to transfer to a four-year school than the reverse transfers at 22% and complete a bachelor's degree. Moreover, the highest rates of completion were among students who never changed colleges or transferred; they started and stayed at the same university until degree completion. The study concluded that transfer students, especially those who experience socioeconomic barriers are less likely to be successful completing college.

One limitation of this study was found in the description of a lateral and reverse transfer (Curtin, et al., 1988). Lateral transfer was defined as movement from one community college to another and did not indicate or define a vertical transfer from a community college to a four-year school. Many first generation students will transfer from one community college to another, never completing or finishing the degree they intended to achieve. Reverse transfer indicates that the student started at a university and transferred in the reverse direction, to a community college. Both reverse and lateral transfers are student patterns that have become the norm; however, neither of them indicates a successful transfer to

a university. Students have changed the way they access education and are less likely to take courses in a certain order from one particular school (Bailey, 2003).

Using National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 and Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS) of 2000, students who were enrolled in a community college during 1992-1993 were tracked (Adelman, Berkovits & Daniel, 2000). Students from the original study, who started in a community college and eventually transferred to a university, were kept in the data set for further observation. The methodology utilized logistic regression to predict baccalaureate persistence and attainment. Of the 1992 pool of students, 19% who first attended a community college eventually transferred to a four-year institution. The study concluded that the likelihood of degree attainment was low and significantly associated with SES and gender. Students with a higher SES were more likely to succeed than students with a lower SES. Females were more likely than males to earn a degree. Students who experienced academic difficulties were less likely to persist. The study concluded that the use of the student GPA was the single best predictor of baccalaureate attainment. The study indicated that pre-college motivation, student self-efficacy, and educational aspirations affect the first generation student and their success.

Summary. First generation students struggle both economically and academically. The socioeconomic status of students is an important factor that justifies the need for this population to have additional resources to increase transfer success rates. The literature indicated that first generation students arrive

at college underprepared and without college level skills to advance academically. Given the needs of this category of student, further research on the factors leading to success is warranted.

Federally Funded TRiO Programs

Federally funded TRiO programs are included in this literature review in an effort to understand the services provided and the roles that these programs play in the lives and successes of first generation college students. TRiO programs are funded through highly competitive federal grant awards to institutions of secondary and postsecondary education to serve first generation and low-income students. In the early 1960s, the U.S. Government developed TRiO programs to provide equal access to education for disadvantaged students The first program, Upward Bound, emerged out of the War on Poverty Act in 1964. Two more programs emerged in the mid-1960s; Educational Talent Search in 1965 from the Higher Education Act and in the first amendment to the original Act, the Student Support Services programs was launched. In the late 1960s the three programs merged under the umbrella name of TRiO. In a 2010 report, Chaney (2010) noted the growth of TRiO/SSS programs; in 1970-71 there were 121 SSS projects serving approximately 30,000 participants. In 2007-08 there were 947 programs serving approximately 198,940. Chaney (2010) stated that the funding has increased from $10 million to $264 million and participating institutions include 22% of four and two-year colleges and universities.

Today, TRiO/Student Support Services is one of eight federally funded TRiO programs administered within the USDOE. This program is designed to help economically disadvantaged, first generation students, and those with a documented disability to succeed in college and earn at least a Bachelor's degree. TRiO/Student Support Services (TRiO/SSS or SSS) provides services to students while they are enrolled in college. The goal is to help students complete certificates and/or degrees in order to transfer to a four-year institution if their education began at a community college. Students may apply to a TRiO/SSS program upon enrollment at an institution or they may enroll at a later date while still attending college. Direct services to students are designed to help them persist toward four-year degree attainment and to matriculate through the transfer process if the student began at a community college. The purposes of SSS are:

a. To increase college retention and graduation rates for eligible students;

b. To increase the transfer rates of eligible students from two-year to four-year institutions; and

c. To foster an institutional climate supportive of success of low-income and first-generation college students and individuals with disabilities.

Funded programs offer a menu of services for SSS enrolled students, including: academic, career, and transfer advising, peer tutoring and mentoring, supplemental instruction, university tours and assistance with admissions

processes and applications. It is important to note, that there is diversity in TRiO program services and the design of the program. TRiO grants are funded based on the strength of the application, the need for the project, and program design submitted in the proposal. Staff employed in a federally funded TRiO/SSS programs serve approximately 180 - 250 first generation students each year. Enrollment in a TRiO program can be continuous until the student graduates or transfers to another school. SSS programs are known for linking students enrolled in community college programs to the SSS program at the transferring university to ensure a smooth transfer.

In an effort to document the success of SSS programs, the USDOE launched a 1997 report on a study that was intended to estimate the effects of SSS on the outcomes of student participants enrolled in 1991-1992 (Chaney, Cabalan & Rak, 1997). A quasi-experimental design and regression analysis was utilized to assess the impact of TRiO/Student Support Services. A total of 5,800 students at 47 postsecondary institutions were tracked over a three-year period. A comparison group of 2,900 students was constructed to match the demographic and educational profiles of the 2,900 SSS students enrolled in the 1991-92 academic year. The study found that SSS participants were more likely to (1) remain enrolled in higher education; (2) accrue more college credits, and (3) earn a higher grade point average (GPA).

Table 2.1

More Detailed Findings: Retention

Retention	Credits Earned	GPA
Compared to similarly qualified students in the control group, SSS students were:	Compared to the similarly qualified students in the control group, SSS students earned:	Compared to the similarly qualified students in the control group, SSS students' GPAs were:
12% more likely to be retained the second year (67% vs. 60%), and	6% more credits in the first year	7% higher in the first year,
23% more likely to be retained to the third year (49% vs. 40%	4% more credits in the second year, and	5% higher in the second year, and
	45 more credits in the third year.	4% higher over three years (cumulative).

This study also noted that the size of the SSS program was directly and positively related to the level of program participation. Students that utilized services were more likely to be successful and generated the positive outcomes as demonstrated in Table 2.1. It was also noted that peer tutoring, a direct TRiO/SSS service, during the first year, showed the greatest positive effect for this particular group of students.

Student retention and graduation outcomes are shaped by clear expectations in regard to what is required to be successful in college (Tinto, 2012). In a July 2004 report, Tinto declared that 46% of low income students graduate from high school and immediately enter postsecondary education.

These students are likely to be first generation. Tinto identified particular measures and services that can be provided to support these students (Tinto, 2004):

1. Adequate financial aid that enables first generation and low income students to attend full-time versus part-time is necessary for college success.

2. On campus employment at less than 20 hours a week makes success in college more likely.

3. TRiO programs provide a "home" within the campus where students feel comfortable to access and receive services. It is important to note, that first generation students need integration into the college and should not be isolated to one specific area for student support.

4. Emphasize academic support and what it takes to be successful in college in an effort to engage students who arrive at college with low academic and college success skills.

5. Provide faculty, staff, and peer services focused on advising, counseling, mentoring, and tutoring.

Tinto (2012) concluded that success is measured in three areas: (1) success in the institution; (2) success in the student's program of study; and (3) success in the courses in which the student is enrolled. Colleges make attempts to communicate student expectations through new student orientations, program advising, and finding teachable moments to guide students. It was demonstrated in studies on SSS that students, especially during their first year of college, that first

generation students have access to an additional layer of support provided by a TRiO program. Students in their first year of college who do not seek out services and can quickly fail. First generation and low income college students lack shared knowledge or cultural capital that the more affluent students or students from educated families commonly possess (Tinto, 2012). In postsecondary institutions, the SSS programs provide an additional layer of support for first generation students. SSS programs have the necessary funding and therefore the staffing to provide programming that involves intellectual, social, and emotional development in first year students.

Summary. This section of the literature review gave an abbreviated history of the inception of the federally funded TRiO programs and provided objectives and the permissible services that a TRiO/Student Support Services project can deliver to first generation students. Understanding the history of the TRiO programs and the services provided to students will allow the researcher to formulate questions appropriately as well as understand the student's experience to the program operations. Research concluded that the TRiO programs are successful models of support, provided directly to first generation students in an effort to guide students toward successful completion of a four-year degree.

Chapter Summary

The literature reviewed for this chapter was comprised of three distinct themes. (a) access to community college and the transfer mission, (b) the socioeconomic and academic difficulties faced by first generation college students, and (c) the federally funded TRiO/SSS programs designed to assist first generation students with transfer from community college to the four-year university. The three themes presented an understanding of community college access, first generation students, and federally funded TRiO programs.

The literature confirmed that first generation college transfer students are less likely to persist and complete a bachelor's degree than their peers who come from a stable socioeconomic status and background. College enrollments continue to rise and students from all backgrounds seek education at their local community college. Because admission to the community college is less rigorous, many first generation students begin their education at the local community college. The first generation student's probability for success is decreased by their socioeconomic status, limited understanding of college systems, resources limitations, and level of family or outside support. Several studies concluded that transferring from a community college to a four-year university is difficult for students in general and often more complicated for first generation students. Federally funded programs like TRiO are designed to support the first generation students. The Student Support Services model was examined in the literature for service provisions and overall support to community college first generation transfer students. Studies

concluded that additional data was necessary to determine how colleges can do a better job of working together to form bonds between the two institutions that will impact student success for the first generation population. Due to the difficulties that first generation students face, there is a need to further study first generation community college transfer students. A qualitative study, in a narrative or phenomenological methodology, could generate new information by expanding beyond the numbers and looking at the students' experiences in an in-depth way. Other areas to consider for future studies could be targeted at defining the gaps, methods, and systems to better facilitate first generation student transfer.

CHAPTER THREE: DESIGN OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the successful experiences of first generation students, served by a TRiO/Student Support Services (TRiO/SSS) program, who are prepared to transfer from the community college to a four-year university the following fall. This phenomenological study was designed to understand the successes of first generation transfer students and the activities and resources that contributed to the students' success and persistence.

This section provides: (a) the philosophical approach and rationale for the study design; (b) overview of the research methods including major assumptions used in the approach; (c) the procedures used in the study and major assumptions. The study participants, data collection techniques, and data analysis processes are identified. Finally, strategies to ensure soundness of the data, and the means to protect human subjects conclude this section.

Philosophical Approach

The philosophical approach for this qualitative study of transfer students is Interpretive Social Science (ISS). The purpose of ISS is to study how people construct meaning within their social settings. Different from the positivist approach, there is no hypothesis or an effort to prove or disprove the phenomenon. The intent is to seek an understanding of the situation or phenomenon, not proof. As a former TRiO director, I have seen students succeed and reach their academic goals.

　　　　To stay aligned with the interpretive tradition, I provided my personal perspective at the onset of this study. I have personal experience as a first generation college student. Being the first in my family to attend college, I have a deep rooted understanding of the challenges that first generation students face. My goal at the time of community college entry was to become employable with a living wage and benefits. I experienced socioeconomic difficulties, lack of family support, and at the time of college entry I had below average academic and college success skills. Like many first generation students, my family did not understand college, therefore they were unable to advise or assist me with college-related decisions and coursework. At times, earning any degree seemed out of reach. Through a program for single parents and displaced homemakers, I was fortunate to access college resources that encouraged persistence and completion and or transfer to a four-year school. These resources helped me in my pursuit of transfer from the community college to a university and finally earning a four-year degree.

