

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Cristobal Valdez for the degree of Doctor of Education in Education presented on February 8, 2010.

Title: The Human Spirit and Higher Education:

Landscapes of Persistence in First Generation Students of Color.

Abstract approved:

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Larry Roper

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of first-generation persons of color attending and persisting at a community technical college. Students of color continue to be an increasing population in our higher education system. Many of these persons of color are choosing to attend two-year institutions. A great deal of research has been conducted regarding student retention with minorities, dropout rates of minorities and higher education retention strategies for students of color, yet little research has been done on the attributes and factors that allow this population to persist in higher education. A phenomenological approach was utilized to examine the attributes, challenges and successes of first-generation students of color who were community college students.

Nine first-generation students of color attending a community technical college in the Rocky Mountain region participated in this study. The student ranged in age from 20 to 49 years of age, had been enrolled at least half-time, and were attending the college for a minimum of one year. Data were collected through individual in-depth interviews and a focus group.

Five main themes emerged from the data: 1) Internal motivation, 2) Belonging, 3) Finding financial support, 4) Finding success strategies, and 5) Confronting barriers and adjusting to college.

Three factors were identified as a result of the study. (1) Students finding their own inner strength, spirit and resiliency assisted in persisting in community college. This allowed students they not only belonged in higher education but that they could succeed in the environment. (2) The interaction of the students' persistence and their current family and support system dynamics. This allowed the students to improve relationships with family members which, in turn, improved persistence. (3) The collective sum of the main themes is the foundation and expression of Human Spirit and students began to operationalize Human Spirit, in spite of overwhelming circumstances, to persist in, and succeed in higher education.

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The Human Spirit and Higher Education:  
Landscapes of Persistence in First Generation Students of Color

by

Cristobal Valdez

A DISSERTATION

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degree of

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Doctor of Education dissertation of Cristobal Valdez presented on February 8, 2010.

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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Cristobal Valdez, Author

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this work has been more than an endeavor, it has been a life journey and such a journey is not completed without great support. As I reflect on the accomplishment of this task I wish to acknowledge and thank the many individuals who assisted me throughout this voyage.

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This life journey has been fortified by the tremendous support of my beautiful wife Robin. She sacrificed her own educational goals and encouraged me to enroll in, continue and complete this program. Many days and nights, she continually supported me throughout the process, and she gave me the time and peace to do the work. I could never have accomplished this journey without my best friend, whom I intend to spend eternity with, Robin. Like those in the study, my children were an inspiration to complete and to improve their futures through my work.

Finally, I have an enormous sense of pride, as a first-generation student of color, and admiration for the students who participated in this study. Besides being the foundation of this research, these students have enriched my life by the telling and retelling of their stories to paint such a vivid picture of persistence and provided the rich source of data for this study. I hope they have all accomplished their higher education goals. Finally, for their openness and willingness to participate in this study I am truly grateful.



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Human Spirit and Higher Education:  
Landscapes of Persistence in First Generation Students of Color

CHAPTER ONE

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

*Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.*  
*—Fortune cookie opened by author in 2005*

Introduction

I have long been intrigued about the human spirit and the ability of students of color to persist in higher education. I have witnessed several instances of student persistence without fully understanding the forces behind the persistence. I have seen students who are seemingly actively engaged in higher education fail or leave college, and I have noted students who are clearly burdened with endless responsibilities, including parenting, varying employment commitments, remedial coursework, and numerous life activities, succeed. I have experienced the fears of students coming into higher education with limited knowledge of the system or success, students whose parents or families did not complete or attend college, and students who are blazing trails beyond high school, doing well and continuing their education. I have witnessed students of color begin higher education with limited English language skills, living in the midst of poverty and with few or no other students of color in their school environment, persist and complete college degrees. Still, I do not fully understand these students' abilities to persist.



## Human Spirit and Higher Education 2

I wish, and the intent of this study is, to better understand how students of color perceive the human spirit and how it contributes to their academic persistence in higher education. At no time in the history of higher education in the United States has the student population been as diverse as it is today. Nearly every institution has experienced growth in the enrollment of students of color (Laanan, 2000; Naretto, 1995; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Tinto, 1987). The completion rate for an Associate degree after six years for these students entering postsecondary education stood at a paltry 18.6 percent in 1994 (U.S. Department of Education). Several researchers have investigated issues of student attrition, retention, and persistence (Pavel, 2001; Bean, 1982; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Reyes, 2002). These studies have examined institutional efforts, examined student failure and dropouts, and reflected on encouraging programs. Few have provided insights into the forces or elements of individual persistence in students of color or the human spirit in relation to persistence.

### Focus

The focus of my study will be to gain a richer understanding of the human spirit of college students of color navigating higher education. My study, titled *The Human Spirit and Higher Education: Landscapes of Persistence in First Generation Students of Color*, will tell and retell the stories of those qualities of the human spirit which allow students of color to persist. The study investigated further the stories of first generation students of color to better appreciate whatever

it is that empowers them to persist in a competitive, uncompassionate, and bureaucratic higher education system.

Through the telling and retelling of our stories of learning, desire, spirituality, higher education, and the human spirit, we have begun to understand the nature of persistence in first generation students of color. The stories evolve from particular students' experiences with their own persistence, resiliency, cultures, internal desires, senses of self, higher education, and spirituality. In this research study, I used the landscape metaphor to capture the complexity and characteristics of persistence in the students chosen for the research. The individual and collective experiences of perseverance created the landscapes of the students who have encountered positive persistence. Through the stories of these students of color, readers will view the pictures of their tenacity and steadfastness.

The persistence of such students is essential to the improvement of their personal, familial, and cultural situations. Students of color are historically underrepresented in higher education. Academic achievement is also crucial to the "betterment" of our increasingly diverse society. The 2000 census offers a picture of the diversity of today and tomorrow. The nation's population has grown more in the last 10 years than in any decade of census recording. In fact, there has been a growth of 32 million since 1990. Since this time, the Hispanic population has grown by 35 percent; the Black population has increased by 16 percent, while the White population has experienced only a 3.4 percent increase. Further, projections detail a decrease of the current composition of "74 percent White to... 64 percent in

2020, and to 53 percent in 2050” (U.S. Census, 2000). In fact, by the year 2020, the Hispanic population is expected to add more to the makeup of the United States than all other ethnic groups combined. My research topic centers on these emerging populations who have not been, historically, considered part of the dominant culture.

My previous experiences of being immersed in the lives of students participating in higher education reveal to me that they are influenced and motivated by something beyond the services and programs higher education institutions provide to assist non-traditional students. These experiences have given me a sense of a greater resolve, a level of personal conviction. I have come to believe this phenomenon is human spirit and for the purpose of this study, it will be our operational definition.

This study is multidimensional. My investigation began through participatory examination and research. Reason (1988) heralded participatory research for its authenticity and its ability to liberate stifled thoughts and voices (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). I acted as a co-researcher with the students I investigated. Such investigation allowed me to immerse myself in, and become part of, the study. I further developed terms including *first-generation*, *human spirit*, *resilience*, and *persistence*. We identified the essentials of the human spirit and pulled out elements of resiliency, spirituality, motivation, and determination in ethnically-diverse individuals pursuing higher education.

### Significance of the Study

Higher education has long been an opportunity for individuals to improve their lives, increase employability and develop career directions. Specifically, Laanan (2000) stated that community college provides opportunities for people to dream and allows people to accomplish their dreams to advance their education, regardless of their educational, racial, or ethnic background. In a report on higher education, Milem and Hakuta (2002) emphasize the benefits of racial and ethnic diversity in higher education:

Many postsecondary institutions share a common belief in the value of diversity in their student bodies. They conclude that diversity in higher education enriches the educational experience that we learn from those whose experiences and perspectives are different from our own, and that diversity promotes personal growth and a healthy society by challenging stereotypes and encouraging critical thinking. Diversity also strengthens communities and the work place by allowing students to become good citizens in an increasingly complex, pluralistic society and fosters mutual respect, and enhances America's economic competitiveness by making us all utilize our talents and abilities to bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures. (p. 38)

The preceding statement affirms America's belief in the importance of higher education and in the diversity of its students. The Milem and Hakuta report (2002, p. 40) reveals both the commitment to and necessity of enrolling students of color as revealed in a statement endorsed by the presidents of 62 research universities. "The value of education, when confronting the 21st century, will be increasingly important." This is even more pronounced for people of color and the opportunities that community colleges present to this demographic. Our society,

which is experiencing tremendous increases in population growths of racially and ethnically diverse people, has not seen much change in the gap of education attainment in those same populations (NCES, 2000). According to a published report by the Business-Higher Education Forum, enrollments for the Hispanic population have grown by 58 percent from 1990 to 2000. The educational attainment of Hispanics and Blacks, ages 25-29, has increased in the last 20 years, but not near the rate of population growth. While the minority enrollment continues to increase, the playing field is not even. Only Asian youth will be attending college in numbers roughly proportionate to their share of the U.S. college-age population. The gaps of enrolled students and educational attainment between Hispanics, Blacks, and Whites remained very similar during the last decade (NCES, 2000).

#### Attrition, Retention, and Persistence

The American college campus, like society as a whole, is experiencing an expansion of racial and ethnic diversity (Szelenyi, 2002). According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, ethnic minorities represented 28 percent of the population in 1998. The enrollment trends in higher education follow a similar pattern.

Often community colleges are the most diverse of postsecondary institutions (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Students of color flock to community colleges for several reasons including: cost, accessibility, admissions policies, and institutional mission. Still, students of color historically are numerically

underrepresented in higher education. Thus, since community colleges have existed, their administrators, faculty, and staff have all been concerned with the attrition, retention, and persistence of students of color as well as the general student population.

### Attrition

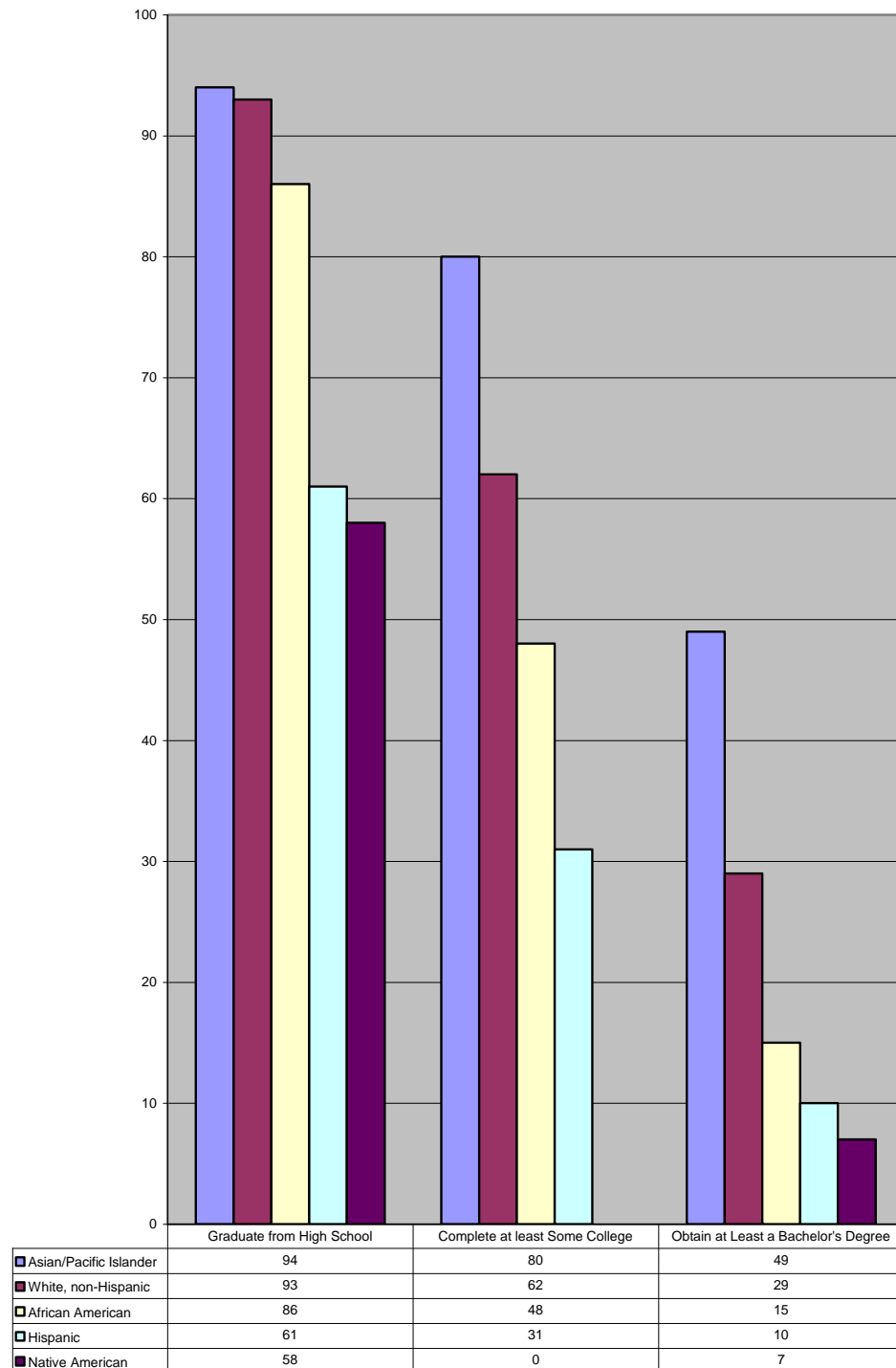
Attrition, or students' inability to stay in school, has been much scrutinized in the literature (Avalos & Pavel, 1993; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Reyes, 1997). Often such research examines students' deficiencies; recent research has investigated educational systems' inability to prepare students in the K-12 to transition to higher education. The disjuncture between the K-12 and postsecondary systems impedes successful transitions and diminishes educational opportunities for many students, particularly traditionally underrepresented students (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). Venezia et al. (p. 8) conclude that students of color are far more likely to be hampered by insufficient access to college preparatory courses in high school, student placement into remedial-level coursework in college, and a lack of early and high-quality college counseling.

Attrition can be attributed, in part, to inadequate preparation in high school. A survey published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2000) reported that many students mistakenly believe that being accepted into college was the most difficult task. They soon find underpreparedness to be a large barrier. A community college administrator in Maryland was recently quoted as saying,

“So many students come to this college with not a clue that they’re underprepared. They get those [placement] test results and they are sometimes very upset. . . . We always have people here who got B’s in English and test into developmental English and they think they know how to write and read, so it is a surprise.”  
(Venezia et al., 2003, p. 22)

Lack of preparation in high school has resulted in approximately half of all college students enrolling in remedial courses. Unfortunately, many students learn that getting in is the easiest step. They soon find out that completing a degree is the most difficult part. Venezia et al. (2003) reported that over 80 percent of African American and Hispanic students she surveyed intended to attend some level of higher education. Further examination revealed that only 55 percent of African American and 53 percent of Hispanic students in Venezia’s study enrolled in college the October after completing high school and (we know that even fewer actually matriculate and complete degrees). Further, about 50% of the first-year students enrolled in community colleges and 25% of students enrolled in four-year colleges do not return for the second year. At community colleges, approximately 70 percent of students indicate an expectation to obtain a Bachelor’s degree, but only 23 percent receive one (NCES, 2000). A longitudinal examination (2001) of kindergartners’ ability to obtain educational levels (by age 24) illustrated disproportionate levels of achievement for students of color (Figure 1). Clearly, attrition and persistence rates and the disparity and educational achievement for students of color are affected by several institutional and societal variables.

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Source: *Youth at the Crossroads*, The Education Trust, 2001, Washington, DC: The Education Trust.



## Retention

The term *retention* is defined as the efforts employed by a college or institution to retain students through the completion of their desired goals (Clark-Tolliver, 1996). Few will argue that competing in college is a daunting task. Even fewer will dispute that completing a postsecondary education is a challenging prospect. This task is even more daunting for first generation students of color. Several studies have documented institutional retention efforts (Bean, 1982; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Sweet, 1986). The literature is filled with retention studies examining dropout or failure rates of students of color (Dumas-Hines, Cochran, and Williams, 2001; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Lee, 1999; McNairy, 1996; Reyes, 1997). Academicians and higher education officials have long known the difficulties involved in “retaining” students to graduation. Data reveals a completion rate of 18.6 percent for all Associate of Arts degree seeking students entering postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

## Persistence

*Persistence* is a term which is, at times, synonymous with retention. For the purpose of this study, I will consider retention and persistence to be separate terms with contrasting definitions. We will define persistence as efforts by individual students to continue in education through the accomplishment of their stated educational goals. It is important to separate terms that are sometimes used synonymously. The issue of retention is taken very seriously by higher education,

as it should be. Institutions often spend a great deal of effort and money on retaining students until graduation, a measurement of success for the student but also for the institution.

Most research examines persistence relative to external variables that influence persistence. Cofer & Somers (2001), for example, ask the question in their study, *What Influences Student Persistence at Two-Year Colleges?* This research is aptly titled, as their study investigates external variables contributing to, or limiting, student persistence. In their study, financial resources were the most common and strongest determinant. Tinto (1993) brought forward the notion of academic and social integration and its influence on students' persistence. I have found that the body of knowledge regarding research investigating the internal drive or intrinsic embodiment of student persistence, particularly for first generation students of color is extremely limited. Therefore, this study investigated the intrinsic characteristics of students of color that allow individuals to integrate and, ultimately, to persist in higher education.

### Achievement and Students of Color

Higher education has a vested interest in student success. Serving students and increasing graduation completion percentages are positive objectives for institutions. It makes sense that higher education would be highly invested in retention and would take meaningful steps to assist with, provide services for, and take measures to increase student retention and, thus, student success. According

to a 1998 National Center for Education Statistics report, initiatives and programs designed to retain first-generation and students of color by higher education institutions leave something to be desired. Using degree attainment as a barometer of retention success, the study found that all first-generation students were far less likely than other students to have attained a Bachelor's degree (13 percent versus 33 percent) representing a 20 percent gap. At all levels of postsecondary education, first generation students still lagged behind, with 44 percent attaining a postsecondary degree or certificate while 56 percent, or a 14 percent gap, of their non-first-generation counterparts attained a postsecondary degree or certificate (US Dept of Education, 2001). This clearly illuminates a disparity in opportunity and circumstances for people of color engaged in higher education.

#### Persistence and Educational Attainment of Students of Color

Choy defined persistence, in this context, as a student's ability to continue in higher education to degree completion (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Choy describes degree attainment as a necessary step to reaping all the benefits of postsecondary education (p. 37). The Choy study centered on issues of persistence and the human spirit. According to Tinto (1993), enrolling and leaving higher education without a degree has negative monetary, occupational, and other consequences for individuals. As one would imagine, the levels of income increase dramatically with the attainment of education. The differences in median earnings according to educational attainment reflect a median income level for Whites who

did not complete high school at \$21,400, a median for Whites who held a high school diploma at \$28,800, and a median income for Whites who completed a Bachelor's degree at \$46,300. The disparities are even more drastic for ethnically diverse populations. The median income for Hispanic workers without a high school education was \$14,493 and \$19,606 for those who completed high school. The median employment for Hispanics who attained a Bachelor's degree increased to only \$32,234.

### Changing Demographics

Increasingly, the college population demographics are growing older and more diverse. In a study by the U.S. Department of Education (1994), it was shown that first-generation students were more likely to be 24 years or older and made up 31 percent of adult students entering as freshmen in 1995-1996. The number of students entering college at ages 25-34 and 35 and older continues to grow. According to the 2000 U.S. Census reports, the total enrollments of postsecondary education students in the age 25 and older ranges were 5,713,000, which is nearly equal to those in the 20-24, or traditional, age group at 5,853,000. Secondly, the total of age 25 and older students enrolled made up over one-third of the entire enrollment population (U.S. Census, 2000).

More significant is the increase in population percentages. From 1990 to 2000 the population of White people increased 5.9 percent. During this same time period, people of color, specifically the population of Blacks, increased by 15.6 percent, Asian Americans by 48.3 percent, Native Americans by 26.4 percent, and

Hispanics by 57.9 percent (U.S. Census, 2000). While enrollments of individuals have increased on pace with population growth, many of these students of color are leaving higher education without degrees (Walters, 1996). Such enrollment shifts, coupled with the, arguably, failed efforts to retain students of color beckoned me to further investigate the nature of persistence in first generation students of color.

