College Persistence Stories of Low Income, First-Generation Students

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Gretchen L. Jewett for the degree of Master of Science in College Student Services
Administration presented on April 22, 2008.
Title: College Persistence Stories of Low Income, First-Generation Students

Abstract approved:

_____

Thomas D. Scheuermann

Low income, first-generation college students face many barriers in their

pursuit of a college degree. As a result, the retention rates for this student population

have traditionally been lower than for other student populations. In order to support

the persistence of this student population it is important to study the experiences of

those students who are persisting in college. This study explores the college

experiences of seven low income, first-generation students who are persisting in

college, in order to better understand how university faculty and staff can better

support degree attainment for this student population.

This qualitative study addresses the question, "What are the experiences of

persisting low income, first-generation students during their enrollment in college?"

The study also addresses the two secondary questions, "What factors contribute to low

income, first-generation student persistence?" and "How can their university better

support low income, first-generation students to graduation?"

This study explores the emerging themes of the challenges this student population faces and their personal drive and motivation to persist in college, as well as experiences with advising and orientation, academic support resources, and non-academic support resources. The end result of this study is a set of suggestions for how university faculty and staff can provide resources to better support low income, first-generation students in their college persistence.

College Persistence Stories of Low Income, First-Generation Students

by
Gretchen L. Jewett

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Science

Presented April 22, 2008
Commencement June 2008

Master of Science thesis of Gretchen L. Jewett presented on April 22, 2008.

APPROVED:

_____

Major Professor, representing College Student Services Administration

_____

Dean of the College of Education

_____

Dean of the Graduate School

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

_____

Gretchen L. Jewett, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF APPENDICES

College Persistence Stories of Low Income, First-Generation Students

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 1995-96, first-generation students made up 34% of the students enrolling in four year institutions of higher education and 53% of students enrolling in community colleges (Choy, 2001). In 2002, 364,000 first-generation students took the Scholastic Aptitude Test, evidence that the numbers of first-generation students accessing college is increasing (Ishitani, 2003). Despite the increase in first-generation college students, these students are still significantly less likely to graduate from college than their peers who have parents who graduated from college (Choy; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez, 2001). However, for those who do graduate, there are no observable differences between the occupational attainment and income levels for first-generation and second-generation students (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin).

Increasing the persistence rates of first-generation college students is a necessary goal for those who work in higher education. I am personally interested and motivated to learn more about this topic because of my experience teaching low income middle school students for three years. As a teacher, I invested a lot of energy into academically preparing my students for college, helping them understand what college is like, and encouraging them to develop a personal goal of attending college. If these students are able to attend college, many of them will be the first in their families to do so. However, enrollment is just the first step. Once enrolled, these students will face an uphill battle of persisting to attain their degrees.

Low income, first-generation students face huge hurdles in pursuit of a college degree, including a lack of role models and little knowledge about higher education, financial difficulties, lack of adequate academic preparation, and lack of understanding about the application process. As a future student affairs professional, I am driven to serve these students. It is not enough that they attend college; I wanted to understand how to better support these students to their college degree attainment. Therefore, in this research I wanted to analyze college success stories to provide insight and understanding of the experiences of low income, first-generation college students.

Existing studies on first-generation student have focused on pre-college predictors of success, college access, first-generation student characteristics, and rates of attrition and persistence. These studies show that first-generation students have 71% higher rates of attrition than second-generation students between the first and second years (Ishitani, 2003). They are 51% less likely to graduate in four years than second-generation students (Ishitani, 2006).

Given the focus of existing research and these statistics, the purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of those low income, first-generation students who are persisting in their college education. Through this research, I sought the experiences of low income, first-generation students persisting in college to learn more about how universities can better serve these students. The primary research question for this study was: What are the experiences of persisting low income, first-generation students during their enrollment in college? The two secondary questions were: What factors contribute to low income, first-generation student persistence?

And, how can universities better support low income, first-generation students persist to graduation?

Definition of key terms is necessary to clarify the research topic. There are six key terms defined below: persistence, first-generation, low income, traditional students, non-traditional students, and Student Support Services.

Persistence here means continuing in higher education until graduation. It is the opposite of attrition, or dropping out of college. Ishitani (2006) determined that although first-generation students have a higher risk of dropping out than non-first generation students throughout their entire college career, first-generation students are at the greatest risk of dropping out during their second year of college. Choy (2001) found that after three years, first-generation students have the same likelihood of degree completion as second generation students. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, students continuously enrolled in an institution of higher education and having at least junior standing will be considered to be persisting (Horn & Kojaku, 2001). Those students who transfer to other institutions but do not take time off from their education will also be considered to be persisting.

First-generation has been defined in the literature in different ways. Ishitani (2003) considered students to be first-generation if neither parent has earned a college degree. The term first-generation is defined by Thayer (2000) as referring to college students whose parents have never been enrolled in college but does not consider whether or not a sibling has been enrolled in college. In her research, Choy (2001) found that having parents who had some college education but not a bachelor's degree did not increase students' rates of college access or persistence. Although there are

multiple definitions for first-generation students, for the purpose of this study, the definition of first-generation student will be the same as is defined by the TRiO Student Support Services program. All participants for this study were identified through Oregon State University's TRiO Student Support Services program. Therefore, for the rest of this study, students will be considered first-generation students if neither parent has *earned* a bachelor's degree. This study will not consider whether the student has a sibling that has been enrolled in college.

The third term is *low income*. Low income was defined as a criterion for participant selection because among first-generation students, those with lower income levels have been found to have much lower rates of persistence than those with higher income levels (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Additionally, two-thirds of low income students do not have a parent who has attended college (Corrigan, 2003). In this study, the term low income will be used as it is by the federal TRiO programs and by Corrigan in her study entitled "Beyond Access: Persistence Challenges and the Diversity of Low-Income Students." Low income refers to students whose family's taxable income does not exceed 150% of the poverty level income ("Office of Postsecondary Education," 2007; Corrigan, 2007).

Two additional terms that arose as significant during the research process were *traditional* and *non-traditional aged students*. The term non-traditionally aged college student has been defined in prior studies to refer to any student who is 25 years or older (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Muraskin & Lee, 2004; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the term non-traditional student is used

to refer to any student age 25 or older, while the term traditional student refers to any student who is under the age of 24 while in college.

The final term is *Student Support Services*. This term is significant because all of the participants for the study were enrolled in a Student Support Services program. Student Support Services are federally funded TRiO programs at colleges and universities and serve low income students, first-generation students, students with disabilities, and veterans ("Student Support Services Program," 2007). Student Support Service programs serve these populations with advising, tutoring, supplemental instruction, study skills instruction, resource and supply check out, college orientations specifically for students in the program, and access to cultural events.

In order to answer the primary research questions I conducted a qualitative study involving personal, one-on-one interviews with seven low income, first-generation students who are enrolled in the Student Support Services program at a research institution in the western United States. Each of the participants has junior or senior standing and is on track to graduate by spring 2009. These students shared with me their personal experiences, challenges, and successes in their pursuit of a college degree. It is my hope that their personal insight can be informative for professionals in higher education who will support the low income, first-generation students who enroll in the future.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

An understanding of the literature and related research is necessary to better understand the experiences of low income, first-generation students persisting in college. This chapter explores the dominant research on both attrition and persistence. It also explores the characteristics of both first-generation and low income college students, as well as current research on the pre-college experiences of this population as predictors of their persistence, their engagement during college, studies on low income, first-generation attrition and persistence in college, and the support services universities have implemented to better serve them.