　　　　Because of my background in community college education, I have worked directly with first generation, low income students. I have directed a federal TRiO/SSS program and provided direct service to students. I no longer work directly with first generation students; however, my interest in this topic still relevant to my general work in student services administration. I have seen students drop out due to feeling inadequate and those who are unable to navigate the higher education systems. At times, an issue like lack of transportation can be the problem that makes college seem impossible; resulting in students dropping

out. In this study, my focus was on the successes of these students and not their deficits.

As a community college student services administrator, I think about the questions posed in this study on a regular basis. I think about the impact on students of decisions made by administrators. My professional involvement with the subject could be a source of bias. I countered this by being open and fully engaged with the information shared by the students. I moved forward by listening intently and making a continuous effort to describe all that I discovered accurately.

The purpose of this approach. ISS is a methodology which seeks to understand social life and discover how people construct meaning in natural settings (Neuman, 2003). Interpretive qualitative research recognizes the self-reflective nature of qualitative research and emphasizes the role of the researcher as an interpreter of the data who represents information from the research Creswell, 2007). ISS has become interwoven into the core characteristics of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Neuman (2003) stated, "…interpretive researchers study *meaningful* social action, not just the external or observable behavior of people" (p. 76). The interpretive approach holds that social life is based on social interactions and socially constructed systems (Neuman, 2003). In order to conduct an interpretive study, one must study a certain social setting and see it from the point of view of those in it. The interpretive researcher strives to

discover what actions mean to the people who engage in them. According to Neuman (2003):

> A researcher conducts "a reading" to discover meaning embedded within the text. Each reader brings his or her subjective experience to a text. When studying the text, the researcher/reader tries to absorb or get inside the viewpoint it presents as a whole, and then develop a deep understanding of how its parts relate to the whole. (p. 76)

One goal of the qualitative researcher is to understand the social interactions within a group of people. This paradigm of thinking is aligned with the constructivist world view which suggests that researchers who employ the constructivist paradigm work with categories and interpretations that are grounded in the data, analyze data through inductive means (i.e., interpretations emerge from the data) and concern themselves with the discovery of the meaning (Stage & Manning, 2003).

Assumptions about truth and reality. "Qualitative research is a general term. It is a way of knowing in which a researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets information obtained from humans using his or her eyes and ears as filters. It often involves in-depth interviews and or observations of humans in natural and social settings" (Lichtman, 2010). From the constructivist perspective, reality is multi-dimensional and socially constructed. The goal of research from the constructivist viewpoint is to build a time-and context-dependent body of knowledge that is expressed as interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The

constructivist is concerned with meaning, researcher-respondent rapport, co-construction of the research findings by the researcher and respondents, practical application of research findings, and reciprocity between the researcher and the respondents.

This phenomenological study specifically investigates the experiences of first generation transfer students, served by a TRiO/SSS program, that have applied for admittance to a four-year university. The interviews take place before the students make the actual transfer to the university in an effort to fully capture the students' experiences at the community college before they became engrossed at the university. The ISS model allows for the in-depth study of a group of first generation transfer students to gain a better understanding of the transfer students' experiences in their pursuit of a successful transfer. In an interpretive biography, the researcher's presence is apparent in the text, and the author admits that the stories voiced represent an interpretation and presentation of the author as much as the subject of the study (Creswell, 2007).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined a constructivist world view as one in which "the investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the 'findings' are *literally created* as the investigation proceeds" (p. 48). The goal of this research is to rely on the students and to allow them to respond to two broad questions as an interpretation of their successes. It is their view of what success looks and feels like. The formal measure is the

application to the university which was previously achieved as documented by the study criteria to participate.

How this approach relates to this study. Qualitative approaches, offer both flexibility and robustness to the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994):

> Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study subjects in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (p. 2).

I attempted to stay true to the description above in terms of ISS. Students were interviewed on the college campus in their natural setting. The focus group allowed students to confirm their own messages with the larger group. While my personal experiences were bracketed and set aside, I found myself proud of what the students had accomplished as they talked their growth and success. It was through the use of the interviews, focus group, personal journaling, and bracketing my own experiences as a first generation college student that I was able to code and identify themes that portrayed student's lives.

Through bracketing, I attempted to suspend my own beliefs. While I have worked with TRiO students, I have never been served by a TRiO program. My career is in community college post-secondary education and I suspended my biases by setting them aside. I have never engaged in a research study of this magnitude and I recognized early on that journaling would allow me to suspend my thoughts and preconceived ideas of the student experiences.

Personal research perspective. This phenomenological study looked specifically at the successful experiences of first generation transfer students, served by a TRiO/SSS program, that have applied for admittance to a university. The interviews took place before the students made the actual transfer to the university in an effort to capture their experiences at the community college while they are still relevant and fresh. The ISS model allows for the in-depth study of a group of first generation transfer students to gain a better understanding of the transfer students' experiences in their pursuit of a successful transfer. In an interpretive biography, the researcher's presence is apparent in the text, and the author admits that the stories voiced represent an interpretation and presentation of the author as much as the subject of the study (Creswell, 2007).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined a constructivist world view as one in which "the investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the findings are *literally created* as the investigation proceeds" (p. 48). I have direct personal experience as a first generation college student. Being the first in my family to attend college, there is a deep rooted

understanding of the challenges that first generation students can face. My goal at

the time of community college entry was to become employable. I experienced

socioeconomic difficulties, lack of family support, and had below average

academic and college success skills upon entering college. At times, persistence

and completion of any degree seemed out of reach. Through a special program for

displaced homemakers, I was fortunate to access college resources that encouraged

persistence and completion. These resources helped me in the pursuit of transfer

from the community college to a university and finally earning a four-year degree.

As I continued my formal higher education, I could relate to the needs of

students, and I had an in-depth understanding of program design and teaching that

contributed to my community college profession. Having served as a TRiO

director for ten years I have experience in the development of resources and

services to students. Although eligible for TRiO services as a first generation

student, I was never served by a program. I can still place myself in these

students' stories and I have seen hundreds of students struggle through college,

some succeeding and others dropping out. In this study, I sought to share the

perspective of the students who have reached their goals and are ready to transfer.

The existing research has focused on the barriers and failure rate of first generation

students and it is through this study that the focus is on success and the persistence

of first generation students to earn a four-year degree.

History and major authors. The purpose of ISS is to study how people

connect meaning to their social situations. Authors contributing to this theory are

Neuman (2003), Creswell (2007) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994). Creswell (2007) stated that interpretive qualitative research recognizes the self-reflective nature of qualitative research and emphasizes the role of the researcher as an interpreter of the data who represents information from the research.

Research Method: Phenomenology

This study used the phenomenological method to explore the successes of first generation community college transfer students served by a TRiO program as they prepared to transfer to a four-year university. The purpose of this section is to describe phenomenology as a type of qualitative research and to present a rationale for using this method and the research study design.

Purpose of the method. The purpose of this section is to define phenomenology as a method and to present the rationale for using this method. The research design will be introduced in this section. Lichtman (2010) defined phenomenology as a type of qualitative research with philosophical roots emphasizing the study of a lived experience. Phenomenology is based on description and understanding of one or more individuals who have undergone a similar experience. Initially, when I began my research, I found that the literature on first generation students discussed the barriers associated with higher education. What I knew from my personal and professional community college background is that first generation students can be successful. I have great familiarity with federal TRiO programs and the resources and services provided to students after directing a program. It was with these thoughts that I identified the use of a

phenomenological method and my intent of portraying the successes of this population.

I began to research a phenomenological study as the type of method to portray the successes of first generation students. Phenomenological research is used to answer questions of meaning (Cohen, Kahn & Steeves, 2000). Creswell defined a phenomenological study as one that describes the meaning of a concept or phenomenon as described by a number of individuals. Phenomenology is most useful when the task at hand is to understand an experience as it is understood by those living it. The data on first generation students reports they are college dropouts; my goal was to depict and demonstrate, through a phenomenological study the successes of this disadvantaged population. Creswell (2007) stated that a product of a phenomenological study is a, "composite" description that presents an "essence" of the phenomenon, or the *essential, invariant structure*. The reader should come away from the phenomenon with the feeling, "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (Creswell, 2007, p. 62). I was excited to find this type of study that could portray the successes of first generation students.

Key concepts of this method. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research with its own methodological strategies. Merriam (2009) proposed that in order to find the essence of a phenomenon, one must show how complex meanings are built out of simple units of direct experience. The primary method for data

collection within a phenomenological study is the interview. Prior to the

participant interviews, Merriam (2009) suggested the following processes:

1. The researcher must explore his or her own experiences in part to examine

    dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal

    prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions. This is known as epoche and is

    the process in which the researcher refrains from judgment. Epoche is a

    Greek word; its meaning, refrain from judgment. "In the Epoche, the

    everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the

    phenomena are revisited" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33).

2. Prejudices and assumptions brought forward from the epoche process are

    then bracketed or temporarily set aside so the researcher can suspend their

    own beliefs. When belief is suspended, consciousness becomes heightened

    and can be examined.

    Merriam (2009) stated that, the phenomenological approach is well suited

for studying the affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences that

makes up peoples' lives. The act of being successful in college and preparing to

transfer from a community college to a university for first generation college

students is an intense human experience. Phenomenological research is designed

to get at the core of the individuals experience. I was seeking study participants

that could portray their experiences as first generation transfer students and

demonstrate their perseverance to succeed.

Rationale for selection. Currently, there is little data on the successes of first generation transfer students prior to the actual transfer. Finding out from successful pre-transfer students the essence of their phenomenon or lived experience is a worthy endeavor as it will assist college professionals in understanding what first generation transfer students experiences are and what it takes for them to be successful in their pursuit of transfer. The phenomenological study is appropriate and gives voice to the students and their direct experiences of success.

Research Procedures

This section describes the major steps, data needs, collection techniques, and the participant and site selection for this study.

Data needs. The data needs for this study are specific to community college transfer students, served by a TRiO/SSS program, who plan to transfer to a university in the next academic year. The goal of the phenomenological approach is to unearth the lived experience of participants. The lived experience is a term from Husserl, (Lichtman, 2010) who suggests it is the researchers' role to extract the essence of that experience by means of a reductionist process (p. 79). The students' stories related to their college experiences will need to be extracted.   The student's opinions about what worked, their personal beliefs, and what

made their experience successful in the students' interpretation will need to be told in order to get to the essence of the lived experience.

Data collection techniques. Data for this study will be collected through three distinct processes: (a) face-to-face semi-structured interviews, (b) a focus group and (c) journaling. The use of the semi-structured interview allows the researcher to ask follow up questions. These questions are imperative in order to conduct a phenomenological study that seeks to capture the essence of the student's lived experience related to first generation transfer success. Through an approved IRB protocol, students who meet the criteria will be invited to participate in the interview process. To better understand this population of successful first generation students, and get to the essence of their preparation for the transfer experience, face-to-face semi-structured interviews will be conducted with eight to ten community college students, who are purposely and previously selected, during their last year of attendance at the community college. The sample size is appropriate and leaves room for the possibility of a student who may need to drop from the study. Each participant will be interviewed on an RCC campus or in the local community one time, for one-to-two hours.