### Summary

At no time in the history of U. S. higher education has the student population been as diverse as it is today. Nearly every institution has experienced growth in the enrollment of students of color. Since the diversity of these populations, including race, ethnicity, class, and gender, contributes to the marginalization of such groups, it is hardly surprising that ethnically diverse people face serious challenges in persistence, degree attainment and overall success in navigating higher education (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996).

Clearly, higher education persistence to degree attainment must be part of the solution to resolve the needs of people of color. According to Rhoads and Valadez, people of color bring with them border knowledge or a cultural perspective based on community and the collective versus a more traditional hierarchical structure often seen in higher education, which is different from the canon of higher education, and thus, the “wrong” knowledge (1996). Consequently, students of color traditionally do not persist at the same levels as the middle to upper class White students.

As a result, we are often studying the persistence of students of color through a deficit model, determining when and why students drop out, quit, fail to graduate, or attain stated educational goals. These studies make attribution to students' ability to persist, but focus on environmental and institutional variables that influence persistence. Still other efforts to study student persistence are examining retention efforts and students' reactions to retention programs.

It is imperative that we understand and value the uniqueness of the border knowledge, as defined by Rhoads & Valadez (p. 14, 1996), as well as the resourcefulness and resiliency of persistence in ethnically diverse people. Thus, this study focused on the telling and retelling of stories about the strengths of first generation students of color that contribute to a richer understanding of the elements of persistence. I investigated the perceptions of human spirit of students of color and how they contribute to their academic persistence in higher education.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*Among Latinos, the past is not only kept alive through family narratives but unfolds in front of our very eyes. . .*  
–Suarez-Orozcos (from Tatum, 1997)

Narrative inquiries are concerned with peoples' lives, their stories, passions, struggles, triumphs, and lived experiences; mine is no exception. As I communicated in the previous chapter, I am interested in persistence and the ethnically diverse, first-generation student. I am attracted to understanding students of color, elements of personal experiences of persistence in higher education, and the concept of human spirit. I am particularly interested in understanding the human spirit and how it contributes to persistence.

I am especially fascinated by the stories of those first-generation students who have participated in, and persisted through, the community college higher education system. My inquiry has arisen from a broad interest in completion rates, minority success rates, and the historical deficit models of portraying students of color in higher education. In the next sections I will explore the theoretical underpinnings of students of color, persistence, and the human spirit.

### My Understanding of Students of Color

As an ethnically diverse, first-generation student, educator, and community college leader, I seek to understand the forces behind the persistence evident in

some students of color. In order to better appreciate their persistence, I first had to understand ethnicity, culture, and minorities. The literature review is organized around three central themes: (1) the identification of attributes, characteristics, and commonalities of ethnically diverse student populations involved in higher education; (2) the phenomenon of personal resiliency and persistence; and (3) the investigation of elements and attributes of the human spirit.

As we began to explore the sentiments, understanding, and meaning of the ethnically diverse, we began to understand the terms that are used to define what we think of as ethnic diversity. The term “ethnically diverse” is derived from the definitions of culture and ethnicity.

### Definition of Terms

#### Culture

*There's a certain amount of anger that comes from the past, realizing that my family because they had to assimilate through the generations, don't really know who they are.*

*—Don, American Indian college student (from Tatum, 1997)*

Culture was originally defined by Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871 as “that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Naylor, p. 6). Since 1871, we have seen a proliferation of attempts to more accurately define culture. The term “culture” has been used to describe groups of people who have shared beliefs, behaviors, and ways of life. Martin (1997) defines culture as



the “abstract, learned, shared rules and standards for interpreting experience and organizing behavior in a society, including the behaviors and material possessions that are produced by those rules and standards” (pp. 75-76). Admittedly, culture is a rather nebulous concept that varies by individuals. For the purpose of this study we defined culture as the norms and values that drive behavior. We must understand that culture is not a fixed or static experience, but evolves over time and is shaped by individuals’ experiences. Levine (1977) noted that culture is not a fixed condition but a process—the product of interaction between the past and the present. Its toughness and resiliency are determined not by a culture’s ability to withstand change, which indeed may be a sign of stagnation and not life, but by its ability to respond creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation (p. 5). People of color live in similar cultures relative to their experiences with oppression and discrimination.

People of color live distinct and diverse cultures. Levine (1977) revealed that the peoples of Africa who were brought to the United States during the 17th century encompassed a “myriad of languages, religions, customs, and social political and economic institutions which differentiated them and gave them separate identities” (p. 3). Today, the lives of African Americans, while likely more similar than the historical context of Levine, continue to experience several variations while experiencing many similarities. The cultures of people of color can strongly clash with the culture of higher education institutions. Higher

education continues to have a definite culture of competition, individualism, and excellence.

Tatum (1997) noted a glaring difference in the approach and value of work and education of peoples of color, especially Latinos. Latino teens and young adults enter employment and higher education to allow them to take care of family members. White American teens, on the other hand, enter work and college as a means of gaining independence from their families, according to Tatum (p. 137). This disparity creates truly significant meaning for students of color and their ability to persist in higher education.

## Race

Intertwined in the definition of ethnic diversity is the concept of race. Race is defined by Martin (p. 83) as “a social category based on arbitrary physical or cultural characteristics.” She suggests that the definition is used for the purposes of discrimination. Tatum (1997) asserted that the experiences of Latinos, American Indians, and Asian Americans in the United States have been marked by racial and cultural oppression. She suggests that these populations have a “third world consciousness” (p. 132) as a result of the discrimination and oppression in their collective lived experiences.

## People of Color

Martin defines ethnicity as “membership in a group with which one chooses to affiliate on the basis of shared ancestry and/or cultural heritage” (p. 79). The function of implementing culture becomes one’s ethnic orientation (Martin, 1997). It is true that many Americans can claim ancestry from several different countries or heritages even though their orientations may come from one distinct culture. Individuals’ behaviors symbolize their distinctive heritages or groups. These groups are often termed ethnic minorities, and they are members of traditionally disenfranchised groups. Their traditions and recollections are as victims of maltreatment, exploitation, and discrimination. Several similarities exist among the traditionally termed ethnic minorities and, for the purpose of this study, people or students of color and ethnically diverse people will be used interchangeably.

## Ethnic Orientation

Ethnic orientation is the outward sign of the ingrained and substantial differences derived from shared experiences (Martin, 1997). These experiences develop into one’s ethnic identity or set of self-ideas about one’s own ethnic group membership. Some examples of the development and personification of culture and ethnicity, as related to education, are the Native Americans’ lived experiences with education. From the late 1800s and extending into the early 1930s, thousands of Indian children as young as five were forcibly removed from their families and placed in boarding schools. Often these schools were too far from their families to

visit. These horrific experiences resulted in situations and life-changing episodes, such as quoted in the Knight Scholars Foundation report:

*I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. I was carried downstairs, and tied fast to a chair. I cried aloud, shaking my head until I felt the cold blades of the scissors and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit.*

*—Zitkala-Sa, Yankton Sioux, 1884*

Early in American Indian history, these were the lived experiences of education versus family. The broken spirit is an example of the shared cultural values that are considered characteristic of American Indian families and their experiences with education. Many ethnically diverse people share similar ethnic identities as victims of oppression and discrimination. Ethnic orientations are not solely determined in response to racism and discrimination; they are nurtured by the strong sense of family and a need for a strong positive self-identity in order to persist.

### My Understanding of Students of Color and Higher Education

People of color are not often portrayed as individuals who participate in and succeed in higher education. Despite this perception of failure and non-participation, high percentages of the overall populations of people of color tend to enroll in higher education, particularly at the community college level. Again, historical context or stereotyping projects messages which contribute to a deficit model of peoples of color experiences with higher education. Rendon (1996) suggested that the term minority is rapidly losing its statistical meaning. She noted that in some two-year institutions, they are already the majority (p. 2). Several

studies examine students of color and dispel the ideas that students of color are often unsuccessful in higher education (Rendon & Hope, 1996; Ross, 1979; Tinto, 1987), and these studies find that the racial and ethnic background of students contributes significantly as determinants to success in higher education. Continued and present prejudices in society may strongly and adversely affect the ability of students of color to persist. At least, these prejudices affect society's belief that higher education students of color can and will be successful.

Laanan (2000) also states that community colleges enroll a substantial percentage of ethnic minorities, women, and non-traditional students. According to Laanan (p. 19), nationally, about 30 percent of enrollments consist of minority students. Data from the Chronicle of Higher Education (2000) indicate that from 1976 to 1996, the number of Native American, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic students attending two- and four-year institutions increased from 1.6 million to 3.6 million, an increase of 125 percent in 20 years. Further, between 1976 and 1996, the percentage of enrolled four-year college students who were minorities increased by 63 percent.

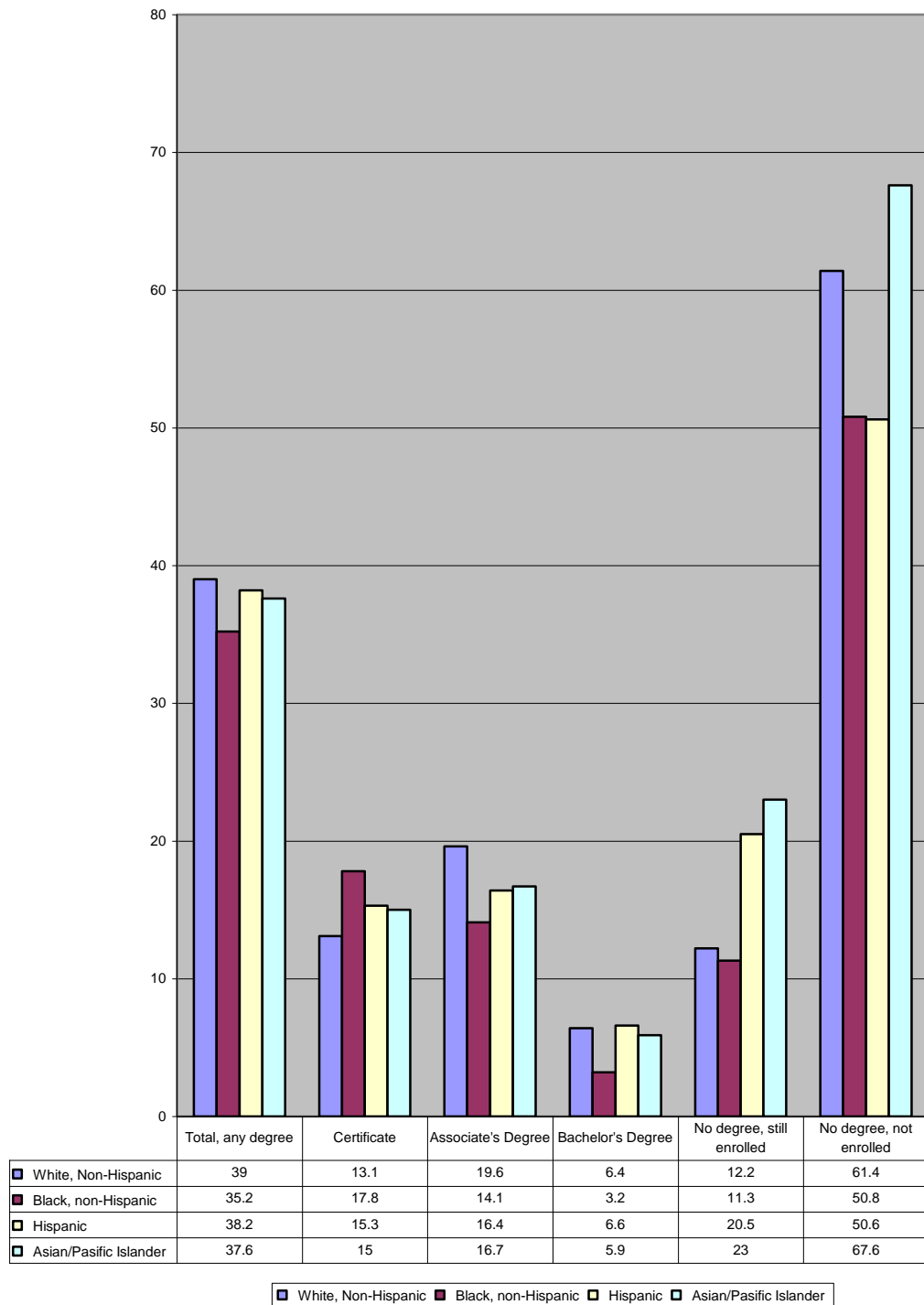
Figure 2 measures completion rates by race of students entering two-year colleges enrolled from 1989-1990. The graph indicates similar percentages of students completing a degree regardless of race. Upon further examination, the percentage of students of color, especially Black students at 14.1 percent, begins to drop at the Associate degree level compared to White students at 19.6 percent. At the Bachelor's level, the percentages of Non-Whites—5.9 for Pacific Islander

students, 6.6 for Hispanic students—appear similar to completion rates for White students at 6.4. However, Black students fall behind at a 3.2 percent completion rate after six years.

#### Low Socio-Economic Status

An examination of socio-economic status is critical in this study, as many first-generation students fall into the lower strata of income status. First-generation students from lower socio-economic levels often experience difficulties with persistence and success when compared to higher income level students. Figure 3 reveals that students in the lower 25th percentile of income level make up the

**Figure 2**  
**Race**



largest percentage of academic non-completers, at 58.4 percent while providing the lowest percentage of completers of Bachelor's level degrees, at only 1.9 percent.

The above data clearly show the gaps in persistence and success between students and those from the dominant, White, upper class where parents participated in and completed a postsecondary education. Students who come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, who live in the lower percentile of socio-economic status, and whose parents did not participate in postsecondary education or possibly even complete a secondary education, failed to maintain the same level of persistence and success as their counterparts. In fact, their participation and persistence paled in sheer numbers of enrollment and persistence.

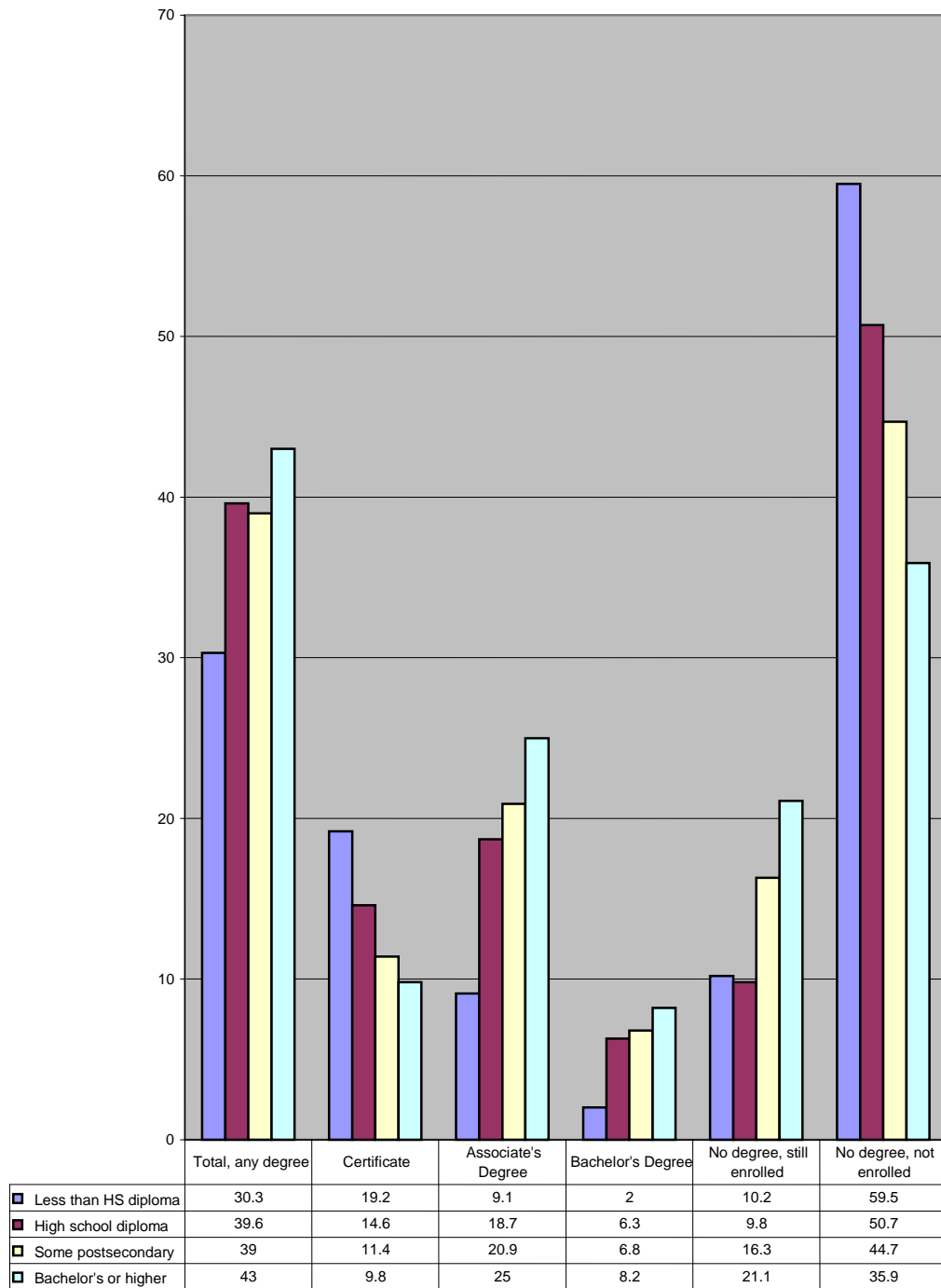
#### First-Generation Students

First-generation students—students whose parents did not attend college—face many difficulties to academic persistence, both from within higher education and from outside influences. Many first-generation students face a myriad of social and cultural barriers when they enter higher education. Laanan (2000) points out the necessity of family support systems in facilitating or enhancing academic success. First-generation students do not experience a culture and lifestyle from their family or from the education systems that is supportive of higher education and are often persuaded to follow a path to direct employment following the completion of high school. Striplin (1999) stated that “academic and social challenges are often compounded for first-generation students because of family



resistance to cultural and academic acclimation, which alienates these students from family support and financial resources.” Essentially, first-generation students must learn to balance living in two worlds, often choosing between aspirations of a better future and leaving behind old friends and family.

Thus, first-generation students’ rates of completion in higher education illustrate increased disparity when compared to students whose parents completed or participated in higher education. Figure 3, which measures completion rates of students entering two-year colleges by parent’s educational level in 1989-1990, indicates widening gaps of completion and success. The acquisition of any degree already reveals a gap between students whose parents completed a Bachelor’s degree (43 percent completion rate) and those whose parents did not complete a high school diploma (30.3 percent completion rate). At the Associate degree level, the gap widens to a 25 percent completion rate for students whose parents completed a Bachelor’s degree to a 9.1 percent completion rate for students whose parents did not attain at least a high school diploma. Similarly, according to data from U.S. Department of Education, only 21 percent of students whose parents did not complete high school enrolled in higher education, while 32 percent of students whose parents participated in some higher education enrolled, and 59 percent of students whose parents completed a Bachelor’s level education or higher enrolled in postsecondary institutions.



### My Understanding of Persistence

In this section, I explored a personal understanding of persistence and resilience, enlightened by reading narrative, philosophical, and educational resources and by engaging in narrative inquiry. I was particularly interested in a narrative way of understanding persistence, which means, first and foremost, I was interested in the experiences of people. The lived experiences and stories of ethnically diverse individuals as they relive their stories of going about college life as first-generation students will yield rich data. The individual experience, placed in its holistic context in which experiences and stories provides a broader, more complete view. It is in the tension between individual experience and temporal, physical, and relational contexts that meaning is made in a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### Retention

It is important to understand that the weight of persistence in higher education does not and cannot rest entirely on the shoulders of the student. Several external and internal institutional variables factor into students' journeys navigating higher education, especially students of color. The issue of retention, as suggested by Reyes (1997) was not identified a generation ago when there were more students than chairs in America's higher education system. According to Reyes (p. 1), by the 1980s, programs designed to not just recruit students but to keep them through

graduation had become common at colleges and universities throughout the United States.

Retention programs were developed primarily in a response to keeping students of color in school, but the success of these programs is still in doubt. Jones and Watson (1990) have noted the substantial impact the retention of students of color has had on both higher education and society in general. Specifically, retention affects (a) funding patterns, (b) facilities planning, and (c) academic curricula offered. Retention also affects the future labor market because students who do not have proper training for the workforce are generally unprepared to meet the expected roles and responsibilities associated with particular vocations. Given the importance of increasing student retention, colleges and universities have focused considerable attention on developing programs and strategies to that end.