Attrition

Thirty one years ago, Vincent Tinto (1987) supported the need for further research of college student attrition, noting that 2.8 million students would enroll in college for the first time in 1986, and that more than 1.6 million of those students would leave without earning degrees. Attrition impacts employment opportunities, salary levels, and societal status of those students. Tinto further undertook a study and created a model to better understand attrition among college students.

In his Theory of Individual Departure, Tinto (1987) outlines factors that increase the rate of attrition for individual students. This model connects student integration into academic and social communities to persistence at the university. Students who feel overwhelmed or under-engaged by their academics, lack positive faculty interactions, or feel that the institution does not adequately meet their needs, have higher rates of attrition than integrated students.

Of equal importance is the degree to which individuals find their place in a social community on campus. This integration can be formal, such as membership in a student organization, athletic team, or on-campus job, or informal, as with involvement with friends. According to Tinto's model, students who are less socially integrated into the campus community, either formally and informally, have a higher rate of attrition than those students who effectively integrate socially.

Persistence

In order to better understand those factors that could be used as predictors of college attrition, Alexander Astin (1975) undertook a multi-institutional, longitudinal study of college students. The results of the study provide some insight into the factors that impact individual student attrition, and conversely can be used to better understand college student persistence. Identified factors include financial aid, employment, living environment, institutional type, and social background.

The findings show that finances are directly related to rates of persistence (Astin, 1975). Receiving financial support from their parents or from the institution in the form of grants and scholarships can improve student chances of persistence, along with work study jobs. Conversely, student reliance on loans or their personal savings to pay for college is related to increased attrition. Student employment can also affect persistence (Astin). Being engaged in employment can enhance student persistence, especially if the student works part time on campus. Working off-campus or full time can decrease student chances of persistence, according to Astin's research.

Student persistence is affected by the level of student interaction and engagement with the campus (Astin, 1975). Students' chances of persistence can be enhanced by living in the residence halls, as this experience involves students in campus activities and facilitates relationships with others. A student's GPA is associated with persistence rates, and honors program students have a slightly higher rate of persistence. Finally, student engagement in extracurricular activities such as Greek organizations, student clubs, and teams can increase rates of persistence.

Astin (1975) also found that higher rates of student persistence were directly related to characteristics of their institution. Higher rates of student persistence are associated with more selective private colleges and institutions located in the east and southeast of the United States. Finally, students persist at a higher rate the more similar their social background is to the majority of students on campus.

Although Astin's findings provide insight into college student persistence, they raise questions about the persistence of low income, first-generation students at a public research university because the study did not specifically focus on low income, first-generation students. These students have financial need, are often academically underprepared for college (Gladieux & Swail, 2000), and they come from a different social background than the majority of students on campus; factors that according to Astin, may affect their persistence in college.

First Generation Students

First-generation students have been found to differ from other students in multiple identity characteristics. These students are more likely to be non-traditionally

aged, or over the age of 24 (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton, et al., 2001). A large proportion of first-generation students are from low income and racially diverse families, and are women. As a result, a large portion of these students have been found to be married, have dependents, and work more hours off campus than their counterparts (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin; Warburton, et al.).

First generation students whose parents did not obtain a bachelor's degree enroll in higher education at a much lower rate than continuing-generation students (Choy, 2001). One reason may be that first-generation students have less parental involvement in the application process. They have often been found to be less academically prepared for college than those students whose parents graduated from college. They have been found to have lower aspirations for their educational attainment than their counterparts (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Those who do access college typically enroll at community colleges at twice the rate of their peers. Once in college, first-generation students have been found to have higher college attrition rates than their peers (Ishitani, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton, et al., 2001).

Low Income Students

Low income students are defined as those students whose family income does not exceed 150% of the poverty level (Corrigan, 2003). First-generation students are more likely than continuing-generation students to be from low income families (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) and two thirds of low income students are first-

generation (Corrigan). However, those first-generation students with higher family income levels are more likely to persist in college than first-generation students with lower family income levels (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Attrition rates for low income students are higher than for middle and upper class students (Ishitani, 2003; Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Corrigan identified four factors found to negatively influence the persistence rates of low income students: part-time enrollment, working a full time job, not enrolling in college directly after high school, and not having a traditional high school diploma. These students are more likely to enroll in college part time and work more hours than their middle and upper income counterparts. Twenty-three percent of low income students have been found to work full time while enrolled in college (Corrigan).

Pre-College Preparation

Numerous studies have been conducted to better understand the pre-college preparation and experiences of low income, first-generation college students. Research has shown that, in general, this population of students has had a less academically rigorous high school curricula (Harrell & Forney, 2003) and is less academically prepared for college than students whose parents attained a bachelor's degree or higher (Choy, 2001; Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez, 2001). In fact, half of first-generation students were found to be marginally qualified for the academic requirements of a four-year institution. For example, while first-generation students are less likely to enroll in advanced math classes in high school (Choy; Harrell & Forney), enrollment and success in rigorous high school coursework can greatly

increase college persistence for low income, first-generation students (Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez).

First-generation students have less parental involvement in the selection of their high school coursework (Choy, 2001). This lower level of involvement carries over into the college application process. These students have less parental support and involvement in college selection, the application process, signing up for admission tests such as the SAT and the ACT, and filling out financial aid paperwork. Ironically, low income students are the least likely to locate and complete financial aid paperwork (Harrell & Forney, 2003). As a result, these students tend to rely more heavily on support from high school personnel.

For those low income, first-generation students who do successfully graduate from college, Sandria Rodriguez (2003) determined some characteristics linked to persistence to college graduation. The first characteristic was special status, in which a child was singled out during their childhood from peers in a positive way. These students receive special attention or materials, which positively affected self confidence. The second characteristic was positive naming, when mentors helped the student realize the connection between skills that they have with potential occupations. The third characteristic was ascending cross-class identification. The persisting first-generation students had the opportunity to see what life is like in a higher socioeconomic class and how they might attain that class level for themselves.

First-Generation College Engagement

First-generation student motivation for enrolling in college is often an attempt to improve socioeconomic status or occupation levels (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini, et al., 1994). Once enrolled in college, the first-generation student experience differs from that of their continuing-generation peers. These first-generation students are more likely to have lower family incomes, attend less academically-selective institutions, and to attend college part-time while working full time (Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin; Pascarella, et al, 2004.; Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez, 2001).

As a result of lower levels of academic preparation and other commitments outside of their academics, low income, first-generation students have been found to earn lower GPAs than continuing-generation students (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella, et al, 2004; Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez, 2001). This population of students often "stops out" or transfers from their initial institution, as a result they are less likely to attain their degree from the first institution in which they enroll (Billson & Terry, 1982; Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez).

Reasons for "stop outs," transfers, and high attrition rates may also be attributed to lower levels of both educational aspiration (Pascarella, et al., 2004) and academic and social integration on campus (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Pike and Kuh suggest that first-generation students know less about the importance of engagement in their college experience, and less about how to become engaged on campus than continuing generation students. In fact, first-generation students have been found to view the college

environment as less supportive than their continuing-generation peers. They also tend to live off campus at higher rates and to be less involved with extracurricular activities, athletics, and volunteer opportunities (Billson & Terry, 1982; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin; Pascarella et al.; Pike & Kuh;). Many of these students are less likely to have their most important friendships on campus (Billson & Terry). In his study, Pascarella found that academic and social involvement increased first-generation student degree aspirations and reasoning skills, and that social peer interactions increased their levels of cultural capital, or understanding of the college culture.