In addition to individual interviews, I will conduct a focus group, prior to the students leaving the community college, with the students that are willing to participate. According to Patton (2009):

A focus group usually consists of 6-8 participants who are gathered to discuss a topic. The group is led by a facilitator as opposed to an

interviewer. The facilitator describes the topic to be discussed and

attempts to create a non-threatening environment for the participants in

which all group members feel free to express their opinions, attitudes, and

experiences even if they differ from other participants in the group (p.

155).

Focus groups will provide a means of member checking and will assist me

in helping to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. This research will add to the

current literature from a new angle, focusing on what successful first generation

transfer students have experienced in an attempt to describe the essence of the

students' lived experiences.

Focus groups for this study will be conducted on the community

college campus in an attempt to bring the participants into the educational

setting in which they are familiar. A predetermined set of questions (also

known as a questioning route) will be followed to ensure that all relevant

aspects of the topic are discussed (Patton, 2009). As suggested by Patton

(2009), the facilitator will probe for additional information when necessary.

Participant selection. Creswell (2005) stated, "In a qualitative inquiry,

the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth

exploration of a central phenomenon" (p. 203). In purposeful sampling,

researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the

central phenomenon (Creswell, 2005). The goal is to seek participants who are

information rich (Patton, 2009). In order to understand the phenomena of a

successful transfer student, and to eventually arrive at the essence of the students'

experiences as transfer students, homogeneous sampling will be used. Participants

will be selected who possess a similar trait or characteristic; the researcher

purposefully samples individuals based on their membership in a subgroup that has

defining characteristics (Creswell, 2005). The group of first generation students,

who have received services from the TRiO/SSS program at RCC and who intend

to transfer to a university characterizes the identified subgroup, therefore making

homogenous sampling the identified strategy for participant selection.

In order to gain access to these students, I will seek to identify specific

TRiO/SSS students who have submitted an admissions application to a four-year

school. Students on track to transfer in fall of 2015 will be invited to participate in

the study. Using the approved IRB protocol to invite students to participate, I will

seek to identify at least eight to ten students for the study. In an effort to engage

the group of students over a year long period, I will select subjects from the pool

who have agreed to participate for the entirety of the study. Students will be

interviewed during their final term at RCC. Interviews will be conducted on

campus. Interviews will be conducted on campus, in a familiar place, in an

attempt to put students at ease.

Site selection. The setting for this study is Rogue Community

College (RCC). RCC is located in Josephine and Jackson County in

southern Oregon. Data from the Rogue Community College at a Glance

(2012) indicated that there are currently more than 11,000 students enrolled

in credit bearing courses in the 2011-12 academic year. That number

represents the full-time equivalent (FTE) of 5,751 students. The college

has three campuses in one district. The original campus, Redwood, is

where the TRiO/Student Support Services project is located. Students will

be selected from RCC who have participated in the TRiO/SSS program and

who are on track to transfer to a four-year institution fall of 2015.

RCC was selected as the study site. TRiO/SSS has existed on the

Redwood Campus for fifteen years and has continuously served first

generation transfer students. Upon approval from RCC in conjunction with

the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), students

selected for this study will have received services from the TRiO/Student

Support Services project located at RCC and they must have a goal of

transferring to the university the following fall of 2015. Students who have

applied to any university, with the intent to transfer in fall of the 2015 will

be invited to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted between June and August of 2014. Data

collection had three components:

1) A focus group was conducted at the TRiO/SSS facility and seven students

attended. Following the focus group topic guide (Appendix B) the session

was recorded and later transcribed. Hand written notes were taken by the researcher during the session. The focus group was two hours in length.

2) Individual interviews were conducted with 10 students who met the original study criteria. Interviews were conducted mostly on the college campus and lasted 1-2 hours. The interview question guide (Appendix C) consisted of broad and specific questions. All seven of the focus group attendees participated in the individual interviews. One student disclosed during the interview that he was not first generation. Data from this student was omitted from the study.

3) I spent time journaling after each interview in an effort to recall the specifics of each situation, the moods of the students, and the non-verbal observations of the research participants.

The focus group. Seven students participated in the focus group. We met in the TRiO/SSS classroom; snacks and beverages were provided to help students feel comfortable. Even prior to student introductions, it became clear that the students all knew one another. The format of the focus group allowed students to express their successful experiences at college in an open forum. The students expressed sincere gratitude for the experience in TRiO/SSS. The level of support from student to student was notable. One student said to another, "I believed in you long before you ever did." During the focus group several students talked about their struggles with health or family issues, including death, accidents, surgery, and long lasting medical conditions. In all of these health related

incidences, the students stated they would not be sitting in the focus group today, without the support of the TRiO/SSS staff.

The interviews.

Nine first generation students participated in the study. The semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted in private and all but one of the interviews were held on the college campus. The interviews were confidential, using pseudonyms to protect students' identities. Two primary questions led the interviews: (a) What successes have you experienced as a first generation transfer student? and (b) What activities and resources provided by TRiO/SSS contributed to your successes? It was interesting to hear the students reflect on their success and experiences. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Students openly expressed their successes during the interviews. Students expressed a sincere gratitude for the TRiO. Several students had overwhelming emotions during the interviews as they talked about their successes and the essence of their experiences. Their stories demonstrated how hard they had worked to reach success and overcome the typical barriers experienced by first generation students.

The journal. I used journaling in an attempt to document the mood of the students, the environment, and the feelings that transpired during the interviews and focus groups. This method proved useful in allowing me to express my own thoughts and feelings about the rich data expressed by some of the students. I often found myself emotionally struck by the amazing stories shared and the successes of the students. Hermeneutics is a term used in phenomenology where

there is an interaction between the researcher and what is being interpreted
(Lichtman 2010). Telling the stories of the students and describing the success of
their perceived experiences required the use of hermeneutics. I used this model to
tell stories about the successes of these first generation students. Each interview
and the focus group were transcribed and the journal notes reviewed. A topic list
was created and abbreviated to create the codes. The codes were placed into
categories. From this process the primary themes of the research study emerged.
All collected data will be kept and protected as identified in the approved protocol
by the IRB of Oregon State University.

Measures of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness and strategies to ensure soundness are essential
components of qualitative research. Efforts were made to ensure the findings
accurately represented the participants' experiences. Methods triangulation
was appropriate as two sets of data were collected from the face-to-face, semi-
structured personal interviews and the focus group. Both sets of data were
recorded and transcribed verbatim and segments of the transcription were checked
randomly to ensure accuracy in the transcription process. Member checking was
employed as an additional strategy.   The transcribed documents were sent directly
to the study participants. The participants reviewed the transcript and had
opportunity to clarify, omit, or make changes to the transcribed documents and
emerging themes.

Because of my long term employment at RCC and my experience with federal TRiO programs, every effort was made to set aside and bracket any assumptions, prejudices, and viewpoints. "Bracketing typically refers to an investigator's identification of vested interests, personal experience, cultural factors, assumptions, and hunches that could influence how he or she views the study's data" (Fischer, 2009 p.583) Bracketing was done early on and then again throughout the data analysis. It was appropriate to keep a set of side notes when thoughts came up and assumptions might have been made.

Before I began the research I considered my biases and pre-conceived ideas about first generation transfer students and TRiO/SSS programs. I questioned my assumptions about the students, based on my previous experiences working with this population. I forced myself to reveal my hunches about first generation students' successes and failures. I was able to identify the following hunches:

1. Students fail because they allow problems to get in the way of their success and they give up. Someone lacking confidence may drop out and leave college prior to successfully transferring.

2. Students who have access to TRiO/SSS have all the resources they need and should have no problem succeeding.

3. Because TRiO/SSS serves only 171 students each year, I had a hunch the students would have adequate support to succeed.

Data analysis. Creswell (2009) indicated that the plan for
analyzing data must have several components. In an effort to analyze and
evaluate the interviews and focus groups with the participants, the
following strategies will be used to analyze the data. First, the data must
be prepared for analysis. Interviews will be transcribed and organized. I
will read through all of the transcripts in order to glean a general sense of
the data and reflect on its meaning. Note taking will be employed at this
level as I get a general sense of the data. The data will be questioned, in an
effort to consider what the study participants are saying. A topic list will
be developed during the process of data analysis. Upon reading every
transcribed interview, the topics will be abbreviated as codes. These codes
will be turned into categories through the process of grouping topics that
relate to each other. Once the codes are placed into categories, I will seek
to determine prominent themes that emerge from the data. These themes
will be descriptive in nature and seek to capture the essence of the students'
transfer experience.

Strategies to ensure soundness. In an effort to ensure soundness of the
data, methods triangulation will be used. Methods triangulation is appropriate as
the focus is on collecting two sets of data (personal interviews and focus groups)
from the same participants. Due to the nature of the study the oral interviews and
focus groups that will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. Segments of the
transcription will be checked randomly to ensure accuracy in the transcribing

process. In a second effort to ensure soundness of the data, member checking will be employed to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings, in this case the emerging themes. The participants in the study will have an opportunity to review the transcription and analysis to determine if the data collection methods were sound and representative of the participants. In the review process, participants will clarify what they meant and changes will be made, if necessary, to the data and themes that emerged.

A phenomenological study seeks to determine the essence of the lived experience, therefore, the use of rich, thick description to convey the findings will be explored (Creswell, 2009). The description of the data will be used to convey the findings of the data. Creswell (2009) states that the many perspectives, defined by the data, about a theme will emerge; the results of the data become more realistic and rich, adding validity to the findings.

Strategies to protect human subjects. This study will comply with the National Institute of Health (NIH) standards. These standards have long been established in order to protect human participants during research studies. Oregon State University is protected by the Institutional Review Board (IRB); this board is responsible for ensuring that the NIH standards are upheld whenever a study engages human participants. I have taken the online training and received the *Certification of Education for the Ethical Use of Human Participants in Research Projects in 2007*.

Summary

This section described the philosophical approach, the research methods, and the research design. The use of a phenomenological study to capture first generation community college transfer experiences of students is appropriate and necessary to get to the essence of the successful experiences. The purpose of interpretive social science is to understand social life and discover how people construct meaning and it lends itself to qualitative research and allows the researcher to interpret the data.

This qualitative study used the Interpretive Social Science (ISS) approach. The study sought to explore the successful experiences of first generation community college transfer students. Phenomenological research is rooted in the theory that truth and understanding are embedded in experience. Studying the students' successful experiences prior to leaving the community college allowed the students to reflect on their personal and collective experiences and is an appropriate use of the phenomenological method.

In keeping with the ISS tradition, I outlined my own experiences as a first generation college student. I disclosed my intentions at college and my pursuit and completion of degrees with the help of programs similar to TRIO. I was able to capture my professional connection as an educator interested in program design, policy, and as an advocate for students. I have worked at RCC for years and I have no working relationship with any of the study participants or the staff employed in TRiO.