Wilson (1995) has given some critical examination to the value of diversity for institutions of higher education. "The questions confronting the academy are whether diversity is a legitimate goal; whether achieving a diverse student (or faculty) body is an educational value; and what is the educational role and purpose of higher education" (Wilson, 1995, p. 19). Many others have pondered the success of programs attempting to retain students of color (Dumas-Hines, Cochran, & Williams, 2001; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Lee, 1999; McNairy, 1996; Reyes, 1997). Several of these researchers focused on improving the campus climate and identifying barriers for students of color. A great deal of research has

been conducted to measure outcomes and successes of retention programs, and several of the programs themselves provide suggestions or recommendations. The caution is to not “re-invent the wheel” in designing retention programs (Dumas-Hines et al, 2001, p. 4), and most of the studies outline the numerous programs instituted in the name of student retention. The list includes, but is not limited to:

- revamping mission statements to include inclusive and supportive language,
- recruiting and retaining faculty and staff of color,
- increasing and improving student counseling and advising,
- providing faculty and staff cross-cultural training,
- expanding orientation,
- increasing financial aid resources,
- engaging students in the academic and social fabric of the college,
- developing faculty, staff, and peer mentoring programs,
- developing comprehensive cultural diversity plans.

Nearly all programs studied that have developed retention programs included most of the above elements, with some variations. The difficulties for these programs to claim success often can be traced to a lack of authenticity or exertion put into carrying out the programs and plans (Collison, 1999; Reyes, 1997).

Several studies caution against the expectation of results without the effort. Higher education cannot expect faculty and staff of color to adequately mentor students when their percentages (8.7 percent) lag far behind the percentage (25.3

percent) of students of color enrolled in higher education (National Education Association, 1998). Institutions cannot assume that developing a new mission or philosophy statement alone will have any effect on the campus climate and/or attitudes or treatment towards students of color. Increasing financial resources and incentives are also not the total answer: “It’s not about the money. . . . If there’s no appreciation, the money won’t fix it” (Collison, 1999, p. 28). Still, the gap in completion rates for people of color persists—a fact widely acknowledged by higher education officials. Reyes (1997, p. 2) clearly reveals this point: “It’s very important that we not delude ourselves that the issues facing poor people and people of color have been solved, because they have not.”

These same admitted difficulties affect students, especially students of color, and their ability to persist in the higher education academic environment. Students have little or no control over institutional variables such a campus climate, discrimination, and external factors. Given that one of the leading authorities on the retention of students of color in higher education, Vincent Tinto (1990, 1993, 1997), notes the importance of a sense of belonging in determining whether students persist or leave college, these variables weigh heavily on persistence outcomes.

### Resilience

Resilience is an intrinsic characteristic of humans that contributes to persistence. Tross, Harper, Osher, and Kneidinger (2000) conducted research

suggesting resilience may be a positive predictor of student performance and persistence. They define resiliency as a tendency to demonstrate commitment to a course of action when challenged . . . and rebound when faced with adversity (p. 324). Henderson and Milstein (1996) defined resilience “as the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to severe stress or simply to the stress inherent in today’s world” (p. 7).

Bernard (1991) discussed adults at school and the need to foster, in themselves, protective factors to promote resiliency. These factors include: 1) exhibiting a caring and supportive attitude, 2) providing opportunities for meaningful participation, and 3) setting and communicating high expectations. Life’s transitions can be terrifying experiences and are critical times to employ and build resiliency. Beginning and persisting through higher education is a series of tremendous transitions for first-generation students. They are often products of family environments that do not understand, have not negotiated, or do not support education beyond high school. Thus, resiliency is a key factor in student persistence and the ability to continue in higher education.

### Persistence

Past research has examined students' academic success or ability to gain social and academic integration within the educational institution as correlating factors to persistence (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Burnett (1996) revealed that Tinto's work was based on four-year university students. Because more first-generation students of color are enrolling in two-year institutions, Burnett investigated retention at community colleges. She found that "student retention appears to be unrelated to participation or lack of participation in co-curricular activities" (p. 47). Borglum & Kubala, (2000) found that when examining retention at community colleges, "definite differences exist between student persistence and social and academic integration" (p. 569). The Tinto et al. (1994) model states that students have background characteristics and attributes that help determine their institutional fit. This study will examine how those characteristics and attributes i.e. human spirit affect persistence.

Rodriguez (1996) reported on the correlation of high school and admissions test scores as predictors to persistence but points out that "both singularly and jointly, they are less related to the college grades of Mexican Americans than of Whites" (p. 330). She suggested that researchers begin to investigate the fact that other variables play in academic success. Sedlacek (1987) reported self-concept and confidence are important for students of color at all educational levels. Confidence considers external factors but is decidedly an internal function. Others (Arbona & Novy, 1990; Tinto, 1987) have examined educational aspirations and



internal function and found them to be positive indicators of persistence in students of color.

Opp (2002, p. 60) reveals that high school grades and college grades are poor predictors of college persistence. He found that with students of color, high grades were associated with less persistence. He suggested that high school and college grade point average and persistence are two separate phenomena and should probably be treated separately. Opp (p. 60) goes on to “suggest that in order . . . to provide more effective services to help improve students’ grades and persistence—especially of the minorities—other important variables need to be identified.”

This study will examine the elements of the human spirit as variables to persistence. As Bookchin (1995, p. 237) notes, human beings can begin to discover that they have the potential to go well beyond the existing circumstances of their lives. Each generation develops new needs and expands ideas about their cultural domain. Not only can human beings create cultures, but depending upon time, place, and circumstances, they can expand their cultures and social ideas. They have the ability to formulate belief systems, establish institutions, and construct richer and more complex ideas about life and its meaning, including broad notions of justice and freedom. Human beings can literally create choices, which do not exist in their natural habitats. This ability to create meaning and new realities is critical in persistence and the ability to function in the competitive higher education environment.

According to Bookchin (p. 241), human beings can literally create choices which do not exist in their natural habitats. This is especially critical in navigating higher education as a first-generation student. Often, first-generation students are not socialized to the rigor, competition, and community of higher education. Additionally, students of color may be affected by racism and discrimination or simply may not be afforded the support from educators in the K-12 system that allows them academic success at that level.

#### Asset Versus Deficit Models

Many of the studies view the ethnically diverse higher education student using a deficit model. Most of the literature describes the characteristics of students of color as students at risk, and it details students of color who terminate their education before graduation (Castle, 1993; Chavez & Maestros-Flores, 1991; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Henderson, 1991; McNairy, 1996; Tinto, 1987, 1993). These studies are concerned with the external factors and forces of retention or persistence. Typically, such studies make recommendations relative to institutional programs, policies, and practices. They discuss increasing financial assistance, creating minority and support programs, engaging in remedial instruction, and utilizing advising and tutorial programs. While each of these recommendations is important, they rarely touch on the intrinsic and internal forces and elements that allow students to persist.

Such studies focus on areas of deficiency, such as lack of academic preparedness, low grades, race or ethnicity as a negative factor, and high school grade point average. By focusing on these areas, the studies suggest, at best, the ethnically diverse student does not have the essentials to compete, persist, and succeed in higher education. This line of thought can lead to the interpretation that students of color cannot persist.

Prime (2001) also suggests that the deficiency model portrays students of color as deficient in areas that are critical to persistence in college. She notes that to better understand students' abilities to persist; we must cue in on their assets, attributes, and abilities. This study will examine factors and elements of human spirit that have allowed students of color to persist. Previous studies begin to move in this direction as they discuss the need for institutions to increase percentages of faculty, staff, and administration of color (Kennedy Manzo, 1995; McNairy, 1996; Reyes, 1997; Walters, 1996).

### My Understanding of Human Spirit

*The deepest questions in life are spiritual. They are questions about the search for ultimate purposes and enduring truths. They are profoundly personal questions that each of us must ultimately answer in our own way.*

*—Jon C. Dalton*

I have found that most literature concerning students and spirituality center around religion and religiosity. The literature rarely considers spirituality or the human spirit as a phenomenon separate from religion. For the purpose of this

study, I considered human spirit to be an internal attribute universally found in people as brought forth by Hegel (1983). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel asserted that human spirit is a natural, intuitive, sovereign right. By this, Hegel postulated that our spirit is not bound by dimensions or restricted by parameters. Thus, external forces cannot limit how we, as individuals, develop and cultivate our human spirit. In this vein, the restrictions and barriers that can impede individuals who are not accustomed to the culture of higher education have less effect on individuals who rely on their intrinsic abilities and influences.

As Hegel believed, the human spirit is a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of intelligence, will, and recognition. He saw these elements as contrasting and polarized. Hegel theorized that individuals are able to reconcile, not dichotomize, the differences to control and determine one's human spirit. This ability to determine and cultivate human spirit remains individual and can, and does, vary among individuals through their lived experiences. These same lived experiences develop and alter one's ability to utilize and be informed by their human spirit.

According to Hegel, individuals must combine the interdependence of one's intelligence (consistency) with the will (assertiveness) to bring into action one's desires. The control and utilization of human spirit gives individuals freedom from external determinants and gives the individual the power to assert his or her will. Individuals' abilities of recognition (the externalization of the human spirit) allow

them to act on intellect and will. This recognition allows the human spirit to be whole, and individuals, in turn, become whole humans.

Parker Palmer (1993, p. 5) describes spirituality as a “process of turning inward to find where we are at home with ourselves in an undivided world.”

Palmer talks about “a universal instinct toward connection with others and a discovery of our place in the larger web of life”. It is this same connection with the web of life and turning inward that this study examines.

Jon Dalton suggests (2001, p. 18) that “the spiritual domain of the college student’s life may well be one of the most inaccessible facets of personality to outsiders because of its highly inward and personal character.” He believes that educators do not recognize the important role that spirituality has in learning and development. College administrators and officials often examine the student’s resources, academic ability, preparedness, and barriers, among other characteristics. In this study, I searched for the meaning of spirituality and the human spirit in individuals as they are brought to life through their stories and recollections of their individual persistence in this very inward and personal phenomenon.

Alicia Chavez (2001) discusses how one connects with a sense of self as important for a person to become an authentic, whole, human being. She reports spirituality as being shaped by familial, cultural, reflective, and religious influences. Chavez suggests that pieces of formal religion as well as daily practices form the foundations of human spirit for individuals. She discusses the unique blending of Spanish and Native American cultures, or Mestizo culture, that form

her spirituality or human spirit as she tells her story of growing up in the mountains of northern New Mexico. She relates her spirituality to her ability to lead a student services division. In this same sense, I believe I heard the students in my study retell and relate to the inward, intrinsic, bank of resources that assisted them in persisting in higher education.

### Summary

The use of narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodology when investigating ethnically diverse, first-generation students, persistence, and the human spirit. For years, populations of people have been separated and categorized based on several criteria, including culture, race, and ethnicity. The term ethnic minority was established and intends to define those individuals not from European descent. The term ethnically diverse appears to be more appropriate as the populations of people of color continue to grow, and the populations of the dominant culture continue to diminish.

The elements of persistence are intrinsic, individual, and dynamic. Retention efforts and programming are common in higher education and comprise several differing elements. The success of retention efforts in higher education is questionable, and the campus climate, as well as other institutional variables, contributes to, and detracts from, students' abilities to persist.

Resilience is a critical factor in persistence. Each of us has the ability and opportunity to nurture resiliency through our lived experiences. All individuals can

create choices, new realities, and potentials that did not previously exist in their experience. Several researchers have investigated retention and persistence of students of color based on deficits and failure. As a result, these studies seem to suggest that students of color are deficient in many areas and, possibly, do not have the ability to persist in higher education. Therefore, if we wish to study the attributes of persistence, it is critical to observe and present an asset model, or strengths-based paradigm, when examining students of diverse ethnicities. Through the storying of their lived experiences, we have better understood human spirit.

Human spirit, the intrinsic or internal elements of intelligence, will, and recognition can be nurtured in individuals and can vary depending on lived experience. Similar to resiliency, the human spirit can overcome the external barriers and determinants revealed in environments and in higher education.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

*Wendy: Why did you come to our nursery window?*

*Peter: To hear the stories. None of us know any stories.*

*Wendy: How perfectly awful!*

*—Sir James M. Barrie, Peter Pan (Hevern, 2001)*

In this chapter I, first, explain the rationale for the narrative inquiry approach. Second, I explain the use of the narrative inquiry perspective. Third, I give a rationale to the appropriateness of the approach in gaining a richer understanding of the assets and attributes of persistence. This chapter concludes with strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the perspective.

#### Rationale

*The phrase experiencing the experience is a reminder that for us, narrative inquiry is aimed at understanding and making meaning of experience.*

*—Clandinin & Connelly (2000)*

In narrative inquiry, people are viewed as embodiments of lived stories. The lived stories create the experiences in which researchers locate meaning (Carr, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Phillion, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995). The use of narrative, storytelling, or of story telling (these terms will be used interchangeably in this research) is a long-accepted exercise of a qualitative research method (Bruner, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, 1994, 2000; He, 1998; Mattingly, 1991; Phillion, 2000). The study of lived experience through



narrative is a phenomenological outgrowth of work by Van Maanen (1988) and derives from the historical underpinnings of interpretive research of Hiedigger (1962).

The contribution of a narrative inquiry is intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic rather than to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study is driven by the question of how human spirit affects an individual's ability to persist in community college. In this sense, the study provides insight into the power and force of the human spirit as well as will providing a backdrop for community college administrators, faculty, and staff to better understand the phenomenon of student success. Narrative inquiry focuses on pointing out the landscape of experiences. In this study the inquiry fleshes out, in narrative form, the elements of perseverance and will identify individual attributes discovered, developed, and practiced that successfully allow individuals to persist. Through the telling of stories of the participants' experiences of perseverance in higher education, this study reveals the persistence landscape; in other words, it paints the picture of persistence and its elements.

#### Foundations of Narrative Inquiry

*Story... is an ancient and altogether human method. The human being alone among the creatures of the earth is a storytelling animal: sees the present rising out of a past, heading into a future; perceives reality in narrative form.*

—Novak, 1975, p. 175

Qualitative research is based on the assumption that individuals construct reality and seek to explore meaning and interpretations via in-depth and thorough investigation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999). Phenomenology, a research perspective of lived experience, is typically biographical and autobiographical (He, 1998; Phillion, 2000). Narrative inquiry is a stream of phenomenological research that involves the examination of different social realities that individuals construct relative to their social situation (Bateson, 1994; Gadamer, 1992; Heidegger, 1962; Van Maanen, 1988). The realities of individuals merge overall lived experiences with specific research experience. For the purposes of conducting such a study, I relied on words, patterns, and themes to express the findings under investigation. To pursue an in-depth understanding of these students and their situations, I utilized audio recording and transcription, observations, interviews, and concentrated fieldwork to inform the study. Similar to the statements in Bogdan and Biklen (1998), narrative study is naturalistic, as researchers frequent places where events are likely to occur. This study chronicles the experiences of nine students' persistence, telling their stories of motivation, intrinsic desire, human spirit, and persistence. The investigation took place within the community college setting in an area familiar to students.

The natural setting allowed for the telling of stories and the individual expression of stories which were important in creating meaning. According to Bruner (1996), the stories we tell construct the meaning of our universe. The

meanings, while in the mind, are shared and lived through the telling of our culture and the narratization of our lives. Most people construct meaning through narratives, and multiple constructions of meaning exist. Bruner (p. 130) states that human beings make sense of the world through telling stories about it. The key is to know why and under what circumstances the story is being told. Rarely are narratives given as “un-sponsored texts” (p. 130). In this sense, participants have ownership over their lived experiences. The texts that result from individuals’ storying become part of their lives. This study gleaned thematic discoveries of the student who persists.

#### Narrative Form

*We had the experience but missed the meaning.*  
—T. S. Eliot

Narrative inquiry allows for the participants and the reader to make meaning of the experience. Increasingly, narrative inquiry is found in broader fields of research. The historical underpinnings of narrative inquiry are traced from naturalistic social science, to hermeneutics, to narratives (Bruner, 1996; Gadamer, 1992; He, 1998; Heidegger, 1962; Phillips, 1991). For Phillips, history is marked by “the gradual erosion of the positivist model and the struggle to replace it with a model that more adequately reflects what we take to be the nature of ourselves as thinking, feeling, and sometimes rational creatures” (p. 14). Bruner (1996), who offered the diverse foundations of narrative inquiry, related it to the confluence of

literary, socio-anthropological, linguistic, historical psychological and computational groundings. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggest that living, telling, retelling, and reliving mark the qualities of a life. They note, “People live stories, and in them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones... Stories ... educate the self and others, including the young and those, such as researchers, who are new to their communities” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). In narrative research, stories are what the inquirer collects, retells, and writes. This study reveals the experiences of persistence in higher education for nine ethnically diverse, first-generation students.

Hence, this qualitative study investigates the lived experience of community college students to understand individual attributes contributing to persistence. This inquiry resulted in narratives of the participants’ lived experiences as they told of their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### Landscapes

The term “landscape” will become the metaphor which describes the attributes, experiences, and stories of individual persistence in first-generation students of color in a dual track inquiry: 1) the inquiry and deeper understanding of the stories of the students’ individual attributes contributing to persistence, and 2) how these stories contributed to the community college’s insight and ability to assist such students in meeting educational goals.

The telling of the experiences of persistence in first-generation students of color assists the reader in understanding the attributes, successes, and assets of such students. These stories have illuminated the attributes of motivation, human spirit, and elements of persistence in these individuals.

### Criteria for Truth

This study did not pass the traditional reductionists, such as Edward Burnett Tylor and James Frazer's, definition of truth. In qualitative research, the truth is found in the interpretation of the researcher's observations, participation, and experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Gall et al., 1999; Morse, 1998). This study utilized transcribed audio recording to accurately reflect the dialogue, exchange, tone, and themes of the interactions and interviews. Additionally, it relied on the soundness, accuracy, and detail of the field texts; on continual communication and accuracy checking with the involved students; and by retelling the experiences to capture the essence of the experience. In describing the soundness of qualitative research, Gall et al. (1999, p. 304) reflect on several criteria. The first is a strong chain of evidence that was supported through the use of field texts. I will consider these field texts in the four directions of experience, as outlined in the following paragraphs. Second, the truth is in experiences, and the value is in the richer sense of the assets and attributes of first-generation students of color and their ability to navigate higher education. The third criteria, usefulness, will be evident to the

reader through these stories, which will shed a more penetrating light on the experiences of such students.

### Techniques and Design

As stated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is lives lived and stories told. This study is a collaborative investigation between the students and the researcher. We will explore experiences, struggles, and triumphs in navigating higher education. We will share stories of our individual and collective experiences of the human spirit, motivations, and persistence. In doing so, we will form a pattern of life experiences. We will examine past and present circumstances to relate to the landscapes of persistence in a continuum of experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak of being in the midst of an experience as a necessity of narrative inquiry. The retelling of their lived experiences will become a way of making sense of and gaining a deeper understanding of the elements of persistence in first-generation students of color.

Narrative inquiry permits the researcher to serve a dual role as investigator and participant. My research will be a dual effort of inquiring about the experience and responding to the experience. The dual role will allow for an emic, or insider's perspective in addition to the edic, or outsider's, perspective of the attributes of persistence.

This study will focus on the three-dimensional space with temporality along one space, personal and social along a second space, and place along a third. We

will be concerned with the three dimensions of persistence. Within these dimensions, the study will look to four distinct directions of inquiry: inward, outward, backward, and forward. The inward consists of the emotions, hopes, and feelings. The outward is environment. The backward and forward refer to the temporality of past, present, and future. As we experience persistence, we will do so simultaneously in these four realms. We will discuss our experiences in terms of how it made us feel and respond, what our world looked like, and how the experience affected who we were at the present time, and who we may become in the future. The inquiry will continue to confirm and affirm the experiences in the field through focus group work as a follow up to the individual interviews.

The focus group work will also utilize audio recordings and will lead us to the field texts. The transcription and field texts will build a database during the study. Morgan (1998) emphasized the importance of a strong and precise recruitment of study participants to gain a rich and accurate understanding of experience in focus groups. The research members checked on multiple occasions in to ensure accuracy and to corroborate interpretations and fulfill the criteria of member checking. The data was coded and categorized to generate themes or constructs that define the persistence experiences.