Low Income College Engagement

Low income students are disproportionately represented in the first-generation student population (Choy, 2001). Like first-generation students, low income students are likely to be older than other students and to be enrolled in college part time (Muraskin & Lee, 2004). These students also have higher attrition rates than their peers, although, those students with clear career goals have higher rates of persistence than those without such goals. A study by Tseng (1971) showed that lower socioeconomic levels are directly linked with academic motivation and occupational aspirations.

For those low income students who do not graduate, the costs include the lost time as a full-time wage earner when they were a student, the cost of their education to this point, and any existing educational debt (Muraskin & Lee, 2004). As a result, an important consideration for low income students' educational attainment is the

available financial aid. Another factor found to increase retention rates for low income students is on campus living, which increases student integration on campus (Muraskin & Lee). For those students who do not live on campus, greater time spent on campus and utilizing campus resources correlates to higher levels of retention. For many students increased work hours results in decreased time spent on campus and lower levels of campus involvement and integration.

Predictors of First-Generation Persistence

Predicting the academic success of low income, first-generation students has been the subject for multiple studies. One such study, based completely on minority student participants, used quantitative methods to determine predicting factors and found that student academic motivation and social support networks contribute to academic success (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Adjustment to college, as well as college GPA and student commitment to college were directly related to the student's personal motivation based on their interests, intellectual curiosity, and career aspirations. Adjustment to college was also found to relate to the support students felt from their peers and the degree to which they did not believe they needed familial support.

Another study conducted by McCarron and Inkelas (2006) considered the lower levels of parent involvement in college preparation and degree attainment for first-generation students. The study sought to determine if parental involvement increased the educational aspirations of first-generation students. Using survey data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88/2000) distributed by the

National Center for Educational Statistics, the researchers found that 62.1% of first-generation college students did not achieve their educational aspirations. They found that for first-generation students, the best predictor of attainment of educational aspirations was the importance that the individual student placed on getting good grades, while parental involvement was found to be a slightly less accurate predictor of aspiration attainment.

In contrast to the quantitative methods, Byrd and Macdonald (2005) used qualitative methods to gain the perspectives of how first-generation students define college preparation. This study is insightful because as a qualitative study, the researchers were able to explore the thoughts and opinions of the participants. This study identified four skills associated with college readiness: academic skills, time management, goal focus, and self advocacy. Six additional factors were identified to have contributed to the participants' decision to enroll in college: familial expectations, career goals, financial concerns, pre-college academic preparation, self concept, and understanding of the college system.

In another study aimed at understanding the factors that help some first-generation students persist, Kathleen Cushman (2007) focused on the transition to college life and spoke with 16 of these students over the course of two years about this topic. These students described the shock of arriving at college less prepared academically, financially, and socially than their peers with college educated parents. These students noted that being able to cultivate and maintain their personal self confidence and stay true to themselves were keys to their successful transition to college and their eventual persistence. These students cultivated their self confidence

by finding social and academic support networks as well as by making connections with adults such as faculty and staff who could provide them with guidance and support.

First-Generation Persistence

Studies tracking first-generation student persistence rates are rare. In one such study, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) compared the persistence rates of first-generation and continuing-generation students between their first and second years of college as well as the factors affecting persistence rates. The results of the study showed that 76.5% of first-generation students persist between the first and second years, while 82.2% of continuing-generation students persisted. Income level is related to persistence, as every $10,000 increase in family income related to a 2% increase in persistence rates. Financial aid was also found to be associated with first-generation student persistence. Every $1,000 increase in grant aid was linked to a 2.7% persistence increase while every $1,000 in work study, which promotes higher levels of campus integration, was associated with a 6.4% increase in persistence rates. Those students who were involved on campus and happy with their social lives were 16.7% more likely to persist between their first and second years.

First-Generation Attrition

To better understand first-generation student attrition, Ishitani (2003; 2006) has undertaken multiple quantitative studies on the topic. The findings of the studies show that after controlling for other variables, first-generation students have higher rates of

attrition than non first-generation students over time (Ishitani, 2003). During the first year, first-generation students were found to have a 71% higher risk of attrition than for students with two college educated parents. In a second longitudinal study, Ishitani (2006) found that first-generation students had a 51% lower rate of graduation in four years and a 32% lower rate of graduation in five years than non-first generation students.

Low Income Persistence

In her quantitative study, Corrigan (2003) researched the challenges to persistence that low income students face. She found that there were four primary risk factors for low-income students who remained dependent on their parents. The four factors found to negatively influence the persistence rates of low income students were being enrolled part-time, working a full time job, not enrolling in college directly after high school, and not having a traditional high school diploma. However, the study's limitations include that it was primarily focused on older, low-income students with their own children and was completed over a three year period. Further, this study did not track the graduation rates of students in four-year programs.

By contrast, in their study on the causes of educational inequality, Gladieux and Swail (2000) took a more positive look at low income student persistence. They were able to identify three factors positively correlated to low income students' persistence: preparation for college level academics, high educational aspirations, and having a college-educated role model.

Low Income Attrition

In addition to addressing the attrition rates of first-generation students, Ishitani (2003; 2006) also examined the attrition rates of low income students. The longitudinal study conducted by Ishitani (2003) provides evidence that the attrition rates for low income students are higher than for middle and upper class students. Low income students were 49% more likely to leave the institution during their first year and 26% more likely to leave during their second year than students from higher income levels. In a second longitudinal study of student attrition, Ishitani (2006) found that students whose family income was less than $19,999 were 41% less likely to graduate in four years and 69% less likely to graduate in six years than students from families with income levels of $50,000 or higher.

Barriers to Low Income, First-Generation Degree Attainment

College attrition rates are high for low income, first-generation students. This may be partially due to the fact that for the last four decades, national policy has been focused primarily on low income student *access* to higher education with a lack of attention on their *persistence* (Gladieux & Swail, 2000). However, once these students do enroll in college, they face many hurdles. Many lack confidence. Still others lack capital in various areas (Barrat, 2007; Cushman, 2007); economic capital for supplies and organization participation, cultural capital in the form of knowledge about college systems, social capital to develop relationships with those who have higher socio-economic status, and academic capital attendant with strong college preparation in high school (Terenzini, et al., 1994).

Supporting Low Income, First-Generation Students in College

Many of the studies that have been conducted regarding low income and first-generation college students have provided suggestions for how the university can better serve these students. Strangely, in very few of these studies are low income, first-generation students asked directly about how the university best supports them and how the university could make improvements in this area.

One way that universities can clearly support this population of students is by providing adequate financial aid (Billson & Terry, 1982; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Doing so may allow students the opportunity to work fewer hours and become more involved on campus both academically and in extracurricular activities. These students would also benefit from living on campus and the increased engagement that residence hall living promotes (Billson & Terry; Gardner, 1996; Pike & Kuh).

Low income, first-generation students can also benefit from increased knowledge about college culture. This information can be provided through orientations and summer bridge programs designed specifically for first-generation students and their parents that include both social and academic aspects (Dahl, 2004; Gardner, 1996; Terenzini, et al., 1994), intrusive advising (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005; Gardner), and support programs such as TRiO (Gladieux & Swail, 2000). Caring role models and increased contact with faculty members have also been found to increase academic and occupational aspirations for this population (Cushman, 2007; Dahl; Gladieux & Swail; Harrell & Forney; 2003; Terenzini, et al.).