This study involved collecting data from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and journaling. All data was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Member checking was employed for accuracy. The responses were read over and over and a topic list developed. The topics were abbreviated as codes and the codes grouped into categories. Five themes emerged from the data that are presented in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter presents the data findings collected from the participants

served by the TRiO/SSS program at RCC. The purpose of this research study was

to explore the successful experiences of first generation students served by a

TRiO/SSS program who were prepared to transfer from the community college to

a four-year university. Three collection methods were used, (a) focus group, (b)

face-to-face semi-structured interviews, and (c) journal entries; data was collected

from all three methods. The first section of this chapter focuses on the TRiO/SSS

program at RCC, student demographics, and snippets of the students' experiences

as first generation college students. The second section identifies the predominant

findings that emerged from the data and connects them to the literature.

TRiO/Student Support Services

The TRIO/SSS program is in its 15th year of operation at RCC. Students

receiving services from this program must meet at least one of the three part

criteria set by the USDOE: first generation, low income, or a student with

documented disabilities. The federal program serves 171 students per academic

year and the goal is to achieve persistence at the community college and eventually

transfer to a four-year university to complete a Bachelor's degree.

TRiO/SSS has three full time staff, including a director, advisor, and

program specialist. The program is located on the Redwood Campus of RCC and

housed in a building on the edge of campus. Facilities include a student lounge

complete with a kitchenette, electronic resources, a quiet study room, a small

classroom, and private offices for each staff member. The program hires eligible student employees who provide peer tutoring services to participants taking academic courses. Other primary services include: academic and transfer advising, university tours to Oregon four-year public and private schools, scholarship application assistance, and courses for college and transfer success.

       Demographics. Students participating in this study were enrolled at RCC and had applied and been admitted to a four-year university for fall of 2015. The following demographics apply to the research participants.
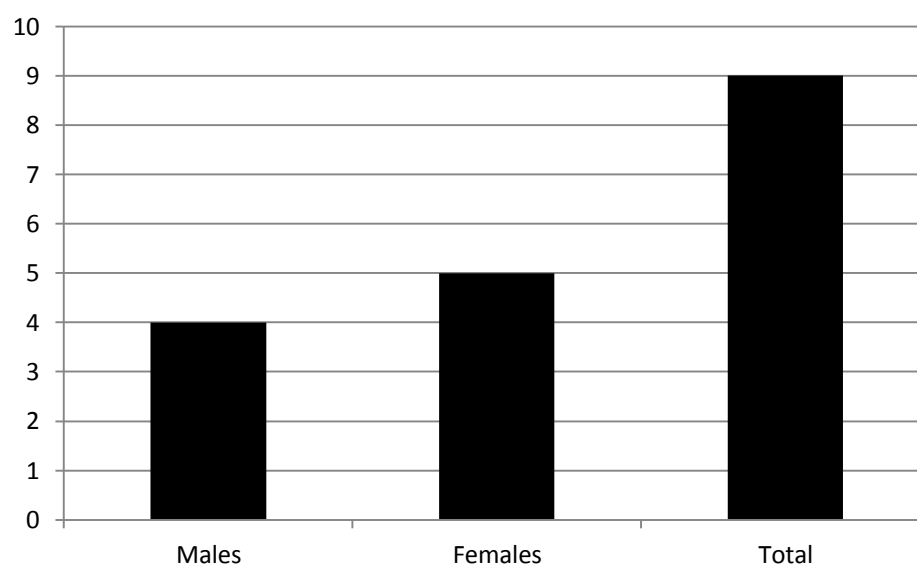

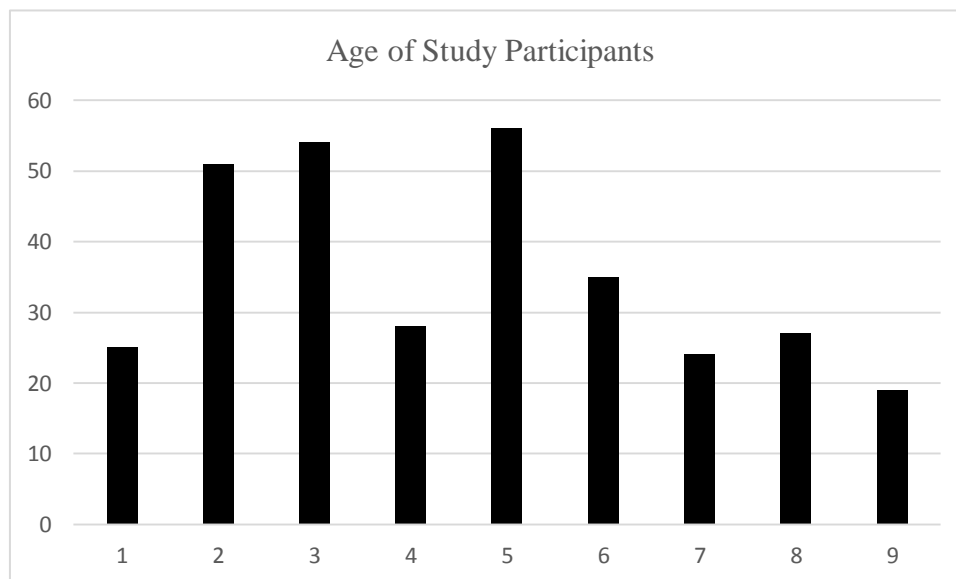
Figure 4.1 Gender of Participants

Age of Study Participants

Figure 4.2 Age of Participants

Table 4.1

Transfer School for Study Participants 2014-2015

Institution	Number of Students
Eastern Oregon University	1
Linfield College	1
Oregon State University	2
Oregon Tech (Wilsonville)	1
Oregon Tech (Klamath Falls)	1
Southern Oregon University	3

Pseudonyms. The participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and to maintain student confidentiality. The following names were chosen: Bruce, Kelly, Duke, Teri, Elizabeth, Jacob, Madeline, Victor, and Dora.

All of the study participants are first generation college students. First generation status is defined by neither parent having earned a bachelor's degree. In the *Moving Beyond Access* (2008) report, first generation status includes students whose parents have some college, postsecondary certificates, or associate's degrees but not bachelor's degrees. Each student was asked in the face-to-face interview to tell me about their background as a first generation college student. Snippets of their stories are depicted in the table below.

Table 4.2

First Generation Backgrounds

Bruce 51 years Male	"College wasn't something that was encouraged, promoted, or even discussed when I was in high school. I graduated from a school that was woefully inadequate, unprepared, and unorganized as far as college preparedness. I did take the SATs, but I don't remember why. I was offered a scholarship, a substantial scholarship to play soccer for a college. But it wasn't even half of the tuition and I had no idea back then what to do about the other $14,000 or $15,000 I

was going to need."

Dora 19 years Female	"My dad went to college but he didn't finish. He just, was so interested in everything that he would spin himself out and burn out. He went to college in his late teens, early twenties. When I was about 4 years old, he got paid by the Job Council to go back to school. He chose the truck driving program and he has been doing that for 15 years. It is a bit disappointing. He is really smart and intellectual. He could have become a doctor and done something else."
Elizabeth 24 years Female	"When I was looking at graduating high school, I was going to go to the Art Institute in Portland. The reason I wanted to do this was because I was extremely involved in my school yearbook and newspaper. I was the editor in chief for both and did all of the design concepts and managed the teams that created those publications, and um, it just all fell through. I was two credits short for my high school graduation. I moved into my own apartment while I was still a senior in high school. It's one of the biggest mistakes I ever made. I kind of got thrown off track with work for a while and then I got pregnant and had a little boy. Work deterred me more than anything else. Umm, I had to pay for living and that I hadn't ever experienced. It is a sad, sad day when you realize there isn't any toilet paper in the house because your mother hasn't purchased it."
Jacob 28 years Male	"My father was an educated person, but he didn't go to college. He went to some technical schools and got some certificates in machining, manufacturing, and welding. He never got a degree. He always owned and operated his own business; a fabrication and welding shop building motorcycles and stuff like that. I remember at a young age, my sister was going to college. She was my older half-sister on my dad's side and he thought that was a waste of time. I remember him telling me that school is a waste of time."
Kelly 56 years Female	"My dad's parents were both school teachers. My dad always wanted to teach, but he ended up a county purchasing agent. My mom used to say I was the one that should have gone to college. They didn't have the resources. I wanted to go to school but it just wasn't possible. I was fortunate because I was working at a hospital while in high school in Medical Records. From there I had

an opportunity to take a correspondence course. There were no computers. I started my first job in 1974 and matter of fact, it is my 40th anniversary in health care. I dove right in, took the correspondence course and got my certificate in Health Information way back then. I was the youngest in the country to get the certification. That was the extent of my education other than a lot of continuing education for medical transcriptionist."

Madeline 25 years Female	"My mom went back to school when she was in her thirties. She got her Associates degree in Crescent City. My dad, I don't think he graduated high school. So, we've been, and I don't say this with any shame, but we have always been on welfare. I think there is a generational habit that we just kind of stick to. I am on food stamps right now, but the goal is to get off of them, right, get a Bachelor's degree and kind of break the pattern. My dad had many different jobs like tree trimming, cab driving, and my mom worked at a bar once and a mini market until she went back to school and got her Associate's degree. There was never instability, there was just a lot of moving, different houses, some much shadier than others. A lot of this you never realize as a kid, that it is a little bit crazy. There are those kids and they have one big house, a big car, a big yard and they lived there for years, with the same dog. It's just so different."
Teri 35 years Female	"I always thought I would go to college and my dad actually did. He has a degree but I didn't grow up with him. I went to college for two years right out of high school and it wasn't right for me. I had a bad car accident and that really messed with my grades and messed up my focus. I looked at ways I could live in another country and work and survive there. I went to Germany and lived for a year as a nanny for a German family. Then I came back to Medford and worked as a disc jockey. I got bored so I went back to Germany for another year. When I came back I worked for the DJ company again. And then I was seeing this guy and I got pregnant. We got married, not necessarily the best decision, but it happened. I have the most amazing little boy in the world out of the whole ordeal."
Victor 27 years Male	"I don't know that I was ever encouraged to go to college. No one ever talked about it and no one cared. I went to school because I was bored. I graduated high school in 2004 so I waited awhile. I took a few classes in California. When I moved here I started working and then I got bored so I thought I would try college again."

Duke 51 years Male	"My parents met in Bakersfield CA. Being raised by Russians is completely different than Americans and it is not a success oriented way of raising kids. You are a worker, a regular person, you are no better than anyone else. My dad was very blue collar, worked in a printing factory for 30 years until they went out of business and he lost his pension. I grew up during the time that the father worked and the mother stayed home and took care of the kids, which is kind of rare these days but was quite common in the 1960s. So my mother was a stay at home and she had a part time job at Sears once in a while, just to get away. We were raised lower middle class and very poor. We struggled to get by and we never had excess. I would get a pair of Levis every year and a couple of new t-shirts and that was about it."