### Data Needed

There are three data items needed for this study: (1) the telling of lived experience to create landscapes, (2) the sharing and retelling of stories to gain

shared understanding, and (3) the narrativization of lived experiences to identify research themes. The individuals to be studied are thought to be a rich resource of information and relevancy. According to Clandinin & Connelly (2000), researchers experience shifts and changes, constantly negotiating, reevaluating, and maintaining flexibility and openness to an ever-changing landscape. The notion of a cyclical, evolving, and recreating inquiry will allow the study to examine intimate details of these peoples' stories, even as the stories continue to evolve.

### Methods

Participatory methodology involves all participants as researchers along with the researcher; they construct the meanings that become "data" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The data of this study is the lived experiences and how they paint the landscape of successful persistence in the lives of ethnically diverse higher education students.

Criterion sampling works the best in phenomenological studies because it insures the participants have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

Participants met the following criteria:

1. *Were first generation higher education students.* This was defined as not having parents who graduated from an institution of higher education. This was derived from data collected by the UM-Helena student data collection. Students needed to experience the academic challenge of being at the first in their immediate family to fully



experience the rigors of higher education and to effectively discuss the challenges of attending college without the experience of parents who were successful in college.

2. *Were a person of color.* This is the federal guideline for reporting a student's ethnicity when entering a higher education institution.
3. *Have successfully persisted in college for at least one academic year.*

This was also a college data collection measure and was intended to eliminate first generation students of color who had not demonstrated the ability to persist. Students who had attended for at least a year have demonstrated they were able to be successful in an academic environment.

The researcher utilized the resources of the Office of Student Affairs at The University of Montana Helena College of Technology to identify an appropriate population which resulted in a pool of 33 who met the above criteria. Of this pool of thirty three eligible students, nine agreed to participate and completed the appropriate steps for participation.

The University of Montana-Helena College of Technology (UM-Helena) was chosen because it is where the researcher worked for the institution for three and one-half years, and as Van Manen (1990) writes, “[D]escribe the experience from the inside, as it were” (p. 64). The personal experience the researcher had with UM-Helen provided depth to the study that would be more difficult to duplicate at an unfamiliar institution. For example, I was aware of UM-Helena had

a large number of first generation student enrolled and minimal support services available to students. Since these services are customary at most higher education institutions, it would have been more difficult to conduct this study at another college where the researcher did not have access to such information.

A letter was sent inviting students who met the qualifications to be involved in the study (Appendix A). Each participant was then called and asked if they would like to participate in the study. Creswell (1998) noted a phenomenological study involves in-depth interviews, “with as many as 10 individuals” (p. 122).

Of the 33 potential participants identified, it became apparent that most were reluctant to participate. Some chose not to participate because of a lack of time. Most did not give a reason for not participating and were not asked for an explanation. It is difficult to determine why so many were reluctant. It may have been due to time considerations, lack of interest, or not being comfortable talking about their experiences.

Nine students out of 33 that met the research criteria were willing to share their stories. This number was a manageable size for conducting individual interviews, provided in-depth data, and was sufficient for saturation of information to occur. Four of the students were known to the researcher prior to the study taking place, one was recommended by a study participant, and the remaining four agreed to participate during the initial phone call and had no prior relationship to the researcher.

The primary data consisted of complete transcripts of the interviews of nine first generation students of color. Each individual student who agreed to participate in the study was provided and briefed on the appropriate informed consent and research protocol forms and parameters.

Creswell (1998) provided the following information in the form of a design process which begins with the telling of a personal experience regarding the phenomenon, then writing questions that explore the meaning of the experience, conducting long interviews where people describe their experience, analyzing the data for salient themes, and reporting the essence of the experience (pp. 54-55).

There are shortcomings involved with conducting phenomenological research. The most important being that the findings cannot be generalized (Van Manen, 1990). Unlike quantitative research, phenomenology cannot be used to show or prove information. Generalization may not be possible, but it is possible to extrapolate information that might be useful to the reader (Patton, 1990). It is up to the reader to determine whether the information is useful. The other critique of phenomenological research is that it does not problem solve (Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological questions are meaning questions; meaning questions cannot be solved and done away with (p. 23). It was not my intent to solve the problems of students of color persisting in college. Indeed, until the research was done, I would not have been aware of what the students perceived as problems. While the findings cannot be generalized, it is my belief the emergent themes and patterns are useful for readers who are working with first generation students of color persisting

in community colleges. After an initial interview of approximately 90 minutes, participants were asked to participate in a focus group to further discuss the experience of persisting in college.

In order to further understand and develop themes and allow for participant interactions, this researcher conducted a focus group interview with the nine students in the study. Creswell, (1998) notes that focus groups will likely yield the best information when participants' experiences are similar and all are willing to actively participate. Morgan (1998, p. 55) notes the importance of focus group composition. He states that all other decisions from recruitment to analysis are contingent on the makeup of the participants. Focus groups allow for purposeful sampling or choosing of the group participants according to the study's goals (Morgan, 1998). Recruiting participants who have directly experienced successful persistence will allow additional insights and deeper understanding. The lived experiences and stories of student persistence were the center of this group interview. The focus group session was also audiotaped and field notes were developed to capture the nuances of the individual and collective stories. The researcher checked with the research participants on the researcher's interpretations of the stories and shared the interpretation of the observations with the participants.

#### Role of the Researcher

I am Hispanic, a native of the United States, lower-middle class, 43 years old, and married with four children. I am a doctoral student, pursuing a degree in

education with a community college leadership emphasis. I am currently employed as the Campus Provost for Minnesota State Community and Technical College at the Detroit Lakes and Wadena campuses, two small (675 and 700 FTE) community and technical college campuses in outstate Minnesota. I hold a Master of Social Work degree. I have served as a counselor, dean of students, campus director and campus provost in community colleges and have provided educational and counseling services to a wide variety of ethnic, socio-economic, and aged students in higher education. I am a product of the community college system and have engaged in the experiences and challenges of persistence.

#### Researcher's Lived Experience

As a child growing up in a small community in rural Montana, I was one of only two Hispanic people whom I knew to live in my entire community. In fact, the only other person I knew with a Spanish-sounding name was my father. My father likely completed high school but was an absent parent. My mother never completed elementary school and held no value in education. All of my siblings, except one, quit high school, married, or entered the Armed Forces. I was a consistently poor student in high school. I was forced to repeat an English course due to excessive absences, boredom, and my experiences of alienation. I experienced very little academic success in high school and completed my education in the bottom tenth of my class. Yet I held a deep and abiding belief that I would enter college and successfully complete a degree.

As an undergraduate student, I sought a minimum of support services. I self-advised and floundered through my unorganized academic plan, and I participated in a study skills course only after landing on academic probation following my first quarter at the university. I somehow graduated (my academic rank was 553 out of a class of 566). After completing undergraduate work in Social Work and with nearly five years of professional experience, I applied for graduate school, completing a Master's Degree in Social Work with a grade point average I had never imagined for myself. During the past several years I have realized I do not completely comprehend, understand, or appreciate the forces that have contributed to my educational persistence.

### The Initial Canvass of Landscape

My personal experiences contribute to the tone of this study. The review of the literature from different perspectives, such as accounts in the article "White Privilege and Male Privilege" (McIntosh, 1988), resonated with the reflections of my childhood experiences. McIntosh relates an "invisible package of unearned assets" such as "I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed" (p. 5). During my graduate school experience, I was also introduced to themes from Howard Zinn, representing a different history of America. I became aware of many truths in Zinn's representation of history. The idea of "context" revealed itself to me in the study of *Color of Fear*, a training video produced by Lee Mun Wah (1994). The men in this video reveal

perspectives and realities that were cathartic for me and brought forward my own experiences. In this regard, the researcher holds an understanding of multiple perspectives regarding the experience of higher education and what it takes to succeed in this environment. I have come to understand that persons of color engage in and experience higher education in a different manner and when adding the element of first generation status, students' experience, much like this researcher's experience, can be unique. This understanding has set the tone for this research.

#### My Understanding of Qualitative Research Methods

As a researcher, I have acquired knowledge and skills in qualitative research and narrative inquiry through the doctorate program in community college leadership at Oregon State University. Observation, facilitation, and interviewing skills have previously been developed through a Master's degree training program in social work as well as my many experiences as a faculty counselor and community college administrator. My content analysis skills were continually refined through doctoral level work.

#### Summary

This narrative inquiry study of the attributes, elements, and experiences of persistence in first-generation students of color explored the stories of the assets and successes of persistence. The methodology is qualitative and derives from

phenomenological methods to specific inquiry in narrative form. It is intended to provide a richer, deeper understanding of student persistence.

Narrative inquiry is an outgrowth of the phenomenological approach of ethnography that several researchers have developed and reported (Bateson, 1994; Gadamer, 1992; Heidegger, 1962; Van Maanen, 1988). This research was further developed by researchers such as Bateson (1994), Bruner (1996), Carr (1986), and Polkinghorne (1988, 1995). Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 1994, 1995, 2000) also further developed the stream of narrative and research into the current narrative inquiry. The hallmarks of narrative inquiry include the development of experience and story, use of participatory inquiry, use of metaphors, and narration of research.

The utilization of story and narration manifested the assets and accomplishments of ethnically diverse, first-generation students. The study shed light on the experiences of nine students and revealed a deeper understanding of persistence and the internal factors and attributes that the students possess and experience.



## CHAPTER 4

*One of the great problems of humanity is that we suffer from a poverty of the spirit, which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially the poorer we have become morally and spiritually.*

*Martin Luther King Jr., (1963)*

### PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

This study was designed to understand the experience of first generation persons of color persisting at a two-year technical community college. Qualitative research techniques were used to provide a rich description of what the experience of attending technical community college as first generation students for these participants.

#### Overview of Analysis

Participants were identified through the BANNER System at The University of Montana Helena College of Technology. They were each mailed a description of the study and a consent forms. Each participant was contacted by phone to confirm their participation in the study and to set up a time for the interview. Each participant was interviewed for approximately 90 minutes. In addition seven of the students participated in a 90 minute focus group interview. Over 70 pages of single-spaced transcribed text resulted from combined interviews with the participants.

Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Each student was given a transcribed copy of their interview and invited to make any necessary changes and provide clarification if necessary. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed and coded. Each transcript was inputted into QSR NUD\*IST version 6 Classic (QSR International, 2002), a qualitative software program. Just fewer than 3,600 text units of one line each were read and assigned codes. At first there was just a list of codes with no organization. As the analysis continued over several months, relationships among the codes became apparent and began to be organized into an outline form. As time went on there were several confirming epiphany moments where relevant themes emerged.

Once all the transcripts had been coded and analyzed, five broad themes emerged with corresponding sub themes. All of the participants were then invited to join in a focus group where each of the themes was presented and discussed. Seven participants participated in the focus group. Two students chose not to attend. The focus group interview was audiotaped and took place in an on campus meeting room. The students did provide feedback on the accuracy of each of the initial themes, the bulk of the focus group became a discussion about being successful in college. The parents in the group shared stories about their children and the motivation that these children provided them. They talked about how school was going for them and which instructors to avoid. They swapped war stories about navigating the financial aid system, and they commented numerous times on how important it was to meet other people of color who were experiencing

the same issues they were. The focus group was scheduled for 90 minutes but lasted just under two hours. The discussion was often lively and filled with laughter and empathy as the students related to each other's experiences.

The following are brief descriptions of each of the participants.

Demographic information is included, as well as information concerning how they came to be students in higher education and why they are attending The University of Montana Helena College of Technology. After the participant descriptions, each of the five themes is presented with its corresponding sub themes.

### Participants

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for each of the participants. The names of children and family members were not used. The pseudonyms used for the nine participants were Tim, Antonia, Patrick, Herb, Debi, Terry, Fred, Judy, and John.

#### Tim

Tim is a 40-year-old man. He is married with five children: three boys and two girls. He is an Ojibwa Native American Indian. Tim has been a student at UM-Helena College for two years and will complete his Associate of Arts degree in spring of 2006. Tim's goal is to continue with school and eventually earn a doctorate in psychology and work with troubled Indian youth, hopefully with

Indian Health Services. Before attending UM-Helena, he worked in the construction industry. An injury at work forced him to retrain, and he started taking classes at UM-Helena.

The other reason Tim decided to attend college was because he wanted to be a positive role model for his children and siblings. Tim spoke proudly of the discussion he and his eldest brother had regarding his attending college. Tim's oldest son, age 21, who has recently returned from military service including a year in Iraq, began his first semester at UM-Helena this past fall. When discussing this transition he said, "My son, all my life, I have pounded into his brain that he needs to go to college if he wants to get a job that is worth having in this world and in this modern time and it took a few extra years and a few years gettin' his rear end kicked in the military but he realized that his place was to go to college." He also proudly notes that another brother began taking classes in the fall, as well. Tim stated, "My brother started attending this fall, the only reason he went to school was because he saw how I was going to school and how I was succeeding and he decided he was going to give it a try. He has a severe disability." He said that his brother had had a brain aneurism and that he shouldn't have lived through that, but he did. Tim is very proud that he is beginning to lay the foundation of higher education in his family.

Tim is not currently employed. His wife works full-time in the hotel industry. When he started college he worked odd construction jobs but said he could no longer put up with the pain. His family now manages with a financial aid

Pell Grant, and student loans. He stated that he is still tempted to do side work in his former construction trade to make ends meet.

### Antonia

Antonia is a 32-year-old female originally from the Dominican Republic, Caribbean. She described this place as an island between Cuba and Haiti and Puerto Rico. She is a single mother and has two children: a seven-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son. Antonia noted that the children's father lives in Helena and has a relationship with the children, but she is responsible for raising her children.

She reported, "I come from a big family. My mom had two marriages. Her first marriage was with my dad, and I have a brother and a sister from that marriage. Then, she had another marriage, and I have two brothers and two sisters from that second marriage that she had. So I have six siblings on my mom's side." In addition Antonia said, "I also have 9 brothers and a sister from my dad's side, so I am from a big family."

Antonia is not only the first in her family to attend higher education but also the first to come to America. On November 29, 1992 with the urging of church members, Antonia came to Seattle, Washington. She spent some time on the Pacific Coast and came to Montana with her daughter's father two years before her daughter's birth. She said, "Out of 23 children, I am the only one in the United States."

Antonia is pursuing a nursing degree at UM-Helena. She has been attending the college for five semesters and will complete all her prerequisites at the end of fall 2005. She noted that it had been a real struggle. With mixed emotions, she stated, "Well, I guess I am very fortunate that I have been trying to pursue this and a different language has been a tremendous, it's very difficult. I feel very good about myself being able to continue on. Even though it takes me like three times as much time." Somewhat chagrined, she further stated, "If it were in my own language...."

Through this journey, she has relied on strong support systems. Antonia noted, "I have two, I have people from the church that have been very helpful. And, previously, like a year ago, my mom was here. And that's why I had signed up for school because if she was here I would have the opportunity to go full time and not worry about if my kids were with someone else, and I knew that they would have the appropriate care because they were with the grandma. Unfortunately, however, a year ago tomorrow, my mom died, and I have to keep going because I have to."

She also noted that there are two people in Helena who have become her support system. First, her children's dad, who takes the children so she can study and second a couple from her church, Janice and Larry. According to Antonia, this couple has helped her tremendously. She noted, "I am like their adoptive child."

Antonia is firm in her conviction to complete her degree. She stated she will continue regardless of how long it takes her to complete it. She noted that she

has two younger sisters who are considering moving to Montana, and she wants to be an example for them to follow.

### Patrick

Patrick is a 49-year-old single father of two adult daughters. His eldest daughter preceded him as a college student and obtained a bachelors degree in Health and Human Services. Patrick is a member of the Little Shell Tribe of the Chippewa. He worked in maintenance for 23 years until an injury ended that career. During this time he had been attending college part-time in the evenings and the injury forced him to enroll full-time to retrain. Patrick is in his third semester and has completed 29 credits.

Patrick's father was born in 1913 and graduated from sixth grade. He noted that, given the times, he was quite proud of that accomplishment as many people didn't attend school during that era. Patrick stated that they typically worked on the farm or the ranch. He believes his mother went through the ninth grade and she withdrew to take care of the rest of the children that were being born with her mother and to take care of the things around the house. She was born in 1916. Patrick is the sixth and youngest child of that union. None of his siblings ever attended college, and only one brother graduated from high school. He aspires to complete his Associate of Arts degree with an emphasis in Business and is on schedule to graduate in May. He proudly stated that he currently carries a 3.71 grade point average.

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Prior to coming back to school, Patrick worked as a custodian for the local school district. Currently, he does not work; he chooses instead to focus on his studies. He lives on financial aid grants, loans, and retraining monies.

### Herb

Herb, age 46, is a sensitive and humorous man who worked in the services areas for much his life. He entered UM-Helena in the spring of 2003 mostly out of curiosity and efficiency. He stated, "I guess why I wanted to learn more about the field of automotive technician, would be I guess mostly a general, wanting to have it for general knowledge." Herb stated that he owns and has owned several cars in varying degrees of disrepair, and he wanted to be able to work on them and also earn some money. Herb stated that his father taught him about thriftiness and taking care of oneself, and he felt this field of study could help him accomplish these two tasks. He is on schedule to graduate in May of 2006 and noted "it took me five semesters. I took the five semester plan (ha, ha, ha)."

Herb resides in Helena with his wife and three children. He is from the Fort Peck Indian reservation. Again alluding to his interest to enter higher education Herb stated, "I know it sounds funny, but one of my kids just got to the age where he could drive, so he wants to have a car, You know how expensive cars are, so I wanted to be able to work on my kids' cars."

### Debi

Debi is an energetic 20-year-old Latina single mother of a 2½-year-old daughter. She married at 16 years of age and had a child out of that marriage. She



was residing in Colorado when her marriage began going bad. Debi stated that, “things went a little rocky, and it ended up in a dissolution of marriage.” When this occurred, she moved to Montana to be closer to her family. She continued, “So now being a single mother, I decided that college is the first step I need to take in order to succeed and take care of my daughter.”

Debi decided to attend college in order to make more money to support her daughter. She knew she had lots of talent and skills, but she felt that she needed a degree to demonstrate to others that she was good at what she did. She would like to complete a baccalaureate degree and understands that she will have to transfer soon but is not decided on where she will transfer. Debi eventually hopes to major in business and attain a managerial type position, and possibly run her own business in the future.

Debi has had sole custody of her daughter and her ex-husband is out of the picture, remaining in Colorado. She says that her mother and new boyfriend have been extremely helpful in providing care for her daughter while she is in classes or studying.

Debi works less than 20 hours per week, through the work study program, in the Registrar’s office at UM-Helena. She expressed that this opportunity has really helped her to attend classes, make some money for living expenses, and learn more about how the school works.

Terry

Terry is a 27-year-old single father of two girls: a 6-year-old and a 4-year-old. He was born in Seattle, Washington, and has “lived all around the United States” including having lived in California, New Mexico, Florida, Texas, Washington, and Montana.

Terry came to Montana from Seattle approximately four years ago. He was trained as a Certified Nursing Assistant in Washington and became a traveling practitioner. Seeing a need in the rural towns of Montana, he transferred to Northeastern Montana and continued this vocation. He expressed concerns that he had had with some of the complexities and difficulties of being a young African-American male in rural Montana. He experienced several incidents of verbal abuse, racial epithets, and threats of bodily harm. Terry stated that at one point he faced threats and harassment directed at his children, in which, his reactions had gotten him in trouble with the law. This precipitated Terry moving to Helena, a larger, more diverse community.

Having completed the required prerequisites for UM-Helena’s Practical Nursing program, he is currently in the first fall semester of that program. Terry intends to continue at UM-Helena through the completion of his Registered Nursing degree. His long-term educational goal is to attend and complete medical school.

Terry noted that because none of his family members, to the best of his knowledge, had been successful in higher education, and because of his strong desire to improve the circumstances of his daughters, he told me, “I have got this really strong drive to make it. Nobody else in my family really has made it. It’s my call. It’s my drive, and I will succeed.”

Unlike several males in his family, he fully intends to be a big part of his children’s lives and be able to provide for them. He stated he wants to have the means, “When they turn 16, I want to be able to give them a good car and other things they need if they get good grades,” as tools to encourage them to go to college. He also stated, “That’s why I want to be financially stable and successful.” He also said he is motivated by demonstrating to his dad that he can be successful in higher education. Terry’s father completed training in barbering and has struggled financially for most of his adult life. Terry said, “I made a promise to him. I told him I am going to do it.” He also wants to prove to himself and his younger brother, whom he is concerned about, that as a young black male, he can be a college graduate.