Student Support Services

Many suggestions have been made in the literature on how to support low income, first-generation students and many services are in place to increase their persistence. One such program is Student Support Services, a federally funded TRiO program, designed to increase retention and graduation rates of students from low income and first-generation backgrounds as well as those disabled or veteran students (Thayer, 2000). Services include assistance with the college application process, academic and social preparation prior to college enrollment, personalized academic advising, academic support including tutoring and supplemental instruction, community building between program participants, and positive messages to students. Advantages for participants include academic support, a support network in and outside of the classroom, and membership in a community focused on academic success.

Justification for the Study

This literature review demonstrates a need for further research, including that proposed in this study. Tinto (1987) has created a well known model for college student attrition, while Astin's (1975) model addresses factors related to student persistence. However, the models by Tinto (1987) and Astin (1975) do not directly address the issues of attrition and persistence applied to the subpopulation of low income, first-generation students.

It is clear from the literature on student attrition and persistence that the experiences of low income, first-generation students in college are unique and that

they experience lower rates of persistence than continuing-generation students (Ishitani, 2003 & 2006). However, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring the experiences and perspectives of these students. Much of the research is on attrition, risk factors, and pre-college characteristics of low income, first-generation students. Existing research considers educational aspirations, college readiness, adjustment to college, and rates of first-generation student attrition. However, there is little qualitative research on low income, first-generation student experiences during their enrollment in college, persistence to graduation, and the factors that support them in this endeavor.

This study shares and explores the college stories and experiences of a select number of persisting low income, first-generation students enrolled in the TRiO Student Support Services program. By exploring the stories and experiences of persisting low income, first-generation college students, this research will illustrate how institutions of higher education can better understand and support this particular student population in persisting to graduation.

CHAPTER 3: MATERIALS AND METHODS

Theoretical Perspectives/Research Perspective

The purpose of this study is to understand the college experiences of persisting low income, first-generation students from their own perspectives. As the author of this study, I believe every individual has their own story and their own experiences. Therefore, the theoretical perspective of this study will be the interpretive social science perspective (Neuman, 2003).

The Researcher

As the researcher of this study, it is understood that I bring my own personal biases and values to all aspects of this work. It was my own personal experiences as a teacher of low income students that influenced my decision to further explore the topic of low income, first-generation college persistence. This experience and my personal views are present throughout the study as I read existing literature on the topic, developed interview questions, and even as I conducted interviews with the study participants. I cannot completely eliminate my own personal values and biases or be completely objective throughout the research process. Instead, I critically reflected on my feelings, assumptions, and values throughout the entire research process, and explored my biases that arose as part of the results discussion.

Research Methods

Research Design Type

This study was conducted from the qualitative research perspective, selected to explore the college persistence of low income, first-generation students in their own

voices. In qualitative research, "the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words from participants, describes and analyzes these words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner" (Creswell, 2005). I used a phenomenological approach (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005) to study how seven individuals perceived their experiences while persisting in college. I compared the interview data and explored the themes that arose from these interviews to provide a greater understanding of the central phenomena, the experiences of low income, first-generation students persisting through college.

Sampling

In this study, I used criterion sampling to get a data rich sample. I selected seven students to interview who met my criterion. The participants were low income, first-generation students. In addition, they were all enrolled in the TRiO Student Support Services program at their university. To obtain the stories of persistence, all participants had junior or higher academic standing and were on track to graduate. These criteria were used because the literature shows that first-generation students have higher attrition rates during their first two years of college enrollment (Ishitani, 2006). I selected the criteria of being participants in the Student Support Services program to direct me to potential participants. Additionally, my hope is that this sample will provide insight into support services that are most beneficial to low income, first-generation student persistence.

Recruitment

The first step was to obtain permission to recruit participants out of the TRiO Student Support Services program from the program director. The Student Support Services program assistant at the participants' university then helped me to distribute an explanation of the study to the Student Support Services listserv and to provide the explanation to the Student Support Services advisors to share with their advisees. This explanation outlined the study, the research questions, criterion for participants, and the time commitment involved in the study. Interested students contacted me, and we then had a short telephone conversation to determine whether they met the study criteria. If they met the criteria and were still interested in participating, we scheduled a one-on-one interview. I then emailed each participant a consent form and a copy of the interview questions so that they could become familiar with the study and the questions before the interview.

Participants

Of the students who replied to my request for study participants, seven students met all the criteria. From this point on the participants will be referred to as Participant A, Participant B, etc.

Participant A was male, nontraditionally-aged, Caucasian, and a father. *Participant B* was female, nontraditionally-aged, Caucasian, and a mother. *Participant C* was male, nontraditionally-aged, Caucasian, and a father. *Participant D* was male, nontraditionally aged, Caucasian, a disabled veteran, and a father. *Participant E* was female, traditionally-aged, Vietnamese, with no children. *Participant F* was male,

traditionally-aged, Vietnamese, with no children. *Participant G* was female,

traditionally-aged, Vietnamese, with no children.

Data Collection

I conducted one-on-one, in-person semi-structured interviews with each

participant, lasting approximately 45 minutes to one hour each. In these interviews I

asked a set of pre-determined questions, but also asked additional follow-up and

clarification questions pertaining to the study. The interviews flowed somewhat freely,

similar to a conversation. To help the participants to feel more comfortable, each

participant was offered a choice of venue for the interview, provided that the location

would be conducive for audio recording. However, I found that none of the

participants had a preference for the location of the interview and thus I conducted the

interviews in a private conference room in the Student Support Services department.

Each of the interviews was digitally recorded, and recorded on a tape recorder as a

backup. All of the participants were informed prior to the interview that they would be

recorded.

At the conclusion of the first interview, participants were reminded of the

possibility that I might contact them for a follow-up interview if clarification was

deemed necessary. They were also reminded that they would receive a copy of the

study at its completion, if so desired.

The audio recordings were copied to a CD and sent to a professional

transcriptionist to be transcribed verbatim. The first interviews completed were sent to

the transcriptionist before the following interviews were finished. This simultaneous

transcription and interview process was used to facilitate exploration of emergent themes so that I could adjust the future interview questions accordingly.

After the transcription was completed, the participants received a copy of their transcript to review. They were asked to send me clarifications, corrections, and additions to the interview. Three of the participants sent emails back to me with corrections to their interviews. After data analysis was complete, I did not need to do any follow-up interviews.

Data Analysis

For data analysis I followed the procedure provided by Creswell (2005) for coding qualitative data. Creswell outlines five steps for coding qualitative data: initially reading through the text data, dividing the text into segments of information, labeling the segments of information with codes, reducing overlap and redundancy of codes, and collapsing codes into themes.

To familiarize myself with the data, I read through each transcript two times. On the third read-through I labeled text segments by key ideas, which I coded. I then proceeded to re-label segments of text to reduce the redundancy of codes. I then identified related codes and grouped together concepts into broader categories. Finally, I grouped the categories into overarching themes that would be explored in this study. Although the data contained more topics than were included in the overarching themes, the themes were selected because they were addressed across all of the participant interviews. With the overarching themes chosen, I determined that follow-up interviews with participants would not be necessary.

The themes that emerged and that I chose to further explore in-depth were (a) the challenges faced by low income, first-generation students, (b) personal drive and motivation, (c) advising and orientation, (d) the role of academic support services, and (f) the role of non-academic support resources. Finally, each theme was considered in order to make recommendations for better supporting college persistence for this population.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured in the data collection process through the use of member checking (Creswell, 2005). The participants in the study were given the transcripts of their interviews to review for accuracy, with the opportunity to edit them if some of the thoughts or information from the interview was unclear.