Predominant Themes

Broad, general questions are typically used in a phenomenological study

in order to gather data that will lead to the descriptions of the experiences and

provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants (Creswell,

2007). The rich conversations were read repeatedly and notes were taken in an

effort to understand the phenomenon portrayed by the students. Extensive review

of the focus group and interview transcripts led to a number of emerging themes.

Topics were identified and lists created. The topics were turned to codes and the

codes placed into categories. The following themes emerged:

1. TRiO/SSS provided a community for students that sometimes acted as

   family

2. Access to TRiO/SSS services had a positive impact on student success and

   transfer

3. A sense of belonging to TRiO contributed to student's educational success

4. Navigating college and how to "do" school was learned at TRiO and RCC

5. Student's confidence to complete the Bachelor's degree was increased by their utilization of the TRiO/SSS program services

Theme one: TRiO/SSS provided a community for students that sometimes acted as family. All of the students expressed what it felt like to be part of TRiO. From walking across the campus and arriving at the front door of the building, they described a sense of coming home. Kelly said:

> It was like I would show up and I was home; people wanted to know how my day was. You had a living room, a kitchen and a bathroom; it was like home. People were interested and you could ask a serious question or shoot the breeze. Everything was there to do what you needed.

Students knew they would be greeted by the staff in a warm and welcoming way. Students expressed that TRiO was like a safe harbor. Some stated they were not comfortable out on the college campus due to age, health, or social issues. For them, TRiO was a safe place where people were non-judgmental and willing to help. These students utilized TRiO as their home base and frequented the location daily. One participant, Elizabeth, said:

> When people come over to your house you feed and water them. That is how you show them you are welcoming them into your space and caring for them. It would make sense that this would be a huge factor, that warm fuzzy feeling that students get when they

come to TRiO. Some of their basic needs are cared for and from there they can do everything else.

Author Vincent Tinto (2012) identified measures and services that provide support to first generation students and stated, "TRiO programs provide a "home" within the campus where students feel comfortable to access and receive services." Kelly said, "The people in TRiO were family like; I knew I could trust them. I would even leave my rolling backpack and laptop there and I knew it was safe." Teri stated, "I felt welcomed and supported; I knew I could go there and feel at home amongst people who are friendly and there for me if I needed something." It was a common theme amongst the study participants to feel at home and cared for. Madeline said:

> I was excited to tell Deb about my achievement scholarship. It was like she was proud of me. There is a parental and familial piece with TRiO. They take ownership and joy in seeing students succeed. This was something I was always missing. I have my parents who are proud of me and what I have done and where I have worked. TRiO is like this informed parent and they know how hard it is to get scholarships and good grades. They are on top of it and really proud of me in a way that my parents can never be.

Research states that first generation students face difficulties due to a lack of family support. Students who are first in their family to transfer from community college to a university lack role models and familial support (Engle,

2006). Consistent with the literature related to the lack of familial support, the participants shared a common theme related to TRiO and the services available to them. When problems would arise, the students knew they could walk across the campus and a TRiO staff member or peer would help them problem solve the situation or simply give support. Duke stated, "all through it, it was the TRiO program that kept me grounded; it's like a safe place to go where I wasn't judged." Teri shared:

> It's not just the staff, but when students go there, they are always willing to help each other. It really fosters a sense of family and a sense of belonging. TRiO fosters good relations with faculty and students. The TRiO staff are able to solve problems immediately. You don't get put on the back burner and get the run around.

Madeline added:

> I feel really similar in that I don't have family here, so TRiO acts like a support system where I can go with many different issues. I was planning to transfer and I wasn't going to have my Math 111 class finished before the deadline. I took the problem to Deb and she took it upon herself to write a letter to the Admissions office vouching that I was in the class and doing well. She faxed the letter and a copy of my schedule. She was in my corner, which was really nice as I felt kind of helpless before, wondering what I could do. Without Deb's advocacy I would have been ineligible for

scholarships. You can talk to the TRiO staff about a variety of

issues and they just help. Especially when you are panicking, it is

good to have someone in your court.

Theme two: Access to TRiO/SSS services had a positive impact on

student success and transfer. In an effort to capture an understanding of the first

generation student's experiences, the study participants were asked to identify the

top three services that contributed to their transfer success.

Figure 4.3. Top Three Services

Top Three Services for Success

Legend:
- ■ University Tours
- ■ TRiO/SSS Lounge
- ■ Problem Solving
- ■ Peer Tutoring
- ■ Casual Check-ins
- Advising: Academic & Transfer
- ■ TRiO/SSS Services
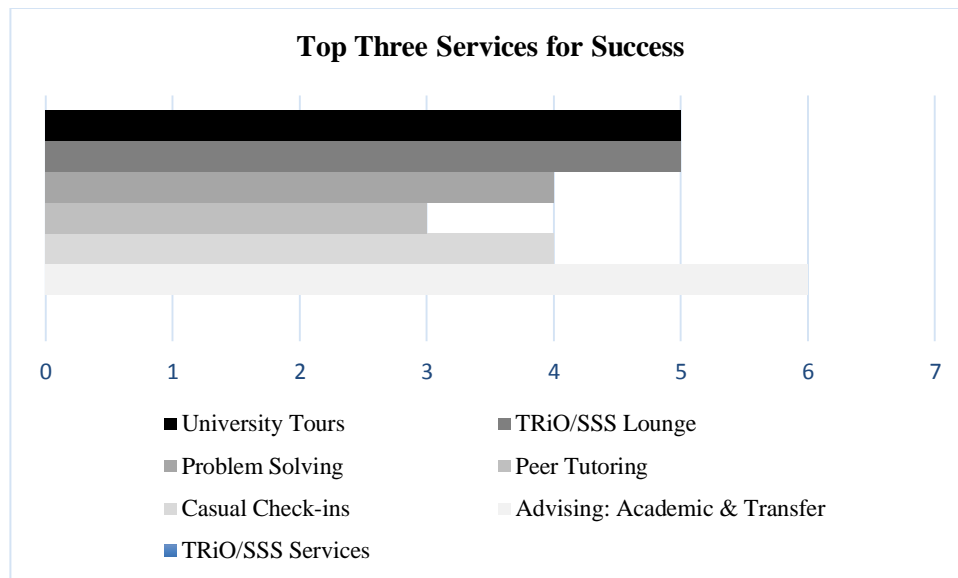
1. Academic & transfer advising. Transferring students from the community college to the four-year university has long been a primary mission of the community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Grubb, 1991). An important aspect of transfer preparation is having an understanding of both the community college and university admissions and degree requirements. First generation students accessing TRiO/SSS receive advising services that incorporate the transfer requirements for the university while the student progresses at the community college.

Academic and transfer advising was the top service utilized by this group of first generation transfer students. Madeline said, "Advising for sure and that is not just limited to Deb. I consider Colletta an advisor too as she would tear apart my scholarship essays and help me rewrite and restructure my applications." Dora was applying for out of state colleges

and she praises the TRiO staff for helping her with her crazy college applications and giving her the encouragement to go forward. Teri states, "I had a moment of realizing I had to take three science classes again. Sitting down and talking with the TRiO advisor who understands the university school requirements was very helpful."

Community colleges have been criticized for low transfer rates of students and their ineffectiveness in transferring students from the community college to a four-year university (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Daugherty, 1994; Zwerling, 1976). Strong advising services allow students to progress in their preparation for transfer as they complete credits toward the chosen degree or transfer goal. Jacob said, "If there was transfer questions, an issue, or I needed to know what classes equated to what, Deb was always on top of it for me, Jodi as well, they got answers and took care of it." Several students reflected on transfer issues between the community college and university. Madeline was told to wait and apply only after she completed the college math class at the community college. She learned just two weeks prior to the university application deadline that she could apply while the course was in progress. She had a short timeline, but submitted the admissions application on time and received additional scholarship funding for her first year at the university. Students talked about the ease of advising and the ability to communicate with the TRiO staff and have continuous service versus telling their story over and over to

campus advisors. Furthermore, students appreciated the ability to drop in on a casual basis and still receive advising services.

2. University tours. TRiO/SSS university tours were the second top service selected by the study participants. University tours, coordinated and paid for by TRiO, allow students to visit four-year schools in the Oregon. Students utilize these trips to shop for colleges across the state; once a school is selected, the students can continue using the trip service to take care of transfer business at the four-year school. Victor stated:

> I have been on two tours with TRiO which is great. I feel like I know the university campus and where my buildings are. Deb even hooked us up with a former TRiO student attending the university and he showed us all the cool stuff from a student perspective. That was awesome!

Bruce added:

I knew the direction I wanted to go and I thought there was only one college, one university that was going to be able to accommodate me. At the time I was still trying to decide between Ecology and Wildlife Fisheries. I jumped on my first TRiO tour and I hadn't been there 10 minutes and I knew this wasn't where I wanted to be!

In Flaga's qualitative study (2006) interviews with students led to the development of the five dimensions of transition. The second dimension of

transition was connecting and identified the importance of relationships with others in an academic, social, and physical environment. The TRiO university tours are tailored for students to connect with four-year faculty, staff, and advisors. Students are transported by their community college TRiO advisor and connected with university staff and former TRiO students to acclimate them to the culture of the university, the entrance requirements, and processes affiliated with transfer. Students commented that even if they decided not to attend a particular school, the organized tours helped students know what to look for at another campus as they continued to develop their transfer plan. Dora said, "I did take a campus tour and it was helpful." She continued to describe how helpful TRiO was with out of state applications. While most students transfer in state, TRiO encouraged Dora to continue to pursue her out-of-state ventures. For Madeline she knew where she would attend but didn't have the resources to drive there, "so each time TRiO travels to my transfer school, I jump on board and make the trip my own."

3. **TRiO lounge.** All nine students had something positive to say about the TRiO student lounge. The physical space sits on the edge of a forest across the campus from the hustle and bustle of student life. Several students stated that they actually enjoy the walk across campus or they park their car at TRiO and start and end their day in the TRiO lounge. The facility includes a large space, complete with a kitchen area. A refrigerator, small kitchen appliances and kitchen sinks allows students to manage their food needs. The cupboards hold snacks, coffee, and condiments. Computers, iPads, wireless access, and printers are available for

students use. There is a quiet study room and a small classroom. Both rooms have large white boards to accommodate peer tutoring needs and the ability to process math problems on the white boards. Elizabeth said:

> I know everyone has joked about the refrigerator, but in all seriousness, it is true; the sink, the fridge, the toaster, I feel taken care of. I begin every morning in TRiO. I get my coffee and I have an informal check-in with whoever is there. They are interested in knowing how I am doing and they answer questions or give me feedback and that is just fantastic.

Seven of the nine students commented on the informal services they received by accessing the lounge. Dora said, "I can be just be doing my work and have a question; TRiO does not require that I set an appointment and stockpile my questions." Duke said, "well first and foremost is the study area with computers; I prefer to use the TRiO space for studying, it's pleasant, never crowded, quiet, and a good place to do my homework."