#### Fred

Fred is originally from Ghana, West Africa. He came to the United States in 1997 after marrying an American citizen. His wife is a Montana native, and they decided to return to Montana. Fred is 46 years old, and he and his wife have one son, a 4 year old boy.

Fred viewed coming to America as an opportunity to pursue a new career. Subsequently, he enrolled at UM-Helena in 1999 and has already completed two Associate level degrees in Computer Technology. One is an emphasis in Programming and the second is an emphasis in Web Master. Now, he is dually enrolled at UM-Helena and Montana Tech, on the UM-Helena campus to pursue a Bachelors of Science in Information Technology. Fred stated that his main goal is to complete his education and, “go back to my country where I can exhibit my talent I learned from America.”

Fred is an extremely dedicated student with good organizational skills. He spends inordinate amounts of time in the college’s student center and library. He described the time management skills he has learned while in school and in the Ghana military and discussed the planning systems he uses at home to keep up with the needs of his family and college study time.

Fred stated that one very challenging aspect of being a college student is his background, or lack thereof, in the English language. When he came to America he saw that he had to really adjust and learn how to speak the American language to get into and be successful in college. He states that a real learning curve was the semester system of American institutions. In Ghana, students attend school year around. Subsequently, if you are in one class you have to stay for the whole year. So, the speed of classes and teaching is more gradual. Conversely, Fred has welcomed the opportunity to share his culture with others on campus and in the

community. He has said that many people with whom he comes into contact are very curious about his culture and he enjoys sharing it with them.

### Judy

Judy is a 24-year-old Latina single mother of a three year old girl. She is currently engaged and plans to marry in the summer of 2006. She graduated from high school in 1999 and entered higher education at UM-Helena in the spring of 2005. She is currently taking transfer courses towards an Associate of Arts with an emphasis in History. She intends to transfer to a four-year institution to complete her teaching credentials and eventually to become a high school history teacher.

She has lived in Montana for four years. Prior to moving to Montana, she lived in Garland, Texas in Dallas County. She noted that her move to Montana was the main motivation to enter into higher education. Judy witnessed, first hand, the economic difficulties of not having a good education. She has utilized, with disdain, “welfare” benefits in Texas and Montana. This has become one of her main motivators to succeed in college. She stated that many members of her extended families have completed college degrees, “on my mother’s side, we have a long line of teachers in my family; my aunts and uncles teach in high schools all around Montana.” Still, higher education was a foreign concept in her home growing up. She is motivated by the successes she has seen with her relatives and by the concerns she has for her younger siblings still living in Texas.

John

John is a 23-year-old single Native American military veteran who served in Iraq. He was born and raised in Montana, and aside from his military experience, has never left the state. John completed his General Equivalency Diploma at age nineteen and entered the military soon after. He dropped out of high school at age seventeen noting that “high school did not offer me anything, and they didn’t want me there anyway.” He is the youngest of five siblings, none of whom completed high school or college. John said that his older brother did go to college for about a year but mostly to party and then dropped out.

When John was seventeen, his girlfriend became pregnant. He said that this also contributed to his dropping out of school. He felt it was his obligation to “provide for my new family.” However, John did not marry the child’s mother, and they split up shortly before he signed up for the military. The mother has since moved out of the state, and other than child support payments, he has lost all meaningful contact with both his son and the mother.

John mentioned several times that he intends to become more involved with his son who is now almost five years old. He said that his mother was divorced twice, and he had little contact with his own biological father. John described his family as fairly poor but states that his mother never let him know that. She worked very hard to provide for him and his siblings. Part of John’s motivation to enter college is to one day support his mother who, according to John, lives “day to day.”

He is completing his second semester right now and is taking general education courses with an intent to transfer into a baccalaureate program in business because, “I can then make good money and not struggle like the rest of my family.” John has stated that he did not expect college to be so difficult. High school was easy, but he rarely attended or participated. He says that he has struggled at times but that he will graduate “no matter what.”

### Results From Participants Interviews

The five emergent themes from the interviews were:

- Internal motivation such as self-determination and pride (in culture),
- Belonging as it relates to relationships with other students of color and support from faculty and staff,
- Finding financial support including financial aid support,
- Finding success as demonstrated by prioritizing college first and identifying and implementing specific success strategies, and
- Confronting barriers and adjusting to college including financial barriers, discrimination, and personal adjustment.

### Themes

The five themes and their corresponding sub-themes are further discussed in the following sections.

### Internal motivation

*Finding our life's meaning and purpose may appear to have little to do with creeds, rituals, or commandments. We therefore fail to see that the search for deeper connections which echoes through our most intimate personal struggles is essentially a spiritual quest.*

*James W. Jones (1995)*

Allen (1999) argued that if students have above average intelligence and a supportive and financially secure environment, it does not take “fire in the belly” to be successful in higher education. Conversely, Allen also notes that in the absence of some or all of these positive support factors, then desire or internal motivation is a significantly necessary attribute.

Each of the students in this study articulated or demonstrated an internal motivation that this researcher understood to be larger than the student. The motivation was benevolent in nature and without exception; the motivation was for the betterment of others in the students' lives. Many of the participants did not or could not describe the source of nor define the said motivation beyond its manifestation to persist. Thus, it is important to define, Raynor and Entin (1982) define internal motivation as the stimulus within the student that incites him or her to action and is based on such factors as initial subjective possibility of success and the nature of the task at hand. For the purpose of this study we will define internal motivation as the students' desire to persist in higher education.

Table one presents and further delineates the theme of internal motivation. The sub-theme self-determination was evidenced in every study participant. Many



also shared specific information regarding their knowledge and pride in their own cultural upbringing. Some descriptions of culture were very direct.

In this study, internal motivation was guided by two underpinning sub-themes as follows: (1) self-determination in persisting in college and (2) understanding and pride in their connection with their culture as illustrated in Table 1 below further delineated in the next section.

Table 1

*Internal Motivation Sub-themes*

Internal Motivation	Tim	Antonia	Patrick	Herb	Debi	Terry	Fred	Judy	John
Self Determination	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Pride in Culture	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X

Self Determination

Self determination as it relates to higher education concerns a student's ability to utilize and employ their strategies and abilities to persist in higher education. Allen, (2004) discussed the concept of self determination as it relates to student persistence in university students. He described self-determination as exerting control over one's environment (p. 467). He argued that there is a fundamental need for students to answer the question, "Why I am I really going to college?" The students in this study, too, had to answer this question. Often, the

answer to their respective questions was the motivation to succeed in college and become a role model to friends and family members. Several of the students related that they saw no other alternative than completing their education. In many cases, from the students' statements they absolutely knew they would continue and complete the degree. In discussing his understanding of the likelihood of completing his degree, Terry responded, "It's been great. I am just excited to get it done. I am highly motivated, highly motivated. The sky is the limit for me. I know that education is finding the key to success and I think I have done that." Similarly, Tim expressed, "Indian people are very self-conscious of their image, and it, you know, even if I am just touching a few people's lives when they see what I achieve, then hopefully that will spread. That motivates me to succeed and feel it every day." Debi noted that her spirit provided an advantage in persisting in college, "I find it an advantage maybe because I am in touch with who I am and I am fluent in another language being Spanish, so I find myself in more advanced position and more prepared to complete college."

### Pride in Culture

Pride in participant's own culture was an important theme for several of the students in the study. *Pride* has both positive and negative connotations, and some students appeared to be apologetic for their sense of pride. For the purpose of this study, *pride* denotes self-respect and satisfaction for the students' cultures and heritages. Students' sense of pride in their cultures became a motivating factor for

different reasons and from differing aspects of connection. First, Patrick explained how his connection to his heritage bridged the gap to a culture that was foreign to him as he shared his connection with his culture, “I participate in sun dances, powwows.” He discussed the spiritual rituals in which he has participated, “I’m in sweats. I’ve done sun dances up in Canada and I have tried to encourage my children to participate.” Patrick related how important this connection was to him and his future generations. He utilized several sources throughout his life to make this strong connection. “I’ve learned from my family because it was removed (his connection to his Native American culture) and then my father’s early death removed a lot (his understanding of his Native American culture) of that also.” Patrick related a poignant history in which his family helped to shape his initial impressions of education. “I remember my grandmother telling me when I was a lad that she went to the Christian school and they told her, ‘You do not speak Cree.’ And it was true was that you don’t say things to the nuns and they don’t hit you anymore. And so that part of the heritage was removed. My grandmother told me about rituals . . . spirit quests and honor.” When encountering higher education he noted that his connectedness with his culture provided a sense of trepidation as a beginning college student, “because they have a different culture and understanding, different regard for others, different regard for some of their peers than I did, and sometimes, I didn’t know how to act around them.”

Others willingly espoused the pride of their culture and, at times expressed a strong desire to share their culture with others. As a result, these participants felt

buoyed by their own sense of history and the opportunity to share important values and traditions with those from the higher education culture. Pride, therefore, became a success factor to the study participants. Tim understood the pride and encouragement his family displayed, “My family has spent a lot of time telling me that they are extremely proud of me for going to school and advancing my life because nobody’s done it before. They encourage me to stay connected to my upbringing but support me in college.” Similarly, Tim related part of his motivation to be successful was the pride in his heritage, “Part of the reason that I try to achieve such high success is to prove to the world that the Indians aren’t as worthless as they are portrayed in much of society.” He went on to say, “Well, first of all, being a Native American, it is a proven fact that American Indians, once they actually go to college they are very successful, and that is because we take great pride in ourselves and we achieve to the highest standard that we possibly can.” It is unknown whether Patrick’s statement was based on actual research finding, however, it was clear that it was a strong belief he held.

Other students in this study also discussed the benefits of introducing their culture into higher education, Terry shared: “Many students said, ‘Let’s get together, I don’t know much about Africa, especially your country, and it is very interesting.’ This was very helpful for me to feel like I fit in.” Likewise, Fred reported that students were, “very interested and needed to know more about my inner self and my background.”

Several students in the study understood the opportunity to connect two cultures and continue to connect their children to both. The opportunity to be a role model was a primary factor for many of the students in deciding to attend college. The majority of study participants maintained and even bolstered relationships with their parents, spouses/partners, and children.

### Belonging

*There are many paths people may choose. I believe you are on the path to becoming a real human being.*

*- The tribe's medicine man to Kevin Costner's character in Dances with Wolves.*

*Belonging* is a concept from college student development theory developed by Rosenberg and McCulloch in 1981 (Schlossberg, 1989). Schlossberg (1989) points to the concept of mattering and notes that students, as a member of a multicultural minority group, can have feelings of not fitting into the larger society. She noted that students of color tend to focus only on the academics, which narrowed their experience to classes and studying.

Understanding that human beings are deeply social creatures, we desire to live, love and work with others whom we know and who know us. The desire to belong is equally universal, although the way it is enacted differs depending on culture.

Some of the students in this study expressed initial ambivalence and confusion regarding whether they belonged in college. Many, though, believed

they belonged in college and were determined to realize their individual understanding. Several of the students in this study described the tools they utilized in finding their sense of belonging and how they developed their own sense of spirit in finding their way as students in college.

Table two presents the theme of belonging. Every participant in this study had negative experiences in education prior to coming to UM-Helena. Often, they attached the negative experience with their ethnicity. Understanding that they could find success was noteworthy. Many noted the support of others as a significant link to a sense of belonging.

Table 2

*Belonging Sub-themes*

Belonging	Tim	Antonia	Patrick	Herb	Debi	Terry	Fred	Judy	John
Faculty Staff support	X	X	X	X		X	X		

One source contributing to students' sense of belonging was the support they received from faculty and staff in the form of validation. Herb related a remarkable turning point in his first semester. He was struggling to some degree and having difficulties finding direction. He remarked, "It wasn't about half way through the semester that my instructor had inspired me to find my niche. I don't

recall exactly what he said, but I found myself and found the confidence to keep going.”

In discussing the experiences in adjustment to college of first-generation students of color, Rendon (1994) noted that making the transitions requires making connections in college. Rendon also discussed the importance of in and out-of-class validation and defined validation as an enabling, conforming, and supportive process initiated by in and out-of-class agents that foster academic and personal development. These processes resonated with Judy. In her accounting of her experiences, Judy noted,

In high school, I was lucky if I was there. I never showed up; I graduated by the skin of my teeth. I was determined if I went back to school it wouldn't be like that. When I started here, I had the help of one really great teacher. He helped me to know I could do this. So, I have studied; I have done the homework; I have done the study groups; and I have committed myself to fulfill the confidence he has in me.

Judy struggled with a sense of belonging in college. This struggle was further complicated by her first generation status as she related; “But it is also a little scary because I can't talk to either my mom or my dad about this because they don't have that experience, so I have to talk to my aunts and uncles and other people that have had it. These conversations helped me to understand that I belonged in college.”

Others, such as Fred, received a sense of belonging while relating to on-campus personnel, “You know, staff, most of my teachers are really awesome. My teacher, Joyce Walborne, she is an adjunct teacher, I wish I would have had her in

high school because she really breaks it down and helps me understand. I never felt stupid around her.”

Debi shared how important not only faculty and staff, but also fellow students, were in supporting her persistence, “Those who help me out in class, people who are going through the same thing as I am, single mothers who are also coming for the same reason, I have been able to talk with them and see that they are on the same basis that I am.”

Herb shared a transformative time for him in his college experience, “My instructor kind of took me under her wing, and she encouraged me to do more and say more about myself and put myself into the class as a Native American. I did poorly on one exam, and I went to talk with her. After talking with her, my instructor realized that I knew the material, but for some reason I didn't do well on the test. After that she held regular sessions with me, and we kept the lines of communication open. I began to do well, but if she had just blown me off, I probably would have continued to do poorly in the class.”

### Finding Financial Support

The study participants discussed strategies to finding financial support while attending UM-Helena. All of the students voiced concerns about financial resources and three sub-themes to securing financial funding emerged: students held little or no good knowledge of financial aid programs prior to attending college; none of the students believed they could have persisted without financial



aid; and despite the financial aid students received, they had to utilize family and friends for assistance including covering childcare.

Table 3 presents and further delineates the theme of finding financial support. This was a critical area for most participants. The absence of knowledge of the higher education system and how to finance their education was present in the majority of the participants. Further, all the students believed they could not have stayed in college without some kind of financial assistance. Every participant in this study developed a strong network and sought out support from family and friends.

Table 3

### *Finding Support Sub-themes*

[illegible]

### Knowledge of Financial Aid

It is common knowledge that financial aid assistance is extremely important in strengthening the retention and persistence of college students. The College Board (1996) presented, although tuition increases have slowed in recent years, the price tag for attending college which is up 35 percent from five years ago is still high by historic standards. Wasley reported in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2006) article that federal spending on Pell Grants actually declined from 2005 to 2006, and that the maximum grant now covers only 33 percent of the average total cost of attending a public institution, including room and board and other expenses above tuition.

Given these and similar findings, funding higher education can clearly be understood as one of the biggest concerns of students entering college; many incoming college students worry that they will not be able to afford such a venture. The same was true with the participants of this study.

Several participants cited a total lack of knowledge regarding financial support and financial aid eligibility. Patrick discovered he was eligible for the Montana Indian fee waiver quite by accident. He noted with a bit of disgust, “The Indian fee waivers, nothing was mentioned about that. Even when I was doing my part time classes, nothing was mentioned, or when I first came in, none of that was mentioned to me.”

Some, such as Debi, learned to rely on a network of fellow college students, “I heard about it (financial Aid) through friends. They said get on the FAFSA

online, do it and see what you are granted, see how it helps you out to fund your schooling.”

Because none of the study participants initially knew about financial aid, many combined their familial resources to locate formal resources as related by Judy:

My mom and I will never forget the person who helped us in admissions and financial aid, Ms. Ice. Oh, we still rave about her because it was that person...we would not have made that kind of connection had she not assisted us the way she did. We did not have any money. We found out that I could apply for financial aid late, and I qualified. Everything went really well. Once we got started with the aid, we do not remember any problems with my financial aid at all. We needed the financial aid. I don't know what would have happened if we did not have it. We could have gone in any direction. I do not know. That was what sort of helped us. I believe she was a financial aid counselor because she helped us get all our paperwork together. And I mean time-to-time again, she was always our contact.

John also shared his experience with a college staff person who became one of his support systems, “She taught me things that I had no idea existed. She was like a mother to everyone there at the campus. She brought me into the awareness of a lot of things--both personally, academically, and things within society. She was a very knowledgeable lady, and I respect her very much as well did a lot of other students. She was a jewel. Everybody respected her and she was a wonderful person.”

The occurrence of financial assistance came in many forms. One participant, Antonia, shared the following as an example of how friends provided indirect financial support, “Well, you know, sometimes I have problems dealing with being a single parent and college student. My kids are away all day. Child care

is very difficult and it is very expensive. Fortunately, I have people that don't charge me; they charge me nothing at all, but when they go on vacation, I mean, they have lives too, they can't be here 24/7 for me. They don't do too many things, so they can be available because they know I can't find day care. The day care is very expensive, like \$15 per kid, so, yeah, it is difficult, the day care. But I have never stopped coming to school because they have always been there for me and my kids."

Debi has utilized both friends and formal programs to cover the difficulties of childcare. She said, "Through the government there is some help that helps with day care for those who have a certain slide scale based on how much you make. Mostly, my friends will offer to help watch my daughter. I feel more comfortable when she is with people I know, so, yeah, that gives me the ability to also attend school; to have my daughter watched in a licensed day care or with my friends."

### Finding Support

During the interviews, the students described their support systems as integral components of their ability to persist and find success in college. They did identify that they themselves were the largest contributors to their own success.

Tim was very cognizant of the support he had received from family members, "Another major contribution to my success is the support my family has given me, especially my wife. There is a couple times that I have thought about stopping school and going out and getting jobs because the money is tough and my

wife has told me straight out, ‘No, you ; you will go to school; and you will finish.’” My older brother, Joe, ... probably the first time in our lives he has just walked up to me and he actually did this; he walked up to, he just said, ‘I am so proud of you, that you are going to school and getting a degree,’ which is something he has never done in our lives, where he just... so family support is really huge in helping to achieve.”

Likewise, Herb discussed the support he received from his wife, “She really helped me a lot my first year. She encouraged me when I was down and always supported my decision to go to college. I took three classes with her the in the first year, and she really helped me a lot in understanding how to work at the college level because I have never had to perform at this type of education level before. She was very huge in my success in college”.

### Finding Success Strategies

*When you walk with purpose, you collide with destiny.*  
- Larry Anderson, Vice President, Fond Du Lac Tribal and  
Community College

When commenting on strategies they have employed that have contributed to their success at UM-Helena, five of the students in this study cited the following contributing success factors: utilizing calendars and schedules, completing a college success course, prioritizing college, sharing their own culture, and utilizing the Learning Center and other support services.

Several of the students in this study were able to apply some of the fundamental study skills as put forth by Pauk (1993) such as setting individual academic and personal goals; understanding, seeking out, and utilizing on and off-campus resources; meeting and getting to know faculty and staff; and managing their time better. The students actively began to use the reading skills they had developed and developed strong listening and note-taking skills as well as their writing and communication skills (Pauk, 1993). Most interestingly, they developed most of these skills and resources through the networks they had developed as students of color.

These students began to understand the notion of motivation and self-determination. Motivation has a strong influence on how well students perform in college. The first-generation students of color learned to not develop a "slave mentality" and believe they were performing tasks that were required by their instructors but were utterly meaningless to them. In contrast, these students were

able to see how their college work fit into their plans thus becoming willing and strong students.

Table 4 presents and further delineates the theme of success strategies the students employed. Many of the students utilized traditional strategies such as calendaring and scheduling and taking courses intended to assist in persistence. Several of the students explicitly chose to place a priority on their education. Lastly, many of the students understood that sharing their cultural background and beliefs assisted them to persist.

Table 4

*Success Strategies for Persistence Sub-themes*

Strategies for persistence	Tim	Antonia	Patrick	Herb	Debi	Terry	Fred	Judy	John
Calendaring	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Scheduling									
College Success course		X	X		X	X		X	X
Prioritizing College	X	X	X			X	X		X
Sharing own culture		X	X	X			X		

Learning to manage time effectively was a key factor for many of the students. Fred found he needed to study as much as possible while his son was in school; otherwise, he had to “sneak off” to find time to study. Fred also

commented that getting a good start is important, “pour it on from the beginning so you don’t get into the hole.” Patrick agreed that adjusting his schedule by taking fewer classes was the biggest factor for his success.