As the researcher, I strove to maintain the dependability and replicability of the study by including a detailed description of all the methods used in the study in this methods section. I also strove to maintain the confirmability of the study by being continually reflexive of my own personal biases thoroughout the duration of the study.

Generalizability of the Study

One of the study limitations is the very small sample size. Due to confidentiality issues, the Student Support Services program would not release names of students who were qualified for my study so that I could contact them. Instead, I was asked to publicize my study by distributing information to the Student Support Services listserv and to wait for those students who were interested in the study to

contact me. From there, each potential participant still had to be screened to determine if they met the criteria for the study. Had Student Support Services been able to nominate those students who were eligible for the study, the number of participants would have been larger and potentially more diverse in age and race.

This is a qualitative study that explores the personal experiences of seven low income, first-generation students' college persistence, and the purpose of the study is to explore and share the experiences of *some* students from this population. As a result, the findings are not generalizable to the experiences of *all* low income, first-generation students. In my view, sufficient information has been provided to apply the findings of the study to this student population. Some meaningful conclusions can be drawn to impact colleges' and universities' practices with regards to low income, first-generation students.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As noted in chapter one, the primary research question is: What are the experiences of persisting low income, first-generation students during their enrollment in college? The secondary research questions are: What factors contribute to low income, first-generation persistence, and how can the university better support low income, first-generation students to graduation?

Each participant shared common characteristics and yet brought their own unique perspective to the interviews. Answers to the research questions emerged from the data into overarching themes. The emerging themes were (a) the general challenges faced by low income, first-generation students in college, (b) personal drive and motivation, (c) the role of orientation and advising, (d) the role of academic resources, and (e) the role of non-academic support resources. Each of these five themes, are explored in depth in this chapter.

Theme 1: General Challenges Faced by Students

Each of the participants in the study held junior or higher class standing and were on track to graduate sometime during the next six quarters. Reaching this point is an accomplishment, as many first-generation students drop out before this point in their college careers (Ishitani, 2003). To better understand the enormity of this accomplishment, it is important to explore the challenges that have defined the participants' college experiences.

Transitioning to University Academics

A common challenge for all of the study participants was the difficult transition to university level academics. Regardless of whether the student enrolled at the university directly out of high school or attended a community college prior to enrollment, the adjustment was a challenge. Participants cited concerns with both the level of the academics at the university, as well as the way that academics were structured differently at the university level than at the community college and high school levels.

Participants noted differing reasons for feeling underprepared for university-level academics. Some noted that the challenge arose because they were returning to college after many years away from academics and had to learn how to be a student again. On returning to the community college to take classes, Participant B explained her experience, "It was very overwhelming. The classroom – just being in the classroom again and not knowing what – where I'm supposed to go and what I'm supposed to do." Explaining about his experience returning to college after multiple years, Participant A echoed these feelings saying, "…when I first started college it was like oh, I've been out of school for so long and I'm not smart enough to do this anymore…there's been a lot of actually having to learn things over again."

Other participants who enrolled directly in the university after high school attributed the challenge of college level academics to feeling that their prior education had not adequately prepared them for college success. Although participants expected academic challenge, sometimes they were still surprised by the rigor of college academics. As Participant E noted, "It's really far more difficult than I would ever

expect it…Even though I tried really hard in high school just to graduate and go to university, it is about 1/5 of what I've been doing here." Participant G reasoned, "One important lesson I've learned in high school was that, dude, I was really behind and I really needed to do some catch up."

For some of the participants, this high level of academic challenge could partially be attributed to language barriers. Participant E explained,

> The biggest challenge would be language. Yeah, because the amount of work I have to do towards graduation requires a lot of reading comprehension. It's just, I still have to work on my English a lot. I have to constantly look up in the dictionary when I read something.

For both the participants transferring from a community college and those enrolling directly out of high school, it took time to get used to the academic format of university classes and the new grading systems. Of particular concern to participants were the large classes in which they felt anonymous and all alone. According to Participant A, "When you're in a class of 200-some students you're just that random face." Another concern was the large amounts of assigned reading and the fact that grades were based on three or four large papers or tests rather than on smaller, weekly assignments were also concerns noted by participants. Participant C said,

> But all the reading that's required and everything like that…that's something I wasn't prepared for when I got here. I mean, at Chemeketa you were doing so many little assignments and taking little tests all the time that, you know, if you didn't do the reading, you know, if you slacked off some things, you could make it up. But here it was like…you've got two finals and two big papers or two big group projects and that's what your grade is based on so you can't miss one and pull out of it very easily.

For some participants, the combination of the different type of workload and the feeling that faculty members were less accessible than high school teachers contributed the challenge of transitioning from high school to university level

academics. As Participant F explained, "Here it is just, you know, tests, do your own reading, more independent. You're kind of on yourself, all alone."

Family Commitments

Both the non-traditionally aged and traditionally aged study participants had family obligations that impacted their college experience. For the participants, college academics were not their sole focus. Each participant had obligations to family that consumed large amounts of their time and energy. For the non-traditionally aged students, the family obligations were related to their spouses and their children. For the traditionally aged students, their cultural backgrounds emphasized the importance of responsibility to the rest of the family and as a result, the family obligations of the traditionally aged students were comprised of commitments to their parents and siblings.

Each of the non-traditionally aged students returned to college after a drastic life change which left them attempting to find a way to financially support their family. As a result, their college experiences were marked by concerns about managing child-rearing responsibilities and trying to balance a schedule that could accommodate both academic studies and family responsibilities. Participant A noted,

> …the hardest thing that I've had to deal with is my wife just had a baby. And trying to balance our schedules, our study needs with time for the baby and babysitting and things like that has been really frustrating…My biggest downside to school is I have the baby Tuesdays and Thursdays but you can't really get any studying done during the day then you're trying to stay up all night to do your studying…

Participant C noted that having joint custody of his daughter meant that when she is with him, she is the highest priority in his schedule and the result is that every other week academics becomes a lower priority. "Every other weekend I have my daughter

and then every Wednesday night I have my daughter and I really try hard not to do any homework when I have her because I want to spend time with her."

Non-traditionally aged participants noted that the family obligations made it more difficult to manage their classes and assignments. In addition, the role in the family and the need to manage many commitments in already full schedules also had an impact on student involvement on campus. As a result, the non-traditionally aged students were generally less involved with extra-curricular activities. Participant D explained his experience saying, "So I've missed out a lot on, you know, student involvement because of having to be home to take care of the kid, make sure he gets homework done, that kind of stuff."

Although none of the traditionally-aged participants were raising children, obligations to family were also a factor in their college experiences. These students were highly commitment to parents and siblings. Cultural integration and the language barrier were two of the issues that participants faced regularly. As a fluent English speaker, Participant F spent time at his parent's home serving as a translator for his family.

> I take my mom to the doctor and translate…And sometimes my brother, he ask me to call up companies, like, just bills. And my sister-in-law ask me to call her…credit card bill for her because she can't speak English well.

In this way, traditionally-aged students struggled to balance personal life and responsibilities with academic responsibilities. As a result, they spent less time on campus.

Financial Concerns and Work Commitments

Each of the participants in the study qualified as low income in the TRiO

Student Support Services program. To qualify as low income in this program, the

family income cannot exceed 150% of the poverty level. Therefore, financial issues

posed a challenge to college persistence for each of the participants, as paying for

classes, fees, books, supplies, rent and living expenses was a concern for all

participants. For those with children, supporting them was an added financial

challenge. Participant C said,

> …when I first went back to school, explaining to my ex that the child support's
> going to go down because I'm going back to school and you know, she didn't
> really like the fact that I was paying a lot less at the time.