Jacob said:

> I go there every day and especially now because I tutor five hours a day. And then I just hang out there because, ever since day one, I don't really put myself out there to interact. You won't find me in the cafeteria shooting the breeze with everybody. I don't have time for that; and I'm not here for that. I have only a select few people that I actually talk to. Not that I am introverted or anti-social at all,

I just have different priorities. I need a quiet space to get my work done and I can use the resources over there. TRiO has everything I need!

Victor works as a full time employee and took most of his RCC classes online. He came to campus for a math class each term and sometimes had a gap in his schedule. If he didn't need tutoring services he would spend his time in TRiO using the computers and printers to do homework. He expressed disappointment that the TRiO workshops were offered primarily during the day when he was working, but he understood that he is not your average college student due to his full-time work commitments and taking mostly online courses. Dora said, "at first I came here for advising and then I became friends with the coffee maker and then I came here more and more."

Students expressed a level of comfort in the TRiO lounge. The services of TRiO are located in one place and less populated than other campus resource centers. Dora shared that she did most of her studying in TRIO. She likes to do math, upper level calculus, on the white boards using color erase pens; "TRiO is my place to go!"

It is clear based on student feedback that the services offered in this TRiO program have impacted their ability to succeed. Students feel comfortable and at home in TRiO. TRiO staff provided a sense of family for first generation transfer students. Elizabeth said,

TRiO helps expose students to scholarships and they take students on

university tours; these are both activities that one would hope a parent

would provide for their kids or at least be involved in. I don't think this

happens as much as it should or even a notable percentage. TRiO is

providing services and doing things my parents didn't do; and my parents

are not bad parents.

Overall, the students communicated feelings of support and gave clear

examples of how TRiO academic and transfer advising impacted their success.

Students placed a high value on these services. Students made necessary

connections at Oregon universities and solidified their transfer intent and goals.

Finally, they had access to a the TRiO lounge where they utilized resources, made

connections, and found people that cared on a collective level about the student's

success.

Theme three: A sense of belonging to TRiO contributed to student's

educational success. Much of the research on first generation students identifies

them as college students that come to college underprepared and lacking the skills

and systems knowledge to succeed at college. It was in the early 1960s that the

United States government developed the federally funded TRiO programs to

provide equal opportunity for disadvantaged students

(http://ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/. The purpose of TRiO/SSS is to help

economically disadvantaged, first generation students, and students with

documented disabilities to succeed in college and earn a bachelor's degree. It is with this purpose in mind that these grant programs are designed.

Helping students experience a sense of belonging is not identified through a particular set of services. Belonging is more of a feeling and that comes from building relationships and camaraderie sometimes through exploration, personality assessments, and a deeper understanding of self and others. Several of the students held college student employment positions and not only participated in TRiO but served as peer tutor to other students in the program. One student stated, "I feel really honored to be part of the TRiO program both as a tutor and a student; the support, sense of belonging, and knowing that I could go there at any time and have someone to talk to, or a quiet space, or that anything I might need was within reach." Bruce said, "I felt like one of their grown kids; I like to keep my circle small and invest in that circle and not have it get too broad. I was able to do that in TRiO."

Seven students expressed that they felt inadequate when they started college. One student described the feeling of being an imposter. She remembers trying to acclimate and wondering sometimes if college was really something she could do. Other students had circumstances or conditions that made them question their ability to be in college. Another student, with loan debt said she almost quit school because of the loan amount she had taken and the message she received during standard college loan counseling. She was told she would run out of money before ever completing her education and she began to feel hopeless about her

circumstance. Upon meeting with TRiO, she was able to talk about the debt load.

Instead of quitting college, she created a transfer plan, invested her time outside of

classes and studying to complete scholarship applications, and identified a timeline

for transfer and future degree attainment. Madeline noted, "Colletta was the first

person who didn't view my loan debt as a death sentence." The student continued

to describe how previously she had felt like an outcast based on the financial

choices she had made regarding loans. At TRiO she could talk candidly about her

loan debt and her plan to reduce the financial need by writing scholarships and

earning more free money for school. For Madeline, this was a point where she

really felt like she belonged and that she was capable of making smart money

choices associated with college.

There was a general consensus amongst the study participants that they

belong at college. They know now that college is their right and by utilizing

services and resources, investing time and effort, and taking responsibility they

feel like they belong. When asked if she felt a sense of belonging, Teri said:

Absolutely! I don't really have a lot of support for what I am doing outside

RCC. TRiO was my biggest support. There are all sorts of emotional

issues that go on with my medical condition. I have dealt with this at

school and especially the last term. There are times I don't want to leave

my house. I know that when I go to TRiO they are not going look at me

funny and they are not going to say anything. They are still going to be my

friends and still be there for me and help me feel like I belong when sometimes I don't feel that way. TRiO is a really good thing.

Theme four: Navigating college and how to "do" school was learned at TRiO and RCC. The focus group allowed students to build on what each other had to say. In addition to their verbal statements, there was body language demonstrated by students indicating that they agreed with one another. One student would make a comment and several others would nod their heads in agreement. Elizabeth talked about how she is now aware of the TRiO programs on a large scale and that she will look for similar services at the university. She reflects on her experience and emphasizes that because she has sought out services at Rogue, she will take the same approach and seek out new services and opportunities as she progresses in her education at the university. Teri said:

I know for me, I will take forward a few things I learned. One is confidence. While I was never lacking in confidence, I was definitely aware of my medical condition. I have so much more confidence to say, hey, I am not a freak, I am a human being who has a condition and people accept me for that. It was nice to see all of the people at school, that have known me for a year without a flair up and when it got really bad, they weren't staring at me funny. People really genuinely cared and had genuine concern for me. When I let the condition control my life it gets worse because stress is a huge contributor.

At least seven students talked about feeling worthy of earning a

degree. Duke said:

For me, the one thing I got is kind of nebulous, it is not anything specific,

the feeling that I belonged and that education is for me. I am not an

outsider looking in, which is how I felt when I came here. I am

transferring to the next school now and I have more scholarships and grants

that I wouldn't have had it I hadn't joined TRiO because I didn't know

about them. It is the simple fact that I am worthy of getting an education.

That is kind of where it starts.

Other students talked about being proactive and in charge of their

education. Madeline learned that TRiO rewards people who are hands on. She

talked about seeking other services on campus and found a cookie cutter approach.

Oftentimes a general advisor wouldn't look me up in the system and they would

approach my questions from a generalist point of view. Madeline said, "TRiO

does a good job of recognizing proactive students and they will work just as hard

as the student to find the answers. Kelly said:

> Proactive is the word I was looking for earlier. I think I have a
>
> better understanding of the whole system. I was really confused
>
> when I came here. It was everything. What is the difference
>
> between grants, scholarships, and financial aid? It was the higher
>
> education system – core requirements versus everything. It was
>
> confusing for a while and I was going on everyone else's

recommendations. Now I can navigate on my own. I am much more knowledgeable in the choices I make going forward.

Four students mentioned accountability. They recognized the importance of being accountable to their faculty, themselves, and campus support teams like TRiO. They talked about strategies for success and how something as simple as getting to know their classroom faculty made a huge difference. Jacob said, "Be an adult and have relationships with your teachers; that is something I learned during my first term experience and it has been key for my success."

Students talked about the importance of faculty relationships. Fostering positive relationships between school faculty and TRiO/SSS programs has been a long standing program objective. Faculty involvement was mentioned by seven of the nine students. RCC faculty provided scholarship recommendations, career guidance, and support when students have struggled. Several students received scholarships while attending Rogue and they learned through TRiO and their college faculty the importance of this revenue stream to fund college. Four of the nine students expressed their satisfaction when they received college honors, awards, achieving high grade point averages, and being on the President's or Dean's list. Jacob described a situation where the faculty person was planting seeds. The faculty person made a suggestion and Jacob would say, "Really, do you think I can do that." The faculty person would encourage him and say, "You can do anything you want." And the seeds would grow. It became apparent over

the course of the interviews, that the relationships built with TRiO staff and other RCC faculty were paramount to student's success.

Theme five: Student's confidence to complete the Bachelor's degree was increased by their utilization of the TRiO/SSS program services. Meeting each student and hearing their stories, including their struggles and successes, was moving in many ways. My current administrative position at RCC has diminished my contact with students. I was reminded, by each student, what it takes to succeed at college. College is not easy and it is even harder for those who don't understand higher education systems. In a 2005 study, Pascarella and Terenzini found that students who start a community college are 15% less likely to attain a bachelor's degree than those who start at a four-year school. First generation students come from low income families whose parents do not have postsecondary experience. These students arrive at college with little or no support, low academic skills and no knowledge of college systems or finances to pay for college.

I asked students if they felt confident, based on their community college and TRiO experiences, that they would transfer and complete their bachelor's degree. All nine participants gave a resounding yes! The table below displays the student's responses.

Table 4.3

Confidence Levels to Transfer

Elizabeth - Yes	"A major part of my confidence is the Ford Family Foundation scholarship that Colletta was a big part of and helped me achieve. She reviewed and edited a dozen times before the final edition was submitted. She was a huge part of

the process and its creation. The essay is what got me the interview and from there it was all up to me. She gave me a huge pep talk before I went to the interview and she has consistently provided support to me."

Teri - Yes

"I do feel confident. Like Elizabeth, the Ford Foundation Scholarship helps a lot. I am completing my certificate in Massage Therapy at Rogue and transferring to Linfield College. A lot of the support I've gotten from Jodi, Colletta, and Deb has made me confident. If there was any question before, the scholarship threw me over the edge. Yes, ok, I can now afford it!"

Kelly - Yes

"I will definitely be finishing it. I have a new position thanks to an RCC experience and the company provides $5000 in tuition assistance per year and they want me to complete my degree. There is no reason not to!"

Bruce - Yes

"I feel confident somewhere between stubborn and determined. Faculty at RCC treated me on my terms as a student rather than what I looked like. I kept people at arm's length. TRiO was another aspect of school, another piece of the pie chart. My education created the whole and I have had to take responsibility. Absolutely! That is how much confidence I have; I am unstoppable!"

Madeline - Yes

"I feel absolutely confident I will finish my Bachelor's degree. If, for no other reason, I will hear Colletta's voice in my head saying, "finish, finish!" All joking aside, I learned at RCC, how to learn. That gives me confidence that it does not matter what the class is, I will do well. I know that pure determination will get me through whatever it is."

Duke - Yes

"I plan to move forward. I have one more surgery and recovery over the summer. I received scholarships from SOU, $15,000 and my whole first year is paid for."

Jacob - Yes

"I am ready to roll."

Victor - Yes

"Oh yeah!"

Dora - Yes

"I plan to complete my Bachelor's degree at SOU."