Terry expressed the notion of making college his job. At some point, he said, “I wasn't going to let earning a living and leading a social life interfere with my opportunity of getting through college. I came to understand that if I had to go, then it had to be something other than school.” Likewise, Tim noted, “My job was a short-term, dead-end proposition anyway. I didn't want to get bumped out of school just to work 48 hours a week for minimum wage”.

Patrick points to a College Success class he took during his first quarter, where he learned about resources on campus that became a big help to him. He also stated that this class helped him learn note-taking strategies. “You take notes of anything the teacher writes down. If the teacher thinks it’s important enough to write it on the board, then you should write it down.”

Antonia said frankly, “I finally decided what I was trying to do in college.” She related that she needed to talk with a counselor to get help with this and understood that that was why they were there. She noted, “I had to find out exactly how I was going to go about finishing what I started with college.” These steps helped her to determine what classes were required and what classes weren't, and she began taking the correct ones. She said, “After that, I could see myself progressing, and you knew I could graduate.”



### Adjusting to College

*Going to college is like moving to a new planet, but a planet with no gravity . . . It is a time of reassessment, instability, fear, excitement, experimentation, adjustment, risk. College is a time for testing the spirits, and having one's own spirit tested.*

*- Hindman (2004)*

Finally, when discussing what barriers, if any, they had experienced as a first generation students of color at UM-Helena and how they confronted these barriers, four distinct barriers were identified: inadequate funding or finances for college; feelings of discrimination; the public's stereotyping of them; and adjusting to school.

Tim talked about some of the difficulty he experienced when first enrolling in college. He said, "It is hard when you walk into class and realize that there are only maybe one or two other minorities in the class. So if the instructor has this attitude of not caring, then you really feel as though you have no support in this class, and it's like you are on your own."

Debi didn't necessarily feel that faculty discriminated against her, but she did relate that they did not completely understand her. She related the following interaction that revealed the lack of understanding, "My one professor named some book during class and said, 'I'm sure all your parents have read this because I know of your parents are probably 50-55 years old.' I was like, dang, because that happened to be my grandma's birthday, and I told my friend next to me that my grandma just turned 62 and my parents aren't like 50 or 55." She felt very different

because her parents were in their early forties and clearly unlike the “normal” parents to which the instructor had referred.

Several of the study participants related that when they were not doing well in high school or in a particular course, their teacher would likely say, "Oh, well, drop the course or there is nothing I can do for you, and there's nothing you can do." As a result, several students indicated they were initially reluctant to reach out to faculty members, to visit during office hours, etc.

Many factors contributed to the success of the students in this study. Several barriers also existed, creating challenges for these first generation students to overcome. Three distinct barriers were identified: 1) finances, 2) discrimination and stereotyping by general public, and 3) adjusting to college. Table five is a representation list of the barriers, cross-referenced to the student with which each barrier is attributed.

Table 5 presents and further delineates the theme of confronting barriers. While the barrier of financing their education was present in every participant's experience, the most important theme was the perception or evidence of discrimination or public stereotyping of the students based on their ethnicity. This also affected the student's adjustment to college. Students experienced both positive and negative adjustments to being a college student.

Table 5

*Confronting Barriers Sub-themes*

Barriers	Tim	Antonia	Patrick	Herb	Debi	Terry	Fred	Judy	John
Finances	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Discrimination and public's stereotyping	X	X		X	X		X	X	X
Adjusting to college		X			X	X	X		X

**Confronting Barriers**

While it was reported that some of the students felt ambivalent toward their chances of success in college, the opportunities presented in succeeding in higher education far exceeded their hesitations. The students in this study did encounter several barriers as have many students of color who entered higher education before them.

**Finances**

All of the students participating in this study received state and/or federal assistance at some time in their life. All were acutely aware of the struggles to survive and succeed without appropriate levels of financial support. Three of the men in the study felt “forced” to enter higher education to secure gainful employment. Tim was quite blunt, “Actually what prompted me to come back to school was the fact that I got injured on the job and I tried to keep working through

the injury and I just could not handle doing manual work in pain every day and I just decided that I was going to go back to college and get a job where I don't have to be in constant pain." Still, Tim said he was concerned about how it was going to turn out. "I was making good money; construction pays well when you get the right job. I have never been able to save much money and did not know how I was going to pay for school and support my family. My wife worked but I knew that would not be enough."

Patrick said he was in a satisfying job, "I was working 23 years with the school district. Occupational disease ended that career and before I knew it, I had to be back in school. I had taken classes before but I had a job then. This was going to be very different." Similarly, John said he never made much in while in the military. Given that he wasn't fully aware of how to access his military benefits he was concerned how he might pay for college without a real income.

### Discrimination

During the interviews, and also in the focus group, the theme of feeling discriminated against surfaced repeatedly. Every student brought up discrimination at least once. The students felt discriminated and stereotyped by the general public, public assistance and some, but not all areas of UM-Helena. This theme was very acute in several of the student participants. Their voices would raise and some became angry, while others seemed exasperated as they tried to convey their feelings of frustration at systems that did not recognize or value them.

Tim strongly believed several classes were taught with bias against Native Americans, “As far as here at UM-Helena, I was really disappointed in the Native American Culture class that I took and I did file a complaint with the college after I took the class. The instructor was telling the students that the Native American culture was a cult and that they practice prostitution and that the spiritual leaders are false, etc.”

Others expressed their experience of feeling discriminated against by some of the staff’s response to their applications. John said, “A popular myth suggesting that Native American students do not need financial assistance exists because they think we get all this tribal money and federal dollars. It just isn’t true.” All of the students in this study received financial aid. Judy talked about her experience at the “welfare office.”

It is still hard for when they think you are a Mexican. If you go in there they tell you right off that you’re capable of getting a job. They said to write down everything I had, and when I did they said I wasn’t eligible. They told me I had a car. I said, it [the car] doesn’t even run. But they said; sorry you’re not eligible.”

Financial aid offices at most campuses have difficulty pleasing every student. The application process for federal financial aid can be confusing and students can experience a great deal of frustration navigating the system. For three of the students in this study the difficulties felt more personal. Terry, who is also a single father, spoke of his frustrating encounter with the Financial Aid office where

he was told to write a letter and have it signed by his daughters' mother proving he had provided support of his children. His perception was that because he was Black, the office was requiring this "extra" step and that White fathers did not have to go through a similar process. Terry also relayed that in the hallway leading to the Financial Aid Office there is a poster of a Latina single mother with her young son. Terry's thought was, "why is it any different for women than men, and where is the poster of the Black dad?"

Patrick talked about experiencing frustration in his Early Childhood Education class. The class was watching a film that discussed men and women's traditional roles in society, and how some men who work with young children may be seen as "gay pedophiles." Patrick continued to say how it appeared that everyone in the class seemed to agree with this stereotype, and he walked out of class with the intention of quitting school. After speaking with his instructor, he developed the courage to share his experience with the class of being a big contributor to raising his children. Patrick said he felt better afterward, but still believes this stigma exists.

Herb related a telephone conversation he had with one of the admissions staff. Herb said, "She asked me a couple of inappropriate questions. One, because it is prejudice to ask, but she just asked. How old are you now, how come you want to come back to school now, and your older brother, Joe, do you know where he is?" Herb was convinced the admissions person asked because his brother had

attended previously and possibly owed the college money. He felt like the admissions person was trying to discourage him from attending because he is Native American and his brother was a failure at the college. Antonia, noted difficulties with some instructors while others were extremely helpful:

The first semester I had Audrey, and I have learned so much from her. Now, this semester, I am in love with this semester because of my teachers. I found Tricia gosh, very helpful, you learned a lot with her. But, in my Medical Terminology class I never learned anything last semester. I am taking that class over again because I think the teacher did not like me. She just never explained anything to me even when I asked lots of questions, but I am taking it again and it has been helpful.

Antonia continued, “Because I have found teachers here that tell me that they do not trust my English to go into the hospitals and take care of the patients. Because they think I will make a bad decision because my limited English.” This was a tremendous frustration for Antonia and she reported the incident to the Director of Nursing.

### Adjustment to College

Six of the students in this study spoke of their initial difficulties adjusting to school. Three of the six students were fathers and they said they found that going to college is harder than working, and had initial difficulties managing time and school schedules. Tim came to college after being laid-off from his construction job. Tim had worked in the construction field for most of his adult life and his recent back injury convinced him he needed to find another career. He described

the difficult transition from being a site foreman and teaching new employees the ins and outs of construction to being a full-time student taking a variety of general education requirements.

It's so much harder. If I came here and I only took classes in one subject I could get very focused on one thing and I could be the best at it. There's no doubt in my mind. But I have to take all these different classes and they seem to have no connection. It is very stressful to keep all the different subjects straight. I was in classes that I had no interest in, classes that I had to develop an interest in order to do well in it. Some things like Statistics for instance, the subject is not that complicated but ... the way I had to learn it was very difficult.

Herb commented that school is more stressful than work. "When work is over, you can leave it at work. You can't leave the stress at school. When the classes are over, the stress of homework, juggling schedules and finding time to concentrate just begin." Patrick agreed that sometimes school is really stressful, and he sometimes takes this stress out on his kids at home; "There were times that I felt really stressed out. My first semester, I was not doing too well in school and I brought that home. That attitude affects my kids and then my kids' attitudes start and I have to deal with another stress." He added, "At first, this was harder than when I worked a full-time job" though he did admit that as he continued in college it did get more manageable.



Antonia was very disturbed by the reaction of the faculty members as she attempted to adjust to college life. “After I went to the Nursing Department I felt like there is no humanity there. They don’t care if you are struggling or not, they do not appreciate that you are there 24/7. I didn’t find very much hope in the teachers like I have found with other teachers in other classes.” Antonia said this severely affected her ability to adjust to college:

Time is a serious issue. I’d love to have more time to spend with my kids. I would like to be able, when I have a break from school, to be able to take him somewhere. But because I am so busy, you can’t take them anywhere. We sit around the house and work in the yard. They want to get up and go somewhere and then I have to explain to them we just don’t have time to do many fun things it’s just not the same as before school started.

Debi noted her busy schedule made adjustments difficult, “After I am done with class, I go and take an hour and think about it. I had a bad time last semester because my daughter was having some trouble also and it was bad and then I had to be running all over the place but in the end things worked out.”

## Human Spirit

The term *spirituality* has been defined in the literature in many different ways. Mattis, (2000) defined spirituality as a complex belief system in a supernatural dimension of life or a personal relationship with God and holding intrinsic beliefs and value. Love and Talbot (1999) maintained that spirituality is a

process that involves the pursuit for discovering direction, meaning, and purpose in one's life. Similarly, Fukuyama & Sevig (2005) describe spirituality as an innate capacity and tendency to move towards knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness, and compassion. While some will use the terms *spirituality* and *spirit* interchangeably, for the purpose of this study the researcher has separated the two terms and defined the term *spirit* to describe the essence of an individual based on, and formulated by, their experiences. Thus, spirit becomes a driving force or personal worldview of an individual or small group.

It is also important to differentiate *spirit* from religiosity. Religion is defined by Parks (2000) as a shared system of beliefs, principles, or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe. Conversely, spirituality is viewed to be a search for meaning and value in life, transcendence, wholeness, purpose, and apprehension of spirit as the animated essence at the core of life (p. 16). Traditionally, religion has been the formal means of manifesting spirituality, but Ingersoll (1994) discusses finding a sense of spirituality outside of organized religion.

The components of spirit that were manifest in the students in this study were the transcendent abilities to find meaning and connectedness, strive forward towards a goal, and find balance in their lives. Chae et. al. used the term spirit as a

means to denote similar characteristics in describing the internalized and fully lived experiential components of an individual (2004).

When examining spirit in students as related to higher education Herndon (2003) found that spirit bolstered resiliency and provided a sense of purpose in students of color. Students of color face every day stresses that can be viewed as extreme. The negative effects of these stresses can be mitigated through the manifestation of spirit in students of color (Carroll, 1998).

#### Summary

When viewed individually, students in this study manifested and retold stories that can be typical of many college students and their struggles in persisting in college. The group of students in this study, though separate from the traditional literature because of the holistic and synergistic phenomenon of Human Spirit. The barriers of financial support, belonging and adjustment to college are not particularly significant or unique. The internal motivation, self determination and the ability to turn a foreign environment and difficult odds into positive relationships with family and the college community, as well as, the intrinsic motivation to write a better future for their loved ones and children is quite significant.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

*I am not a motivator. Motivation is not something that you can provide others; it has to come from within.*

*- Mike Van Deist, Coach of four-time national Champion Carroll College football*

Two-year community and technical colleges continue to be institutions of choice for students all over the country, and the state of Montana is no exception. Current numbers have the state's participation rates of community colleges at 48% of the total number of students in higher education (OCHE, 2006). On a national scale, it is projected that the number of college undergraduate students from 1995 to 2015 will increase by 19% from 13.4 million to more than 16 million, Carnevale and Fry (2000). Further, according to Carnevale and Fry, 80% of the enrollment growth will be "minorities – African American, Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander" students. Carnevale and Fry predict that minority enrollments will increase in absolute numbers and percentage of total enrollments. Additionally, rates of academically and economically disadvantaged students entering higher education via the community college have increased steadily over the past several years and have been reported at 38% and 24%, respectively. Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn and Terenzini, (1998) stated that the disproportionately large numbers of students of color and first-generation students enrolling in community colleges may warrant a more proactive student development component.

The students in this study all intended to persist in higher education. Not all and maybe none of them possessed a distinct plan when they enrolled at UM-Helena. They arrived at the college for a number of various reasons; from the need to retrain, to a desire to learn additional skills, to the aftermath of a bad relationship, to the necessity to provide for their children and loved ones. However, it is not accurate to say any of the students in the study were forced to become college students. On the contrary, students made a conscious choice to challenge themselves, find purpose, and seek growth in their lives. As a result, all experienced significant life changes as a consequence of their decision to enroll in college.

It is a fair assumption that, at some point, all students struggle with some aspect of persisting in higher education. It is equally important to understand the general characteristics of first-generation students. Nunez (1998) study concerning first-generation students found:

- First-generation students were more likely to be older, have lower incomes, be married, and have dependents than their non-first-generation peers.
- First-generation students were less likely to be white, non-Hispanic, than their non-first-generation counterparts and more likely to be Hispanic (11 percent versus five percent) (Figure 2).
- Compared with their counterparts, first-generation students were also more likely to be female (57 percent versus 51 percent)

- First-generation students were equally as likely to be taking remedial classes as non-first-generation students when they began their postsecondary education.
- First-generation students were also more likely to say that obtaining the amount of financial aid they needed, being able to complete coursework more quickly, being able to live at home, and being able to work while attending the school were very important influences in their decision to attend their particular postsecondary institution.
- First-generation students persisted in postsecondary education and attained credentials at lower rates than their non-first-generation counterparts.

These facts provide a better understanding that the phenomenon of white students whose parents completed a higher education degree is more common and those parents provided the opportunities of invaluable insights, support, and guidance. Role models and societal support systems are more readily available to these second and third generation white students.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of first generation students of color to gain a richer understanding of the elements that contributed to their persistence while attending a two-year technical college. Through in-depth interviews (see Appendix E) and a follow up focus group the students were able to tell and retell their stories and experiences related to persisting in higher education. From their stories five themes emerged: internal motivation, belonging, finding support, finding success strategies, and confronting

barriers and adjusting to college. The study also resulted in providing a better understanding of how UM-Helena and other like two year institutions can assist first generation students of color in persisting in college. Chapter Four of this study identified several factors related to the barriers encountered and persistence strategies employed by first generation students of color.

Over the course of several months, the data were reviewed and analyzed including reviewing field notes, discussing findings with colleagues, additional participant checks, and numerous hours of reflective contemplation. The underlying question was how the findings related back to the purpose of the study. For example, what did internal motivation or belonging really mean in the context of the experience in higher education of first generation students of color? As a result of this deeper analysis, a richer understanding of the experience of these students was achieved.

The purpose of this additional analysis was to understand what the identified themes actually meant and how they related to the student's experiences. An outcome of this further analysis was the identification of three relevant findings that may have significance for first generation persons of color attending a two-year college. This analysis produced individual portraits of the participants' progression of events in their educational lives as they persisted through their college experience at a two-year college. Each of the nine portraits was as unique and insightful as the individuals interviewed. The portraits also provided stories that

produced poignant data that were used in understanding the first-generation community college students' of color experience in higher education.

The most readily apparent finding, is that attending higher education assisted students in rediscovering their own inner strengths and resiliency, and it allowed them to understand that they belonged in higher education and that they could persist and succeed in this environment. This factor was primarily identified through the theme of internal motivation and belonging, and it was also connected with the themes of finding success strategies. Students were initially ambivalent about their roles as students and whether they belonged in higher education, which forced them to seek out support and engage their underlying internal motivations, abilities, skills, and resourcefulness. The success strategies that students discovered and utilized such as understanding their internal motivation and relying on their cultural underpinnings were beneficial in transitioning into and navigating through higher education.

Second, as students began to find themselves in higher education, their persistence interacted with their current family dynamics and improved relationships with their families, children, and spouses. This factor was primarily identified through belonging and finding financial support themes. The issue of serving as a positive model for their children and families was important to all of the participants. At first glance this would appear to be counterintuitive. The strengthening of family relationships and increased familial support was one manifestation of *Human Spirit*. Students understood the value of living in both



familial and educational relationships and reconciled success in both realms. The following interchange from Tim illustrated this interaction as Tim related, “Other than my self-determination, I just basically said I am going to do this, for my family, to give them a better life, and to improve my own life.” Subsequently, he related, “my family has spent a lot of time telling me that they are extremely proud of me for going to school and advancing my life because nobody’s done it before.” The interaction and cyclical benefit of these two phenomena personifies this aspect of *Human Spirit*. Similarly, Judy related the relationship building outcomes as a result of support she received, “My husband puts our daughter to bed so that I can have that time to do home work and study.” She also noted, “Sometimes, when it is quiet, he and I are able to spend special time together. I appreciate him so much more. He is kind to me and understands my challenges.” Tim also shared this intimate relationship with his brother as a result of his commitment to persist in college and his family’s recognition and pride, “I mean, then it all becomes sacrifice, you know, like, my brother Joe, the one that patted me on the back and told me how proud he was of me, he went hunting for two weeks this year, just for two weeks out of his life to go hunting and he wanted me to go with him and, you know, that would be an experience that would be remembered with me for the rest of my life.” Surely, the spirit of both adult siblings positively affected their lives.

The third, and perhaps most complex discovery, was how quickly and often the first generation students employed their own sense of *Human Spirit* at times to persist despite seemingly insurmountable odds to persist in higher education. The

students demonstrated the characteristics of resiliency as defined in the literature as an individual's ability to deflect, reinterpret, or otherwise circumvent risk factors that are presented through challenging and compromising circumstances (Taylor, et al, 2003) and more notably as resiliency is illustrated by students of color (Alva, 1991; Ceja, 2004; Gandara, 1982). Specifically, Ceja (2004) discussed educational resilience as the ability to develop a certain consciousness or mental outlook that allows students to form a critical perspective of their surroundings and lived experiences that in turn allow them to cope, survive, and in many cases thrive within those experiences. The manifestation of these driving forces allowed the students to overcome difficult circumstances and persist despite daunting odds.

Prior to attending higher education at a two-year institution, all of the students in this study experienced negative experiences in education. Many were victims of stereotyping or racism from fellow students, staff, or administrators. Consequently, they brought many hesitations into the beginning of their post secondary academic careers.

Many of the students understood their spirit derived, in part to external support factors. Antonia shared a memory of encouragement from close friends in her church, "hearing them saying that 'You are intelligent, you can do it, don't let those people put you down'." helped her to realize her own strengths and fortitude as following continued barriers including instructors' perceptions of her ability such as, "Because I have found here teachers here that tell me that they are not trusting here for my English to go into the hospitals and take care of the patients.

Because they think I will make a bad judgment because my English. Maybe they didn't mean it that way but that is what they said to me. And I think they think it too, because they look in my eyes and they tell me, you know, 'I am kind of worried about it because of your English',” she continued, “still, I am going to pursue for being a nurse, I think that I can do it, I mean, I know I can do it.” Fred also related discouraging feedback he initially received from family members, “They said it was hard to do with kids. I mean, it is hard. He also revealed his own initial self doubt, “I think that just the fact that I am a young black male, you know, a lot of people in my age range don't make it. They are out there doing drugs or gang banging, committing crimes and doing a whole bunch of other bad stuff.” Fred's reaction to these negative forces was, “but you just do it”. He coined the seminal quote regarding *Human Spirit* when he said, “I am going to do it. It is a simple as that.”