In order to cover college expenses, participants relied on financial aid

including loans and grants. For the traditionally-aged students who were not

supporting others, financial aid and work-study jobs on campus covered most of their

educational costs, while those supporting other family members were often forced to

seek off-campus employment or other financial support from family members.

Nevertheless, financial strain continued to be a factor in the college experience of all

participants. In order to support herself through college Participant G said, "I worked

all three years…I had financial aid, I had food stamps, I had SSS and some small

scholarships that did add up."

Adding to financial concerns, participants noted that finding an off-campus job

that worked around their academic schedule could be very difficult. In Participant B's

words,

> There's been times where financially getting through school, kids, and having
> to work, there's been times were I can't find a job that works around my

schedule and I find myself at the end of the term going how am I going to pay the car payment this month?

Even when participants were able to find employment that fit around their academic schedule, balancing employment responsibilities with academics resulted in less on-campus time, less involvement in extra-curricular activities, and less time and energy they could devote to academics.

Commuting

A defining characteristic of the college experiences of the low income, first-generation students in this study was their very busy schedules. These schedules allowed for less time that could be committed to academics and involvement on campus. Family obligations and work responsibilities contributed to their busy schedules. For some participants, commuting to and from campus added to strain on their schedules.

One participant explained that he and his wife were already well established in their home community and that it did not make sense for them to uproot their entire life for his college education which he hoped to complete in two years. Additionally, post-graduation job prospects in the college community did not look bright. As a result, he and his wife decided not to move near the campus and he commutes each day. Regarding the impact of this decision on his college experience Participant A said, "But it's two hours that I'm not studying, that I'm not doing something productive so it is challenging in that sense." Participant C found a similar commute to have too large of an impact on his schedule and his academics and recently chose to move closer to the university to finish his degree. "The reason why I moved down

here wasn't really finances…it's mainly the two hours out of my day every day that I could have been using for studying…"

Although all of the traditionally-aged students in the study lived near campus and did not commute to class on a daily basis, it was common for these students to commute home on weekends to take care of family responsibilities or to visit their home communities. Similar to the commuting done by many of the non-traditionally aged students, these trips resulted in time away from campus and from academic pursuits. Participant F explained,

> I try to see my parents as much as I can. I go home on the weekends so it's an hour and a half drive back to Portland, stay until Sunday night…depends on my schedule if I don't have a lot of midterms.

Isolation from the Student Body Due to Age and Cultural Differences

A common experience for all of the participants in this study was feeling that they did not completely fit in with their classmates and with the rest of the student body at the university. For four of the participants, these feelings were attributed to being older than the majority of students on campus and the added difference of raising children while they were in school. For three of the participants, feelings of not fitting in were attributed to cultural and racial differences between themselves and the student body majority.

The non-traditionally-aged students vented frustration at the lack of understanding from university employees that their needs differed from those of the traditionally aged college student. Participant A said, "I'm not 18 so I get really frustrated when people try to put me in the 18 year old mold. [They] treat me like I'm young." Participant B noted that it took time for her to get used to not fitting in with

the rest of the students in her classes so she could stop thinking about that fact and focus on her academics. "It's a little different being 32 and being in class with 18 and 19-year-olds…I try not to let that kind of thing bother me anymore." Participant C attributed some of his lack of campus involvement and feelings of social isolation to his age, saying, "…everybody's younger than me and I'm single. Should get myself a date every now and then or a girlfriend. I'm an old guy with a kid so social life has kind of been a stumbling block."

Although the age difference was a source of some frustration for participants, participants noted some positive aspects of their age difference. Participants noted their age and the attendant responsibilities created urgency to pursue their degree, and caused them to prioritize learning over other aspects of the college experience. As Participant C said, "I don't have the option of five-six year degree program. Four years, maybe four and a half, that's about it, you know. That's all I'm willing to put in because of the sacrifices."

Feeling different from other students was not limited to the non-traditionally aged participants. All of the traditionally-aged participants noted similar feelings which they attributed to being racial minorities on campus. The isolation affected students both in their academic experiences and the formation of social and support networks with their peers.

Participant E explained that she noticed a lack of role models for minority students on campus and a lack of minorities in positions of power. "I guess not that many faculty or administrators—yeah, teachers even, not that many are minority. Because it would be great to have some teacher or someone like that to because they

can relate more to the students." Participant F expressed feeling isolated in classes and difficulty finding other students to study with.

> It was kind of intimidating to me because I'm in the College of Agriculture and sometimes I'm in the class and I'm the only diverse person in there and so it's a little intimidating. Sometimes I email, like, try to get in a group to work together so I can get help too, but you know, no one really replies so it's a little hard.

Participant G felt the greatest impact of being a minority student on campus in her social life and peer support network. This student grew up in a primarily Vietnamese community and did not have white friends throughout middle and high school. In this way, the transition to the university community was challenging.

> I was really intimidated by white people…I mean, it never occurred to me that maybe I should just, like, put down my wall. But I was just really intimidated because I didn't know what they were like. Even though I grew up in America but basically I was very much Vietnamese in a lot of ways.

Even though participants felt isolated for different reasons, it affected them both academically and socially.

The college experiences of low income, first-generation students are characterized by challenges, including, but are not limited to, transitioning into college and related academic difficulties, family responsibilities, financial concerns and work commitments, commuting, and isolation due to age and cultural differences. Each of these challenges affect student involvement on campus. As a result of these challenges, low income, first-generation students do not have the luxury of being as invested in campus life and completely focused on academics as other student populations.

Theme 2: Personal Drive and Motivation

Study participants shared strong personal drives and motivation to attain a college degree despite many challenges. Participants attributed this drive to career ambitions, family expectations, and sacrifices made en route to their degrees.

Career aspirations motivated some participants. Participant E noted, "I think attending higher education will help me have a better life, a better job." Participant F explained, "I want a good family, a good paying job, good salary. That's kind of what motivates me."

Participants noted that getting through college required sacrifices. As a result of the great financial and personal sacrifices that each participant made in order to attended college, the participants saw persistence to college graduation as the only available option. Participant C identified the financial and emotional support from his family as a huge motivating factor in his persistence. He did not want to let his family down after all that they had done for him.

> …all the support my family's given me is a real big push because…after everything that everyone's done for me it's like, I can't mess up now, you know, I need to go through with it. I need to finish it.

Voicing a similar sentiment, participant E spoke about how her parents moved to the United States so she could get a college education. She stated, "When I think about what's keeping me in college, I always think about how my parents have – well, have sacrificed too much to come here."

For another participant, the family investment in his education was not only positively motivating. For him, the family expectation added a huge amount of pressure to succeed. Explaining the pressure he feels to succeed, participant F said,

> I'm the only son in my family so there's a little pressure with my mom. My family kind of expects me to graduate so there's a lot of family pressure. So, sometimes it gets a little overwhelming to you know, have a degree.

In addition, participants noted pressure to complete the degree in the shortest time possible. Participant A explained,

> I really set a goal that I'm going to graduate by 2009. So, to accomplish that I have to finish all my business classes so I can apply to the Pro school which really shortens my junior and senior year so I have to take all those courses in one year. And it average out between 16 and 19 credits a term which is – seems insane.

The motivation behind this pace was his desire to begin earning an income again after a period of financial strain as a student.

The fact that the study participants are close to graduating was in itself motivating. Participant B noted that since the end is in sight, her personal drive is even stronger. She said, "I think that because I am so close, I'm very driven and I don't worry about the little stuff. Instead, I'm trying to just keep that focus knowing that it is almost done. I'm almost there."