It is clear from these responses, that the students are confident about their transfer plans and intention to complete the Bachelor's degree. The completion of the four-year degree is the primary purpose of the federally funded TRiO programs. In 2006, Townsend and Wilson reported that many transfer students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds are steered into vocational programs and are discouraged from pursuing a transfer track. The TRiO programs focus on the transfer track and students commented several times throughout the interviews, that RCC transfer students must be part of TRiO so they get accurate and timely transfer information. Furthermore, the students stated that early advising experiences with other non-TRiO advisors may have hindered their pursuit of transfer. Elizabeth said, "I took several classes that I did not need." She went on to describe an electronic advising system that would indicate a class was required. She found out later that courses like Speed Reading and College Success were not required for her degree. Elizabeth stated, "These courses are not necessary and they consume student's financial aid; I have come to realize that all students get this message and take courses they don't need." Students stated they were advised into courses they did not need and felt it was not the best use of their financial resources. Victor agreed, "My first term, I took math, another class, and the advisor said I needed to take a typing class to fill in my credits; I have a typing class on my transcript that doesn't transfer and it is not worth anything." Victor was a cash paying student and the advisor strategy to have a certain number of credits to get full financial aid did not apply to him. Because of these types of

situations, the students believed that the TRiO/SSS services were imperative to their success and the ability to make a successful transfer.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the TRiO/SSS program at Rogue Community College. I revealed the findings of this research study and the successful experiences of first generation transfer students, served by a TRiO/SSS program. The five predominant themes that emerged are:

1. TRiO/SSS provided a community for students that sometimes acted as family

2. Access to TRiO/SSS services had a positive impact on student success and transfer

3. A sense of belonging to TRiO contributed to student's educational success

4. Navigating college and how to "do" school was learned at TRiO and RCC

5. Student's confidence to complete the Bachelor's degree was increased by their utilization of the TRiO/SSS program services

The predominant themes that emerged from the data were linked to the research in Chapter 3, the literature review. The emerging themes in Chapter 4 described the rich experiences and successes experienced by the study participants. Chapter 5 connected the data findings to the two research questions and the current literature. Reflections on the research and findings are included in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the successful experiences of first generation students, served by a TRiO/Student Support Services (TRiO/SSS) program that are prepared to transfer from the community college to a university. The study focused on the student's successful experiences, prior to transferring from the community college. This chapter discusses the findings of the study as they relate to the literature review. It also discusses suggestions for practice, identifies study limitations, and provides recommendations for future research.

Summary and Discussion

This section focuses on study findings related to the two research questions and the relevant literature.   The two research questions were: (a) What successes have you experienced as a first generation transfer student receiving services from a TRiO/SSS program?, and (b) What activities and resources provided by the TRiO/SSS program contributed to your successful experience as a community college transfer student?

This phenomenological study used a focus group, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, and I kept a journal to reflect upon the environment, mood, and other non-verbal cues from the in-person meetings. The goal of the study was to focus on the successful experiences of these students in an effort to examine the idea that TRiO programs make a difference in the preparation of first generation transfer students. Findings demonstrated that the students saw themselves as

successful first generation college students, prepared to transfer from the community college to the university. The students expressed a sense of community within the TRiO program and they all have complete confidence they will be successful in earning the four-year degree from the university. An internal community, a family of sorts, was described by at least seven of the nine research participants.

Most of the data found in the study and the emerging themes were consistent with the research and the effectiveness of TRiO programs and their purpose to serve first generation, disadvantaged students. This study was conducted with students prior to their transfer before the personal experience and senses of belonging diminished due to adjusting to a new school, systems and people.

From the study, five themes emerged:

1. TRiO/SSS provided a community for students that sometimes acted as family

2. Access to TRiO/SSS services had a positive impact on student success and transfer

3. A sense of belonging to TRiO contributed to student's educational success

4. Navigating college and how to "do" school was learned at TRiO and RCC

5. Student's confidence to complete the Bachelor's degree was increased by their utilization of the TRiO/SSS program services

I will reference the theme numbers that correlates to each of the research questions.

Research question 1. *What successes have you experienced as a first generation transfer student while receiving services from a TRiO/Student Support Services program as you prepare to transfer to a four-year school?*

The answer to this question was found in themes #1, #3, and #5. The TRiO/Student Support Services program at RCC is designed to assist and prepare first generation transfer students as they prepare to transfer from a community college to a four-year school. The purposes of TRiO/SSS are:

a. To increase college retention and graduation rates for eligible students;

b. To increase the transfer rates of eligible students from two-year to four-year institutions; and

c. To foster an institutional climate supportive of success of low-income and first-generation college students and individuals with disabilities.

Most students who drop out prior to graduation do so because they are not adequately integrated into the college environment and engaged in learning (Tinto, 1996). Themes #1, #3, and #5, from the research data identify this group of students as different. TRiO students are clearly integrated into the college and that

is reflected in their ability to participate in what the students identify as their

"TRiO community." Students commented on the community and family like

support and the differences this flexible and ongoing support service adds to the

value of their education. This is not to say that TRiO took the place of the

student's family, but instead, TRiO was viewed as an enhancement to their college

experience. Students felt supported by TRiO and acknowledged for their

persistence and retention by TRiO staff in ways their families could not

understand. Students articulated support as a place to go where their needs are

met, whether that is cup of coffee or the ability to solve a problem with a staff

member. Their experiences were less formal and sometimes portrayed as casual

and unscheduled. Students reflected on the ease of getting their needs met versus

having to a set an appointment with an unfamiliar advisor.

The community college has been described as unique in its transfer

mission; the community college prepares students to transfer to a four-year

institution by providing the first two years of the four-year degree (Townsend &

Wilson, 2006). The literature goes on to say that community colleges have been

criticized by their low transfer rates (Brint & Karable, 1989; Dougherty, 1994;

Zwerling, 1976). What this research study found is just the opposite. First

generation transfer students supported by a TRiO program excel at college. They

have appropriate support and services for a population described as disadvantaged

and often unsuccessful. Schools investing in TRiO grants, may likely see higher

transfer rates of students carrying higher GPAs and entering the university

prepared to finish the four-year degree versus students who drop out. TRiO grants are continuation grants and can be re-awarded in five year stints, allowing for longevity of program services. Schools with long term TRiO programs are likely to have higher rates of transfer.

The first generation students interviewed for this study felt strongly about their success and they could clearly describe how TRiO has benefited their college transfer experience. The students expressed a sense of community, belonging, and a commitment to completing their college goal of a bachelor's degree. During these in-depth interviews students demonstrated strong emotions related to their successful experiences. More than one student expressed a desire to give back to the program and found it relevant to participate in this study. One student said that the experience of the focus group and interview, prior to leaving the community college, brought a sense of closure to her experiences that allowed her to reflect on her successes.

Research question 2. *What activities and resources provided by the TRiO/SSS program contributed to your successful experiences as a community college transfer student?*

The answer to this question was found in themes #2, #4, and #5. TRiO provides continuous enrollment and support to students who are making progress toward their transfer goals. All of the students reported using TRiO services and had participated in TRiO for more than one academic year. The use of the TRiO

services is expected to contribute to the student's progress and ultimately degree completion.

The National Center for Education (2006) concluded that the four-year degreed person will have more opportunities and higher median earnings than those without a degree. The use of TRiO services increases the student's opportunity to succeed in college and ultimately reach the goal of graduation and completion. Several times, a student talked about his/her internal struggles. Difficulty with finances, finding childcare, reliable transportation, and medical issues are obstacles that students face and must overcome to be successful. When times were difficult, students knew they could go to TRiO; better yet, TRiO came to them. There were multiple conversations depicting how TRiO staff went above and beyond their call of duty and supported students toward reaching their college goals. Research shows that the completion of a degree fosters life changing opportunities and the quality of life for students and their families (Wang, 2009).

Questions for Practice

The federally funded TRiO programs began in the early 1960s in an effort to provide educational opportunities to disadvantaged students. Over 50 years of service, these grants have proven a positive track record for these programs and the student recipients accessing services from program across the United States. TRiO programs are sometimes referred to as "Cadillac" programs due to extensive services that are not afforded or offered to first generation students who do not

apply. First generation students are provided free services that are proven to help students succeed.

Community college completion rates are still low. Per RCC's most recent data, the first-time student attrition rate after one year was 58.2 percent, 76.1 percent at two years, and 85.1 percent after three (Basis: Fall Term 2010/11). Its Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) completion rate was 14.0 percent. One-third of students (32.4 percent) dropped out between their first and second terms (O'Kief & Young, 2014)

Should community colleges invest fiscal and human resources to duplicate the efforts of federal TRiO programs? Is the cost to benefit ratio effective if it produces an increased outcome of completion? The students in the study felt strongly that they will complete the four-year degree based on what their experiences at the community college and services from TRiO. Propelling students to the university, who are ready for the expected academic rigor at a four-year college, who understand navigating higher education systems should increase the successful transfer rates and the completion of four-year degrees.

Is there TRiO programming that could be duplicated across the community college campus? For example, university tours were one of the top three services accessed by students in the study. Is this a future collaborative effort between Oregon community colleges and universities that might demonstrate a higher transfer rate between schools in the state? Could colleges invest more funds into their already existing TRiO programs and serve more students? The cost per

student during the 13-14 academic calendar year was $1,372.00 (O'Kief & Young, 2014).

Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to explore the successes of first generation, community college transfer students served by a TRiO/Student Support Services program. The study sought to interview the students prior to their transfer from a community college to the four-year school in an attempt to gather relevant and current data. My desire to conduct a phenomenological study based on a success model was driven by previous studies that focused on first generation students' deficits. My desire was to explore the successes of the first generation population and add to the existing research and literature the positive outcomes as voiced by students.

The implications for study are tied to each of the predominant themes and findings as outlined in Chapter 4. I offer the following thoughts related to implications of the study for each of the five themes.

1. TRiO/SSS provided a community for students that sometimes served as a family. It was clear from the focus group and student interviews that the students saw the TRiO staff and their peers as family. I understand the dynamics that can exist between students and program staff and it can be complicated and time consuming. We know that first generation students come to college lacking familial support. As students find resource centers and programming, such as TRiO/SSS,

they are drawn in and a unique partnership can be formed. Students feel supported by staff and this is encouraging to the new relationships and bonds formed in postsecondary education. Should families be invited to participate in student activities? Is it a beneficial to the enrolled student to host events that allow a connection to be established between the student's family and college personnel and programming? Based on the literature and my own experiences, I think this can prove beneficial. It allows the family to understand what is expected of successful students and even a basic understanding of where the student goes each day and the amount of time that needs invested for the student to be successful. This type of programming lends itself to generational changes. A sibling or parent who is invited to a family event may be the next student enrolled at the community college.

2. Access to TRiO/SSS services had a positive impact on student success and transfer. The students rated their top three TRiO/SSS services and transfer advising was the most sought service. At least five of the nine students commented on the lack of institutional transfer advising and the difficulty they had navigating the systems prior to service from TRiO/SSS. Institutions should consider replicating transfer advising services across the institution. Our current transfer advising services seem inadequate based on student feedback and could be improved

upon. Transfer students need timely and appropriate advising to meet and understand university processes and timelines. Adding institutional resources to the already existing TRiO/SSS programs on a college campus is one avenue to pursue. Leaders in higher education understand that this level of embedded services across campuses may not be realistic based on the fiscal investment to cover staffing and facilities. This issue invites higher education leaders to explore the possibilities, in an effort to provide the most impactful transfer services college wide.