The students were aware of climate of the two-year college, but they were more motivated by the social interactions that occurred during their attendance on and off campus. With all the students in the study, familial obligations and connections with individuals at the campuses played vital roles in influencing their persistence.

Every participant identified a person or persons outside of their immediate family who aided in their persistence as a first generation student. In most cases, the individuals that the participants identified were faculty or administrators at the community college, but in some instances, the individuals were members of the

community at large or fellow students. In either case, first-generation students do seek the advice, counsel, and support of members outside of their immediate families as a practice of persistence. They equally utilized formal and informal resources and information including college faculty and staff members not necessarily assigned or directed to assist or serve the individual students. More often, they found members of the college community that had a reputation as being willing to serve as a mentor. This conclusion reinforced the extreme importance of mentoring and the hiring processes at community colleges. Roueche and Roueche (1994) support the idea that the hiring process at all levels of the community college is paramount to the success of its students.

Several students identified numerous positive factors from their attendance at a community college such as broad affiliations with other students, faculty, and administrators of color. They noted that these categories of people played a significant role in their attendance, but the connection would have been stronger with people that looked like them. Student activities were another source of potential affirmative social experiences that were identified. Activities surrounding Hispanic, Native American, or African-American themes were notably missing from their experience.

However, many constructive academic experiences were mentioned as well. Highly effective levels of instruction ranging from Associate of Applied Science degree (AAS) programs and remedial instruction to transfer curriculum were identified. Environmental factors such as the number of other people of color or

initial openness to their participation in college were of particular concern to the students in the study. Awareness and understanding of the programs and activities provided the students with a sense of belonging at their campuses. A study done by Pope (1998) posited the design that life outside of the classroom was just as significant to students of color as inside the classroom. The author stated that student development professionals must continue to understand the ways in which racial identity and other social and cultural variables may influence non-white students, their development, and their response to various programs, curricula, policies, and services. The study participants did identify many encouraging experiences throughout their attendance. Positive social experiences were also identified by the group, but their perceptions tended to be based on relationships with individuals or small groups.

Table 6 presents a comparison of the success factors for first generation students of color as found in the literature review and the success factors for the participants that were identified through this study. The main difference appears to be that the attributes of the student participants represent a more culturally-centered family orientation reflecting a determination to succeed.

Table 6

*Comparison of Factors Contributing to Persistence and Success in College*

Retention Literature	Persistence Study Participants
Personal motivation and commitment (Allen, 1999; Elkins, Braxton and James, 2000)	Self determination, spirit, and resilience
Institutional Commitment (Strauss, 2004; Tinto, 1993)	Sense of belonging

In this study, spirit and resilience were similar in that both put the responsibility for success on the individual. Spirit has been argued as a complex belief system in a supernatural dimension of life or a personal relationship with God, holding intrinsic beliefs and values (Mattis, 2000). Love and Talbot (1999) maintained that spirit is a process that involves the pursuit for discovering direction, meaning, and purpose in one's life. Given Love and Talbot's definition, the students rediscovered their own spirit in finding their sense of being and belonging in higher education. The students accomplished this discovery through their own self-determination and resiliency by relying on resources often thought of as deterrents or hindrances; their immediate family members.

Another factor contributing to persistence according to retention literature, is academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993, 1987, Boyle, 1989), which assists researchers in determining institutional fit. Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) forwarded this thought in examining the separation stage of Tinto's retention model

as it relates to support, values, and commitment. For students in this study, the connection to Tinto's research was prioritizing college. The students found fit because they were committed to completing college thus allowing the students to integrate into the new environment. The study participants, after initially struggling with their college environment, chose to make college a major priority in their life. This was no small feat as it meant, often times, neglecting the important cultural and family commitments already in place. A major contributing factor to this prioritization or commitment that leads to integration was having clearly defined goals. Study participants demonstrated the ability to be proactive and to focus on a goal. The students utilized several strategies including keeping precisely detailed calendars, participating in college success courses, and rationing family time.

Another remarkable finding in this study was the comparison of retention strategies from the literature and success strategies employed by the study participants. As stated previously in the literature review, many researchers have examined the phenomenon of student attrition; as a result, they have provided countless recommendations and tactics to retain students in higher education. Some of the findings appear to be somewhat cynical of the notion that students can fully integrate into the higher education culture. Barefoot (2004) noted that some of the attributes that students bring to the college environment, such as goal commitment and determination are more difficult to measure. Similarly, Human Spirit was difficult to measure but was very apparent in the countenance of the

students in this study.

Related to the issues of fit, values, and goals many of the study participants understood one of the barriers that they had to confront was adjusting to college. Many pointed to their commitment to their personal goals to succeed. Tim stated, “I just basically said I am going to do this for my family in order to give them a better life and to improve my own life.” Like many others, Tim could not specifically articulate the motivations or underpinnings of the motivations; he only knew that they had occurred. Similarly, Antonia knew in her own words, “I wanted to do better for myself. I wanted to feel better about myself, and I wanted to finish what I started.” In order to do this, she had to adjust to the demand of college. She went on to say, “I think that I can do it. I mean... I know I can do it, and I will do anything I have to do to get it done.” John talked about his adjustment to college in this respect, “I know... I think that most people they get scared when they don’t do well the first semester, but I go back and say well, I am doing this and whatever it takes I am here to stay.” Patrick also spoke of the significant commitment he made that allowed him to adjust to college. When discussing entertaining dropping out at one point he said, “I have not done that because I have my mind set. This is what I wanted to do, and this is what I want to be, and I know that that is what helped me to find myself a long time ago.”

Table 7 presents a comparison of the literature review on retention and persistence. The main difference appears to be the focus on institutional initiatives



and examining the attributes of the student that allow for success in higher education.

Table 7

*Comparison of Retention versus Persistence in College*

Retention Literature	Persistence Study Participants
Institutional fit (Tinto, 1990 & 1993)	Adjusting to college
Financial difficulties (Schobert, 2000; Watson, 2001)	Knowledge and access to financial resources
Cultural discontinuity (Ledlow, 1992)	Discrimination, lack of culturally sensitive support

As previous literature notes, students experience increased difficulties in persistence due to the lack of financial support and all of the study participants identified their own lack of financial support as a barrier to their own persisting in college. For the students in this study, having a general knowledge of financial aid or financial support outside of their family support system was almost nonexistent. Terry noted the positive way financial support enhanced his ability to persist he said, “It has carried me up to this time.” He revealed that as he began to consider college, “I never knew of anything like financial aid existed.”

The majority of the study participants were severely threatened by poverty and were subsisting primarily on financial aid, including extensive college loans. Some of the study participants received welfare benefits and childcare assistance.

Additionally, because of perceived discrimination, some of the study participants allowed this perception to perpetuate the behavior to not investigate sources of financial aid assistance as they were largely unaware of federal financial aid programs that would benefit them.

The first generation students of color in this study also encountered perceived discrimination that discouraged their participation in higher education. Fred said he expected his experiences in college would mirror his previous lived experiences as a person of color,

“I think that just the fact that I am a young black male, you know, a lot of people in my age range don’t make it. I have had people tell me they expected me to be out there doing drugs or gang banging, committing crimes, and doing a whole bunch of other bad stuff. I don’t want to be categorized like that. When I got to college and saw so many white people here, I expected to hear the same things.” Those expectations alone made it difficult for Fred to see him staying very long.

Several other students had similar experiences such as Herb’s recollection of times before he had entered college. When discussing his recollection of starting college, Herb talked about “the racial thing.” He said, “I lived in a smaller town before I moved to Helena with bars all over the place. I went through a few incidents when I was there. People would give me the looks, and some would say things that you didn’t dare talk back to because there was always three or four of them before they were brave enough to talk.” Tim said that discrimination is a

constant in his life, and it has turned into inspiration and motivation for him both in college and in his personal life.

Well, especially here in Montana, you know, the perception that Indians are just a bunch of alcoholics, and they are a bunch of losers, and all they do is sit around and drain money from the government on a reservation. I mean, just the general perception in many parts of the country about Indian people is bad. I mean, in movies, it is starting to change. I mean, like with the movie “Dances with Wolves” and a few others, but I mean, a lot of the movies you see they portray the Indian people as being just long-haired, drunken bums, and it’s actually not that way. Indian people are very self-conscious of their image, and you know, even if I am just touching a few people’s lives when they see what I have achieved compared to what they have achieved, then hopefully that will spread, and, you know, change that perception a little bit.

In a related conversation, John revealed some of his experiences living in Montana. He noted, “You meet some people that follow that traditional perspective and once you say you are an Indian they just look at you like ‘you’re just a worthless drunk’. I haven’t encountered that too much in this school as much as outside in society.”

Tim related as story concerning his family:

My oldest daughter, when she was going to Helena High, some of the students set up a website there bashing her because of her dark complexion. They thought she was Mexican; they were picking on her thinking that she was Mexican but whether it is Mexican, Indian, black or whatever, it is the same thing, and it is predominant. You know, when I went to high school here I had those types of problems. I mean the general attitude of a lot of the people in Helena. So, they have a bad attitude towards people of color.

Similar to Tim’s experience, many of the students in this study used the previous experiences they considered to be discrimination as future success strategies while attending college. This suggests that college efforts to assist students of color do

need take into account their spirit and ability to turn adverse lived experiences into positive protective factors in their pursuit of persistence. In addition, because of the difference in how persons of color interpret behaviors of others, it would be prudent to not assume that all people of color can call on their inner strengths so readily. For example, while these students have turned disheartening and damaging experiences into productive and heartening strengths, many students of color may not have the opportunities or spirit to do so.

The third and final finding may be the most significant revelation of the study. The concept of spirit and the notion of inner strength and motivation, in one way or another, became an intimate discovery for the students in this study. Prior to attending college, many of the students did not understand the potential they could reach or their inner strengths that would assist them to get to that potential. After they started college, spirit became apparent to them either through the articulation of their own efforts to succeed in college or by the lived experiences they enjoyed in surprising even themselves as they journeyed into uncharted territories with unexpected success. At the same time, the definition of spirit, or what it means to utilize one's own strengths, changed as well. The traditional definitions of retention and persistence and perceived determinants of how higher education retains students of color or whether these same students would persist was turned upside down by the attributes that these students demonstrated in their pursuit of persistence and success in college. They found that they could compete and succeed in college, and when determining how far they could go, they

understood as did Fred, when he said, “The sky is the limit for me when it comes to higher education.” All of the themes of internal motivation, self determination, and resiliency, finding support, adjusting to college and overcoming barriers are reflective of this identity shift and underscore the challenges that first generation students of color encounter as they attempt to find their way in this new environment.

It is true that the themes of internal motivation, self determination, and resiliency, finding support, adjusting to college and overcoming barriers are quite common in all the retention literature. Further, listed as individual themes, this study is quite pedestrian. However, the synergistic culmination of these attributes in the students in this study resulted in a sense of *Human Spirit* must be considered when designing and implementing retention programming in higher education.

This study found *Human Spirit* to be a force within all of the participants countenance that goes beyond the individual attributes and themes discovered during this study. Each student’s representation of their desire, no understanding that they would persist and be successful in college emanated from an inner conviction to better others lives and future.

This was apparent with Debi’s descriptions of effect of her persistence on her significant others, “My daughter, knowing that I am the primary head of household only income for her. This inspires me to work harder and do better.” She related her understanding of the effects of her persistence, “They (her daughter

and her parents) are proud that I am going and knowing that I am the first one in my family out of a family of five, I believe I see myself as a role model to probably all of them.”

Likewise, Terry found strength and encouragement in meeting new people and developing understanding through relationships. He reported that he introduced himself to others in an effort “to give me a lot of encouragement that if I give of myself I can help others understand me better.” He stated that people of color and white people alike were interested in him because he appeared to be different, “I know most of them don’t have any idea about Africa, and some of them even have origins from Africa. And when we can relate those kinds of topics, it could open their minds to their origins and our similarities.” Terry viewed these relationships as gifts to others. Still, these opportunities encouraged him to stay in college, “So, my fellow students in my classes, they are so much interested and need to know my inner parts and my culture and my country how I lived in Africa. I am so pleased to give these things to my new friends.” Patrick was almost philosophical about the relationships he developed as a college student,

I am just learning now the true importance of the people I have met here and how important they were to my . . . education. You have to understand the direction of the other people, and being here I am also on the older side of the students so I have to understand that some of the younger students don’t have the same way of looking at things that I do, and/or the experiences they have had are different than mine. And so I don’t know what it is like to be them, but they don’t know what it is like to be me, so you have to be tolerant of some of the things. This, I have learned by getting to know them better and allowing them to know me. The talking in the corner of the room, you just understand, yeah, that goes on because you can’t stop it. So, it is a give and take as in any situation where you have a

mix of people. In the end, I must be part of this environment if I am going to stay here.

Some of the students readily articulated the notion of Human Spirit, even if they did not specifically identify or define it. Many though merely described their lived experiences that, in turn, manifested in these dynamic non-cognitive constructs as they became more self-aware of the dynamic influence they could be in determining their own academic future.

### Implications

Nationally enrollments of first-generation students continue to grow rapidly. As stated previously, these students predominantly continue to enroll in two-year and community colleges. Increasingly two-year institutions are seeing more students of color in their halls. These postsecondary institutions must begin to strengthen services and bolster the manner in which they have traditionally addressed unmet students' needs. Greater numbers of students than ever before have begun to attend community colleges and these institutions should expect these students to bring with them even more complex situations regarding their educational needs.

Conversely, community college administrators, faculty and staff must also understand the unique attributes that first-generation students bring to their institutions. These students come from an array of ethnic and racial backgrounds, and culturally-based practices of persistence are used to survive postsecondary

education, they seek a sense of community in the colleges that they attend and also look for campus officials with similar experiences for guidance.

More importantly first generation students of color bring the unique non-cognitive attribute defined in this study as *Human Spirit*. This force motivated by a higher commitment to the betterment of others lives and futures, must be considered whenever community college leaders consider retention planning and programming.

A plethora of retention literature exists that examines higher education institution's strategies, interventions and plans to effect positive change in student persistence and completion rates. While extremely useful in informing community college administrators and leaders in developing retention "programs" and services, this literature is insufficient to completely understand the dynamics and interplay of institutional efforts and the notion of *Human Spirit* as it relates to diverse populations including first generation students of color.

It is true that retention programs and services contribute to student engagement, persistence, success, and eventually graduation. However, community college administrators and leaders would be remiss not to consider the power, influence and force of Human Spirit. As manifested in the participants in this study, *Human Spirit* has the ability to turn students' negative outlook and lack of confidence into powerful motivation and commitment of succeed at higher rates as evidenced in Terry's revelation as he spoke to his biggest concerns in succeeding in college, "This is intense and fast. So, it is my biggest challenge in college, the



speed and lack of confidence to acclimatize to this institution.” Still, he offered the notion of spirit, “Confidence is my word power which I got (be)cause I compare myself to citizens of America, I see that I am not really qualified to compete with them. But, I have some burning desire in me that if I got this challenge over me I can really achieve a better future and life for my wife and my kids.”

Human Spirit is much more than confidence. It is a deep desire to succeed not for the successes sake but for the betterment of significant people in their lives and the opportunity to create a legacy of success and generation of college completers as well as new realities for the students’ progenitors. After initially appearing unconfident and recognizing a multitude of negative reactions to her likelihood of accomplishing her dream, Antonia related her inner confidence in no uncertain terms, “I can do this and I know that I will be a good nurse. I know people out there need someone like me and I know I am needed out there even if I don’t get to be a nurse, but I am needed for something else. And, I know my kids are very proud of me. They see that mom is helping other people and they want to help others too.” Antonia related her aspirations that her daughters would wish to enroll in and complete college and her belief that her example would positively affect their desire to do so.

The participants in this study indicated that they look to people outside of the family for advice, counsel, and support as a practice to aid in their persistence. This across-the-board practice for the participants suggests that first-generation students are looking for a person on campus to assist them with some aspect of the

experience at the community college. Every person on a campus, including students, is a likely source for assistance and information for a first-generation student. Again, many of these observations are in line with traditional retention study findings. In this particular study, students went beyond the traditional participation in programming. They discovered and cultivated deep relationships with classmates and colleagues to mutually benefit their opportunity for persistence as forwarded by Tim, “There is one lady that I believe she is from Puerto Rico and we talk with each other quite a bit and we made a connection. I don’t know if it’s so much of because we both have dark skin but because we wanted to help each other. I wanted to see her succeed and vice versa.” Tim commented that that connection lasted the length of his studies at UM-Helena and it was not part of any program offered or necessarily encouraged by services or personnel on campus.

Students in this study also suggested that there are many positive social, academic, and environmental factors that each identified at the community colleges. Each participant cited different combinations of the types of factors mentioned, but all identified some. Successful first-generation students examine every aspect of a community college and look for ways to sustain in their persistence at the college. These students are very impressionable and pick up on the slightest hint of apathy. First-generation students, regardless of ethnic or racial background, bring with them valuable insight into the largest growing sector of community college students to which they belong.

Awareness of *Human Spirit* mandates the understanding that each group and individual must be recognized and appreciated for what he or she brings to the college in terms of cultural richness. Scholarly standards and measures from research done on traditional second-generation have long been used to gain insight into all students.

First-generation students cannot be examined with these same lenses. Students who are the first in their families to attend college have historically been classified with their counterparts who come from traditionally educated families. This fact is a simple case of comparing apples to oranges, and the nuances of the first-generation community college students are being overlooked.

#### Limitations of the Study

This study examined the experiences of nine first-generation students of color attending The University of Montana-Helena College of Technology, a two-year technical college located in Helena, Montana. Whether the findings could be generalized to other regions of the country or to the experiences of other first-generation students of color attending higher education has yet to be decided. The students who participated in the study did so eagerly. Many noted that they felt they had a story to tell, and in some sense, a legacy to leave for their children, families, and others in their lives. The nine who did participate may have been motivated because of past negative experiences with the general public or by voices who told them they could not succeed in a higher education system. Eligible

students who chose not to participate may not have had the same experiences, and thus they lacked the incentive to participate.

The criterion for participation required the students be a person of color whose parents did not complete a college degree and have attended UM-Helena for a minimum of one year. The reason for this was to find participants who had demonstrated persistence as a two-year college student over time. There may be a significant number of first-generation students of color students who do not persevere for this length of time. The experiences of these students could provide useful information about the types of services the college could offer to help these students persist as well additional perspectives and approaches in the delivery of services.

#### Recommendations for College Personnel

Colleges have long known about the increases in first generation students of color enrollments and forecasting enrollments tells the tale of additional students of color, many of whom will be the first in their families to attend college, and growing numbers will be academically and socially underprepared.

The following recommendations have been developed as a result of the data gathered from the nine participants of the study. The persistence and *Human Spirit* of the students who participated in the study are at least exceptional and in some cases extraordinary.

### Acknowledge

Similar to how spirit was manifest in the students in this study; all human beings have an innate need to belong, to feel relevant. Acknowledging the impending circumstances these populations bring to our campuses appears to be the most important act a college could take. The previous suggestions for direct engagement and understanding of the unique attributes these students may bring in their personal mail bags, the enriching culture they can provide to the existing campus culture, and education of faculty and staff regarding the spirit these students have within their souls would be a step forward in helping first-generation students of color feel valued. Many of the participants related lived experiences different from the typical college student. Fred described his experience as follows, “No one in my family went to college, we never talked about college but I always knew I would go to school. Now that I am in college, in some sense, kind of like what you are talking about, is changing the world because you see the things that weren’t right and you want to be a part of changing them.”

Through Fred’s and similar experiences, students in this study found relevancy in their participation in higher education. As previously stated, all these study participants had previous negative experiences in education. Many felt like they did not belong and, at times did not matter. It is imperative that community college administrators and leaders acknowledge students as individuals that contribute to the vibrancy and vitality of the campus community and evidence the ability to persist and influence those around them to persist at higher rates.

### Understand

Further, community college personnel should understand that this acknowledgment could greatly assist in furthering the current mission of two-year and community colleges to maintain open door policies and pursue academic excellence while increasing the much needed effort to retain students and reduce the social stigma that seems to continue to exist for persons of color. Not only within their own cultures, but additionally, these students by participating in higher education provide information to the campus community and reciprocal assistance for all students to persist in college. The students in this study demonstrated an acute understanding of the relevance of participating in higher education. Several were aware of the implications of this study and appreciative of the desire to further investigate the phenomenon as related by Tim's remarks, "Thanks for taking interest in these type of people because it is part (the) of society that is often ignored or nobody bothers to take the time to speak with, pay attention to it." Community college administrators must understand students' perceptions of mattering and whether they and their participation in higher education matters. Students want to and must have voice; they are the life blood of the institutions we believe we lead. As leaders, we must understand the holistic student experience and the unique attributes that these populations bring to higher education.