Each of the participants in this study identified a strong motivating factor that kept them in college and persisting to degree attainment, even when difficulties arose. For all of the participants, personal motivation is a key factor that keeps them in college.

Theme 3: The Role of Orientation and Advising

A consistent theme among each of the interviews was a desire for adequate information. As first-generation, these students came to college lacking knowledge about classes, degree programs, services, and the college experience in general. Two

areas where students traditionally obtain information about their college are student orientation and academic advising.

It is clear that for the study participants, the quality of their advising and orientation experiences greatly impacted how they felt about their college experience and the university in general. For those students who had positive advising and orientation experiences, they were viewed as very valuable supports that positively affected their college persistence. In contrast, other participants viewed their advising and orientation experiences negatively. They saw these services as frustrating hurdles to be overcome in their path toward degree attainment. Therefore, whether positive or negative, orientation and advising are services that can greatly impact the college experience of low income, first-generation college students.

Advising

For some students, advisors provided clear and adequate academic guidance, helping students select their courses and majors and generally stay on track to graduate. In some cases, advisors even served as student mentors. In the experience of one non-traditionally aged participant, when she advocated strongly enough for herself, she found that her advisor was a great support who helped her select a new major when she was unhappy with her college experience and was ready to drop out. When asked what kind of suggestions she would make to other students in her position Participant B said,

> Talk with your advisors, meet with your advisors every term. If you're having a problem, meet with them. Don't wait until the last minute…If you're not happy, if you think you want to drop out, express that to somebody, your advisor, because the direction you are started in is not the direction you need to go…Yeah, just make yourself known. You know, don't fall through the cracks.

For this student, advisor support was critical to her college persistence.

In addition to receiving academic guidance and support, traditionally-aged

Participant E developed a strong personal relationship with her academic advisor.

Through this relationship she got information about college and class selections, as

well as much needed personal support.

> …when I meet up with my advisor I learn more about the college and the classes I shouldn't take. And yeah…sometimes I want to talk a little, that really helped me in relieving stress too. It's good to know someone cares about you.

This close relationship with the advisor can partly be attributed to the advisor's

willingness to go out of her way to support Participant E.

> She's really inspiring and very passionate about her job. So I couldn't get in a class one time…and I asked her to help me override that class. She wrote a recommendation—an override letter to the teacher, to the head of the department, to the dean of the college. I was like, am I worth all the trouble she went through? And I thought it was awesome and she definitely helped me a lot.

This advisor did not just support the participant's academic goals, but her personal

development as well. As Participant E explained, "I think that my academic advisor

played a big role in helping me become who I am right now."

Participant F struggled with major selection and long-term career goals. He

had difficulty determining what path would best suit his interests and abilities. His

advisor not only supported him in scheduling and course selection, but actively

supported him in this decision making process, listening to his concerns, and

connecting him to other people and potential job opportunities.

> She really goes all out to help you. If you need to get an override for class, she'll help you. She'll really help you with anything so like when I meet her, we'll just sit there for an hour and talk and she'll give me an example of what people have done and tries to narrow what my interest is. And it's kind of like—I call her my counselor but she does a lot of stuff to try and narrow my

interest and try to give me like interviews and jobs that I might be interested in…She tried to get me jobs so I can get like experience or hands-on to see if I would like it or not…that's really what I like about her. She'll like help you whatever you want to do.

These participants' interactions with their advisors were extremely positive and their relationships with their advisors have supported their college persistence.

Other participants had negative experiences with advising. For some, advisors seemed like roadblocks on the path to degree attainment. In general, all but one of the non-traditional aged participants were less satisfied with their orientation and advising experiences than the traditionally aged participants. Participant A said, "I was really frustrated when I first came here. And then I just kind of learned to avoid the advisors and it's been better."

These frustrations were caused by different elements. Some were frustrated by trying to work with advisors who were uninformed about requirements, presented information to students in unclear and confusing ways, or failed to connect students with other resources on campus. As a result, advisors did not live up to participant expectations. Participant C explained, "She's been a little help in some areas but you know, not as much as I expect…all the advisors are like that. They're not a lot of help, which is too bad." Participant A explained that his advisor was not understanding of the fact that for financial reasons he needed to graduate sooner than the advisor thought was prudent. He had to determine his own course selection and degree plan in so that he could graduate sooner than the advisor expected him to. "I really am independent so I really just said okay, these are the classes I have to take to graduate. These are what I'm taking. I don't care that the advisor wants me to graduate in 2010."

Transferring from the community college to the four year institution often resulted in uninformed advising, causing frustration for participants. Participant C explained that advisors at the community college level did not adequately provide the information he needed to transfer into his chosen field at the four-year institution. After expressing that he did not want to get an associate's degree, but rather wanted to complete those classes that could transfer over, he was told, "Well then, you need to look through these books and figure it out." However, Participant C was able to connect with an advisor at the four-year institution who helped him determine the courses that he should take. He attributed his relatively smooth transition to the four-year institution to the aid and advice of this advisor. He explained,

> I pretty much had all my classes planned out for like two years in advance. I worked with…a head advisor for the College of Forestry quite a bit to make sure that I had…everything that I could get done at Chemeketa pretty much done.

Participant G became frustrated with her advisor even though the advisor kept her well informed of the requirements of her major and the classes she needed to take to graduate. The student's frustrations came from feeling that she was missing out on other types of classes, experiences and a wider education. Ignoring the advisor, she took courses out of her major and studied abroad, and thus reignited her interest in college. As a result of her experience with an advisor she says, "Never trust your advisor 100% of the time, I swear."

Another concern for non-traditionally aged participants was advisors that did not seem to recognize the multiple aspects that differentiated their college experience from traditionally aged students and continued to treat them the way they would treat a traditional student. Participant A explained how this felt saying, "Oh, you're 18. No,

you're not 18? Oh, well, I'm going to treat you like you're 18." If non-traditionally aged participants had not perceived this type of attitude from the advisors that they worked with they may have been better able to establish the positive relationships that occurred between the other participants and their academic advisors.

Orientation

Along with advising, orientation is used to convey information to new students. Despite some negative views of the orientation experience, two orientations were viewed positively by participants. Multiple participants positively noted the student orientation offered by the Educational Opportunities Program. Although none of the participants were aware of the program when they started as new students, two were involved as program mentors in subsequent years and expressed that they would have benefited from the experience in their transition to the four-year institution if they had known about it as new students. For the traditionally-aged participants who lived on campus, the residence hall experience served as another effective orientation to the university and the services available there. Students who lived in the residence hall noted the live-in resident advisor and the connection to other students and staff members as means through which they were able to obtain information they needed to orient to campus life.

Still, for other participants, orientation was an area of concern. Participants who transferred from the community college expressed concern that new student orientation did not address their needs. One student who was enrolled in the degree partnership program and transferred during the summer was not even involved in the orientation program. Participant D was involved in the orientation program and noted

that the session felt very disjointed and that more information would have been helpful. "The orientation should be a bit more encompassing…orientation is very sporadic. You bounce from here to here to here. You bounce around quite a bit."