3. A sense of belonging to TRiO contributed to student's educational success. The study participants talked continuously about their feelings of belonging to the TRiO program and what it felt like to receive services from a program on campus that was perceived to be helpful and supportive of the students' goals. Further conversations with educators, after the data analysis, lead me to consider the following questions and implications for practice. Should students be weaned from campus support systems prior to transferring? Or, should students be forewarned that upon transfer, the early feelings of inadequacy and imposter like beliefs experienced at community college may return? Would students be better served by forcing them to access other institutional resources in an effort to teach them to navigate more than one resource center and type of service?

4. Navigating college and how to "do" school was learned at TRiO and
   RCC. At least five of the students talked about their positive
   relationships with program faculty. Students felt supported by both
   TRiO and the faculty that instructed and guided them through their
   course work. Faculty planted seeds and encouraged students to
   consider earning higher degrees and transferring to a university.
   Fostering institutional advocacy and support are primary outcomes for
   TRiO/SSS and educators understand the importance of this advocacy.
   The TRiO staff were viewed as going the "extra mile" for students.
   TRiO staff assisted students when they had medical issues, and at least
   three students stated they would have dropped out without the support
   provided by TRiO. Should leaders in higher education provide
   training and support to promote stronger relationships between faculty,
   staff, and students? Could community college personnel operate
   differently in an effort to have positive impacts on students by
   utilizing university models that provide a more integrated level of
   support service to students? An effort to create a more integrated
   TRiO type of staffing could increase degree completion and transfer to
   four-year schools.

5. Students' confidence to complete the Bachelor's degree was increased
   by their utilization of the TRiO/SSS program services. All nine
   students said they were confident to transfer and complete at least the

Bachelor's degree. These are the same students, that when

interviewed, confessed feelings of inadequacy when they began at

Rogue Community college. It is implied that students' self-efficacy

and their belief to succeed is cemented with each little success.

Students want to feel confident that they understand the systems and

what is expected in an educational institution. They need adequate

advising on a continuous basis. All transfer students need exposed to

university life, admissions expectations, transfer timelines, and

processes to be properly prepared to transfer. Could we organize

differently at the community college and the university in an effort to

promote students success and higher transfer and degree completion

rates?

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the successful

experiences of first generation students, served by a TRiO/Student Support

Services program that are on track to transfer from community college to a

university. The goal of the federal TRiO/SSS program is to assist community

college students in making a successful transfer and finally the earning of a

bachelor's degree. The data for this study were drawn from a focus group, semi-

structured face-to-face interviews, and journaling by the researcher. The study had

several limitations, both anticipated and unanticipated. Limitations are addressed

here to fully disclose the suitability of the research and to suggest further research of this topic.

1. The study was conducted in one Oregon community college and it may not be generalizable to other schools. Replicating this study at other Oregon institutions with TRiO/SSS programs would add to the discussion and increase the data for future program development as suggested in the previous section, Implications for Study.

2. The study is limited as there were only 10 student participants. One student did not meet the eligibility requirement of first generation and was dropped from the study. Due to the small sample, the study results cannot be generalized to all first generation transfer students. While the sample size was small, it is appropriate for a phenomenological study.

3. The study only interviews students served by a TRiO program. Non-TRiO students were not included in the study; therefore there is no comparison group to generate further findings on this population.

4. The study criteria indicated that the students must be first generation and have applied to any university for the academic year 2014-15. Interviewing students during the spring term, prior to transfer was hectic. The IRB process took longer than anticipated and this pushed interviews to June and July of 2014. Students were in the throes of finals, spring fever, and an overall urgency to complete the term. Still, these students were committed to the project.

5. The possibility exists for personal bias. I have worked at RCC for 23 years and have served in a previous position as the TRiO/SSS director. I have no direct supervision of the TRiO/SSS program nor do I have contact with students. I bracketed my personal opinions and expectations in an effort to set my feelings and assumptions aside. This study could be conducted by someone outside of community college administration and with less TRiO experience to gain more objectivity.

Recommendations for Future Research

When research began for this project, a similar study that interviewed transfer students during the final term at the community college before the transfer could not be found. A replication of this study could further add to the literature and impact programming for state wide institutions concerned about college matriculation, transfer, and state or country wide completion agendas.

1. This study was limited as there were no comparison subjects. A future study could compare non-TRiO students to the students served by a TRiO program in an effort to determine if there were similarities or differences in their student success.

2. This study could be repeated and the same students could be interviewed after they transfer to the university. If the intent was to focus on the successes of these students, as this study did, the interviews would be conducted several terms into the transfer so the students would have time to acclimate to the new school.

3. This study revealed that these students, served by a TRiO program, have achieved success in their efforts to transfer. A future study could be conducted at other Oregon community colleges with TRiO/SSS programs to see if the student successes are similar. A study of other community colleges with TRiO programs would reveal the differences in the TRiO/SSS program services as each grant has the capability of being unique and may not provide the same services to students.

4. To avoid bias, this study could be conducted by someone with less experience in community college student support programs and less familiarity with federally funded TRiO programs to gain true objectivity.

Acknowledgement of Participants

I have worked in Student Services for 23 years at RCC. During my career I have developed TRiO programming and worked directly with students advising them on their four-year transfer. College is difficult and through support programs and students who are willing to access resources, success at college is attainable.

Students were taking finals and preparing for commencement when I requested their participation in this research study. I am grateful that students made time to participate in the study. Three students expressed their own gratitude for participating in the study. They believed it was an opportunity for them to give back to the TRiO program. I appreciate each student and the stories they shared. Some interviews were filled with emotions as students expressed their achievements. Success for these students was demonstrated by how their lives had

changed. All of the participants expressed that their lives were improved by their experiences at RCC and TRiO. The ability to identify their successes and talk about them in the interview and focus group further cemented their belief in themselves.

The students expressed multiple times their gratitude for the staff of TRiO/SSS at RCC. They talked about the support from all three staff and stated that when times were or difficult or a problem arose, the students knew they could go to the TRiO staff and together, they would find a solution and a plan for action. The strong sense of community, sometimes described as familial, was stated over and over. Teri stated, "It's just having smiling faces and people who are welcoming, all three of them are welcoming." Someone from the group said, "We're framily" (family and TRiO all in one) and they all chuckled and someone else said, "I like it!" It was clear through the established relationships demonstrated at the focus group that the students viewed themselves as close knit and in support of one another.

I appreciate the assistance from the TRiO staff in helping to make this study come to life. Without their support, I could not have conducted this level of research. From announcing to students the opportunity to participate, to scheduling rooms, and encouraging students to participate, they have supported my efforts to complete this study. It is clear to me, and the study participants concurred, that the staff understands their role at the community college and the TRiO mission to see students complete and earn degrees.

Personal Reflection

The five themes that emerged from the data paint a picture of success for the nine study participants. There is something very satisfying about interviewing people, listening intently, taking notes, and later transcribing data. The more I listened and read over the transcripts, the clearer it became; these students have achieved success. Whether success is gauged on grades, completion, camaraderie, or perseverance, it is clear, these students are a success. For eight of the nine students, their descriptive voices of their first generation experiences (Table 2, First Generation Backgrounds) demonstrated a group of people who may have never made it to college. For a myriad of reasons, they found themselves enrolled at RCC and receiving support from TRiO/Student Support Services. These students have endured circumstances within their lives that weren't always easy and ultimately they have met their goals and found success in themselves as they prepare to move forward. The data demonstrated that this particular group of students understands what it takes to be successful in higher education. They have a passion for continuing their education and bettering their lives. The students see how their life changes and pursuit of higher education reflects positively upon their parents, siblings, and their own children. They understand that they are making an immediate and long term difference in the world in which they live by obtaining a formal education. I am truly grateful for all that they shared and the experiences associated with this research study.

I find myself continuously reflecting on what the students had to say. The essence of community, support, and confidence was talked about in each interview. It is clear that the services meant a great deal to these first generation students, but underlying the service delivery, is a deep sense of satisfaction for persevering and eventually completing the four-year degree. Students in this study will likely continue and earn a master's or doctorate degree; some students were already expressing their interest in earning graduate degrees while still attending the community college. My philosophical approach, interpretive social science, fits so well with the phenomenon that has occurred in these student's lives. It was my intent to draw out their successes and in doing so, understand how first generation students construct meaning of their college experience and future plans. It is heartfelt and encouraging to understand a deeper meaning related to students and their success at college.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
Definition of Terms

Definitions of key terms will assist the reader in understanding this research study.

First generation student. A student who attends a community college or university, but whose parents have not earned a Bachelor's college degree (London, 1996)

Lateral transfer. A transfer from one community college to another or one university to another (Bahr, 2009).

Low income. An annual family income of less than $25,000 (Engle and Tinto, 2008).

Matriculate. The act of moving from educational institution to another (Townsend and Wilson, 2006)

Reverse Transfer. A student who transfers from a four-year university to a community college (Engle, 2006).

Swirling. Students who attend more than one institution at a time and take more than one type of credit course, i.e. online courses, traditional classroom courses, etc. (Bailey, 2003).

Transfer. The act of moving from one postsecondary school to another (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

TRiO/Student Support Services. A federally funded program providing services to first generation students to promote Bachelor's degree attainment (http://ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html).

Appendix B

Focus Group Topic Guide

This predetermined set of questions was developed to guide the focus group. The questions were created to engage students in conversation about their successes, resources used, and services received from TRiO/SSS. What experiences did you have that contributed to your success?

1. Do you think TRiO/SSS contributed to your ability to succeed, if yes, how?

2. What did it feel like to be a participant in TRiO/SSS?

3. What are the top three items or services you received that helped you succeed?

4. What did you learn in TRiO that helped you succeed?

5. Are you proud to be a TRiO student?

6. What will you carry forward in your university experience that you learned at TRiO?

7. What else do you want me to know about your successful experience?

8. Do you feel confident, based on this college experience, that you will complete your Bachelor's degree?

9. On a scale of 1-10, how do you rate this experience in TRiO/SSS

Appendix C

Interview Question Guide

The predetermined set of interview questions were created as follow-up

questions to the two broad questions that led the phenomenological study. These

questions allowed for an in-depth interview.

1. Tell me about your background as a first generation college student?

2. What brought you to Rogue Community College?

3. What were your initial academic goals when you began at RCC?

4. Did your goals change as you pursued your education?

5. At what point in your education did you access TRiO/Student Support

    Services?

6. How did you hear or learn about this support program?

7. What drew you to accessing the resources from this federally funded program

    for first generation students?

8. How long have you received services from this program?

9. What resources did you receive?

    - First year?
    - Second year?
    - Third year?

10. What activities were you involved in?

    - First year?
    - Second year?
    - Third year?

11. Did you feel a sense of belonging as you spent more time working with TRiO?

      a. If so, what was that like? Please describe in detail.
      b. Did you experience of sense of belonging?
      c. What was your experiences interacting with the staff?
      d. What were your experiences interacting with your peers?

12. Did you use the TRiO/SSS space in Josephine Building?

13. What significant changes did you make to your personal life while a TRiO/SSS

student?

14. Was there ever a point where the TRiO staff became family like?