### Respond

College administration must be committed to respond to the needs these students in a very meaningful manner. Therefore, the selection of the personnel who serve students on community college campuses and the task of hiring is of the utmost importance for college administration. The leadership should be as selective as possible when hiring individuals for faculty, administrative and staff positions. This extremely important measure is to ensure that a campus environment will be free of inconsiderate and uncaring personnel. Prospective employees, regardless of title, must possess the values that adhere to a student-centered and sensitive environment. Every employee on a campus must be seen as an ambassador for the college, and there must be no misunderstanding that the student is the most important person on campus. Additionally, campus personnel should receive a minimum level of cross-cultural training as well as insights to self, spirit and interpersonal relationships. All campus personnel should be willing and equipped to engage with students on a personal level. In order to complete this role, community college leaders and all personnel must be willing to examine the phenomenon of *Human Spirit* in their own lives.

### Commit

First-generation students do not have the same experiences as their second, third and fourth-generation counterparts; therefore, more intensive interaction and relationship building must be implemented when aiding in their attendance at community colleges. Community college presidents and senior officers'

commitment should be demonstrated by placing more resources in the areas of recruitment, advisement and retention. More to the point, Community college leaders should and must engage in the non-cognitive dynamic discovered in this study as *Human Spirit*. They must model and expect all personnel to find deeper meaning in relationships and commit to exploring the intangibles such as internal motivation, mattering and spirit in the students in their classrooms and hallways. If they will do so, they will find meaning beyond what the literature has previously revealed. They will find complex, dynamic souls who seek to succeed in higher education. Further, they will find individuals who bring a positive and unyielding spirit to their journeys; one that burns with a desire to achieve much like Terry related, “I have some burning desire in me that if I got this challenge over me I can really achieve a better future and life.” and evidenced in Tim’s conviction, “I just said no matter what, I want to get a Ph.D. but I told myself no matter what, I am going to achieve a master’s degree, even if it takes me thirty-five years, no matter what, I am going to reach that level in education.”

Specific to UM-Helena, establishing cultural-based programming including student groups and a student of color office on campus would be an important endeavor. Additionally, infusing cultural-sensitive curriculum and sensitivity training for faculty and staff as well as developing a speakers’ series regarding cultural histories and traditions on campus would definitely enhance and enrich the academic and student environment. Some of the topics could include the role of



families and culture in students' lives, student attributes, and general support resources for students.

Given that none of the students in this study, initially had knowledge of financial aid resources, more personnel and financial measures must be put in place to establish comprehensive programs. Need-based scholarships, child-care, intensive advising and more college success classes need to be funded. Additionally, UM-Helena and similar colleges need to examine their existing grants and scholarships. Do grants and scholarships exist for students of color, and are they well advertised to those populations? If they are, is the language inclusive of first- generation students as well as the general population? UM-Helena needs to consider developing a new grant or scholarship program that is specific to this population.

Colleges must continue to look for ways to include and effectively operationalize the support systems such as family members, clergy, and elders that provide support to students of color. In the age of helicopter parents hovering over students' every decision, it may prove beneficial to understand the value and strength these students' families bring to their endeavors to stay in college and persist through graduation. UM-Helena is just beginning to experience the hovering parents, and it would do them well to receive these students' support systems with respect and an eye to potential learning opportunities. Finally, a message of the values of a postsecondary education must be delivered to those who have not had the benefit of having family members precede them in college. The

approaches must be specific to the target population's ethnic or cultural needs, and programs should be tailored to accommodate the population's immediate needs in order to understand.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

Academic achievement is also crucial to the betterment of our increasingly diverse society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The literature reveals countless research on retention concerning specific populations and efforts to increase retention rates. Often times the student subjects of these research ventures are first-generation students of color. This population continues to enter two-year colleges at staggering rates, yet nearly fifty percent of the students entering two-year institutions will not graduate with an associate degree. Even fewer, approximately 38 percent, will continue through graduation of a baccalaureate degree (Strauss, 2004). As the number of first-generation students of color increases, additional research needs to be undertaken to understand and interface with the attributes they bring to our campuses. The findings of this study suggest the following further areas of research regarding the spirit of first-generation students of color.

The participants in this study were academically successful students and were able to comment on factors that contributed to their success. Many students, especially first-generation students of color, are not successful in college and either drop out or stop out for academic, personal, and other reasons. Studying the spirit

of first-generation students of color who did not persist at college could provide additional information about the needs of this population.

Conducting research on a campus with a more culturally-diverse population might also provide additional information on the experiences of these students. For example, students of color with access to additional culturally appropriate resources and fellow students with similar circumstances may experience additional barriers or utilize support networks in different ways than the students in this study. In addition, conducting similar research on a larger scale and in other regions of the country could add to the knowledge base and sense of the utilization of spirit regarding first-generations students of color.

This study found that first generation students of color were quickly able to find their sense of spirit, understand their sense of belonging, and call on support systems for assistance. Additional research on help-seeking behavior for students of color could prove beneficial. Specifically, an investigation of the effectiveness of intrusive efforts to provide assistance may be warranted.

It would prove helpful to study community college faculty and administrations' perceptions of first-generation community college students to determine whether college personnel are aware of the magnitude of the students' needs, and whether they are aware of the certain change in the demographic make-up of many of the nations' community colleges. Additionally, studies should be conducted to explore the phenomenon of Human Spirit in community college

leaders and personnel. Administration, faculty and staff members could use this information as they engage students of color in a deeper, more respectful manner.

Finally, continued in-depth qualitative research should be conducted on the experiences, perceptions and outcomes of currently enrolled first-generation students who have completed one or more semesters of study to better understand the notion of *Human Spirit* and how it interacts with and stimulates persistence for these populations.

## Conclusions

Much research has occurred regarding the value and challenge of retaining students, and much progress has been convened to increase the retention of students, especially first-generation students of color. Institutions of higher education have developed programming including first-year seminars, learning communities, early-alert systems, and supplemental instruction to retain students, yet the retention rates have refused to rise and have remained mostly static.

Still, the number of persons of color who chose to be the first in their family to attend college has increased in the last two decades and will continue to increase. Little research has been done which explores the attributes that these students bring to persist in higher education that contribute to colleges' retention rates and the unique needs of this population. This study was conducted as a way of contributing to the knowledge base of persistence attributes in first-generation students of color.

Three significant factors were identified. The first was that attending college was found to be beneficial to adult learners and their families because of the relationships they developed or strengthened which allowed them to have more meaningful time with family members and encouraged them to be models for their families and children. They were also able to understand that they could positively affect their college experience and experience a positive college career. Prior to attending college, the majority of participants had had negative experiences in education which tested their self-confidence and perceptions of what was a successful educational experience would be. All the students faced a great deal of apprehension in approaching higher education. This was further heightened by the initial lack of support they experienced while attending UM-Helena. Most of the students relied on their own inner locus of control, *Human Spirit*, or internal motivation to persist, even when they doubted their ability to do so. Consequently, the participants believed they were better students as a result of enduring the perceived barriers to persisting in college.

Second, the students were able to rely on their own resiliency or sense of spirit to find the support, resources, relationships, and finances necessary to persist. Significant factors contributing to their success and persistence were found within themselves. Many of the participants participated in few or none of the retention efforts of the college, and instead, enlisted elements of their own persistence attributes to stay in college.

The third factor was the participants' abilities to reciprocate support to their support networks. Many of the students exemplified a desire to lend support or provide modeling to others in their individual quests for success. At times their motivation was to show disbelievers that they could succeed, but often times, participants desired to persist as an example to children or spouses or a vocalized or secret promise to self or loved ones that they would succeed. The students wished to be viewed in the integrated context of a person of color and a successful student. They were proud of their abilities and accomplishments in both areas.

It is hoped that the results of this study will further the understanding of the attributes of first-generation students of color relative to their ability to persist and succeed in college. College administrators can use this information to enhance services to this population and to further engage faculty and staff in an effort to work collaboratively with students of color to successfully complete their educational goals. The study revealed the importance of support from family members and college personnel alike. Therefore, a culturally competent and knowledgeable faculty and staff become extremely vital and the need to be

deliberate and intentional in the hiring process at a two-year college in order to fill the halls with individuals concerned with student learning and success, who will engage students and seek out the positive attributes these students bring to the institution. In addition, the study revealed how the culturally-relevant information of a student is a key to understanding world views in order to facilitate success at a two-year college.

Finally, the notion of *Human Spirit* and the recognition and utilization of spirit has broad and positive implications in the experience and success of first generation students. The intrinsic motivation and resilience were strong determinants for success in students in this study. For too long, institutions have relied on their “expert” knowledge of what students need relative to services and instruction. While college personnel have attained much knowledge of student characteristics and their needs, they must be cognizant of the attributes students bring to the institution and to the student experience. The ability the students in this study demonstrated to adjust to the college environment, to overcome barriers, to find support and to commit to college completion, as illustrated by Fred in the following declaration, “I am going to do it. It is a simple as that.” should not and cannot be overlooked. The students in this study revealed that through many obstacles and despite seemingly insurmountable odds, they were able to persist.

Therefore, community colleges that recognize students of color as unique individuals who possess internal cultural groundedness, understand that diversity is an asset to the college, respond to individual’s needs and commit to serving first-

generation students of color in a more meaningful and culturally competent manner and to actively work to support their success will find stronger internal student development and increasingly robust instructional experiences and as well as increased persistence, graduation rates and success.



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Appendices

Appendix A: INVITATION LETTER

*Landscapes of Persistence in First Generation Students of Color*

Recruitment Materials

Recruitment of interviewees to participate in this phenomenological study about the experience of first generation students of color persisting on a community college campus will be conducted by sending the following letter. The Informed Consent Document will also be attached.

September 16, 2005

Dear [Participants name]:

We are writing this letter to invite you to participate in a study examining the experience of first generation students of color at UM-Helena. Specifically we want to understand what it means to be a student of color persisting in a community college at UM-Helena and what the college could do to improve the student experience for first generation students of color. Little research has been done on persistence of individuals in community college. Our hope is that we can develop a better understanding of the issues facing first generation students of color and that this information could be used to improve the experience of future students.

You have been invited to participate in this study because of your position as a first generation student of color attending UM-Helena. This study will be part of doctoral dissertation at Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon. Dr. Larry Roper, Professor of Education, and Cristobal Valdez, a doctoral student are the investigators. Mr. Valdez is also an Assistant Dean at UM-Helena.

If you accept this invitation you will be asked to participate in an interview of up to 90 minutes. You will have an opportunity to review the information collected from the interview and make necessary changes. You will also be asked to participate in a focus group interview with other first generation students of color from UM-Helena. The focus group will also be for no more than 90 minutes. The purpose for the interview and focus group is to understand the experience of first generation students of color at UM-Helena and we believe first generation students of color are in the best position to provide this information.

A full description of the interview process and your involvement is included in the attached Informed Consent Document. Your information will remain confidential throughout the study and all records of the transcripts will be destroyed once the

study is completed. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may refuse to answer any questions that you wish.

Mr. Valdez will be calling you within the next week to determine if you are interested in accepting our invitation to participate in the study and to arrange a suitable time. Mr. Valdez will also explain the Informed Consent Document which must be signed before the interview takes place. If you have further questions please call Cristobal Valdez at 406-444-6882 or email [valdezc@umh.umt.edu](mailto:valdezc@umh.umt.edu). We sincerely thank you for your consideration of this invitation.

Dr. Larry Roper, Professor of Education  
Oregon State University

Cristobal Valdez, Doctoral  
Student  
Oregon State University

Appendix B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

College of Education  
Oregon State University  
Corvallis, OR 97331

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of the Research Project.

The Human Spirit and Higher Education: Landscapes of Persistence in First Generation Students of Color

Investigators.

Dr. Larry Roper, Professor of Education; and Cristobal Valdez, Doctoral Student. Cristobal Valdez is also an Assistant Dean of Student Services and Registrar at University of Montana Helena College of Technology in Helena, Montana.

Purpose of the Research Project.

The purpose of the study will be to better understand human spirit through the lived experience of students of color navigating higher education, to better understand individual attributes contributing to persistence. Specifically, the researchers would like to know what it means to be a student of color persisting in a community college. The researchers believe the findings of this study may provide a better understanding of persistence and the strengths of first generation students of color in the community college.

You are invited to participate in this research study because you were identified as a first generation student of color who has attending UM-Helena College enrolled at least half-time for at least one year. It is expected that between six and ten first generation students of color will participate in this study.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, your involvement will last for three and one-half hours. The initial interview is one and one-half hours. A follow up interview to check the accuracy of the first interview is one-half hour. A final focus group to include all participants is one and one-half hours.

The following procedures are involved in this study. Cristobal Valdez will conduct the interview and focus group. Interviews will be conducted with between six and ten first generation students of color attending UM-Helena. The questions will be developed by Mr. Valdez and used as a guide for the interview. The initial interview will take up to 90 minutes maximum and will be scheduled in person at your convenience. The interview will be recorded on audiotape and you will be



able to have the tape recorder stopped at any time. If you choose, you may ask Mr. Valdez to take written notes instead of recording the interview. You may also request at any time to end the interview and may choose not to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

After the interview, Mr. Valdez will have the audiotape professionally transcribed and analyze your responses to the questions. He will then review the transcription and analysis with you, either in person or by phone and you will have the opportunity to approve them or ask for appropriate changes to be made. You will also have the opportunity to provide additional information if you choose to do so.

Once the initial interviews have been completed and the transcripts and analysis reviewed a focus group will be scheduled. The purpose of the focus group is to gather the participants together to further discuss issues raised during the initial interviews. The focus group session will take a maximum of 90 minutes. The focus group will be audiotaped unless you request that notes be taken instead. During the focus group you can choose to not answer questions and ask for the audiotape to be stopped at anytime. You will have an opportunity to review the transcription of the focus group session and either approve or make appropriate revisions to the transcription.

### **Foreseeable risks or benefits**

The possible risks associated with participating in this research project are minimal and include the potential for increased emotions due to discussing past family and/or other experiences.

There may be no personal benefit for participating in this study. However, the researchers anticipate that in the future, society may benefit from this study through increased awareness of the issues facing first generation students of color persisting at the community college level. Your participation is on a voluntary basis and you will not be compensated for your participation.

### **Confidentiality**

Records of participation in this research project will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. In the event of any report or publication from this study, your identity will not be disclosed. Results will be reported in a summarized manner in such a way that you cannot be identified. Audiotapes and transcripts will be destroyed once the study has been completed.

**Voluntary Participation Statement**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may either refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You may withdraw from the study before it is completed all information that you have individually provided will be destroyed.

**If I have questions**

Any questions you have about the research study or specific procedures should be directed to Cristobal Valdez at 406-444-6882 or Dr. Larry Roper at 541-737-3626. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Protections Administrator at 541-737-3437 or at [IRB@oregonstate.edu](mailto:IRB@oregonstate.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the procedures described above and give your informed and voluntary consent to participate in this study. You will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participants printed or typed name

Appendix C: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT - UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

University of Montana  
Missoula, MT 59812

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of the Research Project.

The Human Spirit and Higher Education: Landscapes of Persistence in First Generation Students of Color

Investigators.

Dr. Larry Roper, Professor of Education; and Cristobal Valdez, Doctoral Student at Oregon State University. Cristobal Valdez is also an Assistant Dean of Student Services and Registrar at University of Montana Helena College of Technology in Helena, Montana.

Purpose of the Research Project.

The purpose of the study will be to better understand human spirit through the lived experience of students of color navigating higher education, to better understand individual attributes contributing to persistence. Specifically, the researchers would like to know what it means to be a student of color persisting in a community college. The researchers believe the findings of this study may provide a better understanding of persistence and the strengths of first generation students of color in the community college.

You are invited to participate in this research study because you were identified as a first generation student of color who has attending UM-Helena College enrolled at least half-time for at least one year. It is expected that between six and ten first generation students of color will participate in this study.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, your involvement will last for three and one-half hours. The initial interview is one and one-half hours. A follow up interview to check the accuracy of the first interview is one-half hour. A final focus group to include all participants is one and one-half hours.

The following procedures are involved in this study. Cristobal Valdez will conduct the interview and focus group. Interviews will be conducted with between six and ten first generation students of color attending UM-Helena. The questions will be developed by Mr. Valdez and used as a guide for the interview. The initial interview will take up to 90 minutes maximum and will be scheduled in person at

your convenience. The interview will be recorded on audiotape and you will be able to have the tape recorder stopped at any time. If you choose, you may ask Mr. Valdez to take written notes instead of recording the interview. You may also request at any time to end the interview and may choose not to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

After the interview, Mr. Valdez will have the audiotape professionally transcribed and analyze your responses to the questions. He will then review the transcription and analysis with you, either in person or by phone and you will have the opportunity to approve them or ask for appropriate changes to be made. You will also have the opportunity to provide additional information if you choose to do so.

Once the initial interviews have been completed and the transcripts and analysis reviewed a focus group will be scheduled. The purpose of the focus group is to gather the participants together to further discuss issues raised during the initial interviews. The focus group session will take a maximum of 90 minutes. The focus group will be audiotaped unless you request that notes be taken instead. During the focus group you can choose to not answer questions and ask for the audiotape to be stopped at anytime. You will have an opportunity to review the transcription of the focus group session and either approve or make appropriate revisions to the transcription.

#### **Foreseeable risks or benefits**

The possible risks associated with participating in this research project are minimal and include the potential for increased emotions due to discussing past family and/or other experiences.

There may be no personal benefit for participating in this study. However, the researchers anticipate that in the future, society may benefit from this study through increased awareness of the issues facing first generation students of color persisting at the community college level. Your participation is on a voluntary basis and you will not be compensated for your participation.

Although we believe that the risk of taking part in this study is minimal, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana consent forms.

In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under

the authority of M.C.A., Title2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University's Claims representative or University Legal Counsel.

### **Confidentiality**

Records of participation in this research project will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. In the event of any report or publication from this study, your identity will not be disclosed. Results will be reported in a summarized manner in such a way that you cannot be identified. Audiotapes and transcripts will be destroyed once the study has been completed.

### **Voluntary Participation Statement**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may either refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You may withdraw from the study before it is completed all information that you have individually provided will be destroyed.

### **If I have questions**

Any questions you have about the research study or specific procedures should be directed to Cristobal Valdez at 406-444-6882 or Dr. Larry Roper at 541-737-3626. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the University of Montana Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Protections Administrator at 406-243-6670 or at [Sheila.Hoffland@mso.umt.edu](mailto:Sheila.Hoffland@mso.umt.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the procedures described above and give your informed and voluntary consent to participate in this study. You will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

---

Signature of participant

---

Date Signed

---

Participants printed or typed name

Appendix D: APPROVAL LETTER

Institutional Review Board  
Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Compliance  
Oregon State University  
312 Kerr Administration Building  
Corvallis, OR 97331

To Whom It May Concern:

I am aware that Cristobal Valdez is planning to conduct research with first generation students of color on the campus of the University of-Montana Helena College of Technology. Further, I understand that he is currently undergoing review with the Oregon State University and University of Montana institutional review boards.

I am confident that both boards will approve his respective applications and research and I provide my approval as well.

If you have any questions or need to contact me, please do so at [Binghamd@umh.umt.edu](mailto:Binghamd@umh.umt.edu) or (406) 444-6875.

Sincerely,

Daniel Bingham,  
CEO/Dean

Appendix E: INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Research  
Interview Protocol**

The following questions are to be used as a guide for understanding the experience of first generation students of color at UM-Helena. The questions are intended to be starting points for discussion and will likely lead to follow up questions. In addition, the order of the questions may change as the interview progresses. However, for consistent information all questions will be asked during the interview.

- 1) Tell me what it's like being a first generation person of color attending a community/technical college.
- 2) What has contributed to your success/persistence as a first generation student of color?
- 3) What strategies have you employed to persist/continue in college?
- 4) What, specifically, have you done to continue in college?
- 5) Are there any other factors that have influenced your ability to persist in college?
- 6) What barriers have you encountered?

- 7) What can The University of Montana Helena College of Technology do to improve the experience of First Generation Students of Color?
- 8) Is there anything else you would like to add?