A second concern was that the non-traditionally aged students felt a lack of recognition that they were not 18 years old, and that just as with advising, they had different needs for their orientation than the traditional students. One non-traditionally aged participant who was trying to balance financial needs and academic requirements expressed frustration that he had to give up a day of work to attend an orientation session that turned out to be relatively uninformative for him. Participant A said,

> I was trying to get some last minute clients in from my business so I could, you know, just a little extra money with college or new term coming up and it was like oh, well, you have to be here. We can't understand that you're working at all. We can't understand that you have all these things going around because everyone else is 18 and lives on campus. And then it's like well, then how critical is the START program when you go in there and they don't tell you anything you don't know. You know, they hand you a catalogue and that's about the only useful thing you get out of the whole day. And it's like I just wasted how much money realistically because I had to cancel clients to come down here?

Although participants had varying opinions on the orientation and the advising that they received, it is clear that both orientation and advising impact students' perceptions and attitudes toward their university. The quality of student orientation and advising are areas that can greatly affect the low income, first-generation college experience and their college persistence rates both positively and negatively.

Theme 4: The Role of Academic Resources

Academics were the primary focus of the college experience for each of the participants in this study. Whether the participant was traditionally or non-traditionally

aged, a transfer or non-transfer student, and regardless of their first language, each of the participants reported coming to college primarily for academics and to attain a college degree. To this end, each of the participants sought campus academic resources to support them in their academic pursuits. Participants were generally satisfied with resources. However, participants noted that resources were initially quite difficult to find.

Participants shared the opinion that although there are many effective resources available to students on campus, the resources are not well publicized which made them very difficult to find. It seems that the publicizing of these resources may not effectively reach this population of students because many live off-campus and some commute daily, thus spending less time on campus than other students. In addition, as first-generation students, the participants did not come to college with knowledge about the type of academic resources that they could expect to find available to them, or where to find these resources.

As a result, each of the participants was frustrated that they had to search out resources on their own and had to self-advocate to attain access. Expressing frustration about how difficult it is to find resources on campus Participant A said, "…it seems like there's no advertisement in this school. Like here's all these programs or here's all these events. It's just if you happen to stumble upon them, they're here." Participant F said, "I don't really see them publicizing a lot of the services." Explaining how he had to search out resources for himself, Participant D stated, "I knew it was around here some place. Finally found out where, showed up at the doors, sign me up. I had to go look for it. No one told me where." In a similar situation Participant F said, "So,

definitely you have to be on yourself more—be more, you know, assertive. Go out and get help. If you need something, you go get it."

In general, once the participants were able to find resources, they utilized them regularly and acknowledged that they were a significant support to their college persistence. Participant B explained how by finding needed resources she significantly improved her experience at the institution:

> You don't have to walk around lost. It's not the end of the world. There's, you know, resources. Once I opened up and started searching around and found everything I needed and was pointed in the right direction with everything, it was great. It was a great experience.

For some participants, finding one academic support resource led them to other available resources. Participant B explained, "I had gotten an academic coach through SSD (Services for Students with Disabilities) and she pointed me over here to EOP (Educational Opportunities Program)."

Specific academic resources were noted consistently by participants as helpful to their persistence in college. Participants found both the Student Support Services program and the Educational Opportunities program to be useful resources, including the additional personal advising, mentors, smaller class sizes, and financial resources provided. Participant E noted,

> The SSS program is where they give you money as an aid for a term if you, you know, come in with your advisor and mentors and stuff like that. I also took a class through EOP which is really cool because they offer a smaller class size.

Participants also acknowledged that these resources served to connect them with other available resources on campus.

Services for Students with Disabilities served multiple participants and helped

them get what they needed to have greater success in their classes. Participant B said,

> …they've helped me learn how to talk with my instructors to the point where I do make it clear – I go to their office at the beginning of the term and make sure that I have everything that I need.

Participant D explained that this office helped him get the accommodations he needed

for his classes. "I got eText, I've got a notetaker, quiet location for testing, computer

use during testing, and a chair and table because sometimes I have to stand up and

move around."

In addition to services that supported their academic pursuits generally, some

participants noted that they did not have the skills to be able to complete some

assignments without additional help. Participant B explained that since she had been

out of school for multiple years she did not know how to do computer searches at the

library.

> I walked up and asked one of the gals up front, I said I'm not getting what I want out of it (the search)…she asked me what I was putting in—you know, to search for and I told her. And she decided it was such a broad—you're too broad on it. You need to narrow it down. And I didn't know what she meant and I said well, can you help me…The librarians are very helpful. The library—that's the place to be when you're trying to get through class.

Multiple participants mentioned that using the Writing Center had been very

beneficial. Some utilized it because they had been out of college for multiple years and

they felt out of practice writing academic papers. For another, it was because she felt

academically unprepared to write college-level papers. Still another utilized the

Writing Center because English was not her first language. Participant G who learned

English as a second language explained,

So, I came to college and it was like, oh, there's a Writing Center. So, I went there a lot and I started to work on my writing more because everything in college you do you require writing and reading. And I was not prepared because my reading skills are pretty poor. I'm still working on it now but I worked on my writing intensely.

Each of the participants in the study is a low income student and finances were a significant concern for all participants. Therefore, for multiple participants, simply having easy access to computers, internet, and free printing greatly contributed to their ability to complete assignments for their classes and to achieve academically. As Participant C noted, "The College of Forestry is real nice because they have four different computer labs for students to use which is very, very helpful." The cost of printing was also an added burden. For Participant E, having access to free printing was one of her most helpful forms of support. She explained, "It used to be the computer lab that had free printing because I have to print a lot for my class and it costs a lot of money for the ink and paper." Having internet access was critical for Participant G. "It was nice that we could have internet at home and that was like, to me amazing. It's like having electricity in a third world country."

Available academic resources were important factors that supported participant degree attainment. When participants were able to find resources or knew that they were available to them, they took advantage of the resources and found the resources to be effective supports to their degree attainment. However, the major problem for participants was the inaccessibility of the academic resources. Participants felt that they were on their own to find the support they needed and they often did not know what types of support was available to them or where to go to get it. Participant G said,

> Honestly, I felt like I was sort of on my own and like, the support that I found was just at random places. I was just like, kind of lost and doing things on my own. I think that there are resources out there but it's that if you are looking, fine. If you don't, then it's just kind of like, sorry for you.

As a solution, Participant A suggested, "I'd really like to see the University find a way to get information out to the students." It is clear that publicizing the academic resources that are available in a way that reaches this population of students is critical to low income, first-generation academic persistence.

Theme 5: The Role of Non-Academic Support Resources

In general, participants noted that there are many non-academic support resources available on campus and they sought to take advantage of each of them. The drawback was that each individual was on their own to find and take advantage of them. Just as with the academic resources, participants struggled to find non-academic support resources and this continued to be a major frustration. When participants were able to find non-academic support resources, these services supported their academic persistence. However, the difficulty of finding the resources could be a drain on student energy and motivation for college persistence.

All of the participants noted financial challenges as hurdles in their college persistence. Each of the participants relied on outside financial support to attend college. As Participant E noted, "The one thing that probably helped me the most was the financial aid I got from the government." Despite the financial aid that they received, for most money was still tight and financial issues were still a concern. Participant G explained, "I had to take a loan but that was a major step because I've

never taken a loan before and loans—I mean, owing money to someone just like stresses me out."

Aside from financial aid packages, scholarships, and grants, some of the financial resources most helpful for participants were emergency loans, university-issued short term loans of up to $250 to be paid back by the end of the term; financial support offered through the Student Support Services program; MealBux, a program that provides students with up to $250 deposited onto their ID card that can be spent at campus food vendors; and subsidized family housing. The traditionally-aged students relied more on scholarships, loans and Student Support Services aid. Participant B said,

> Just two terms ago I learned about MealBux and I applied for them not thinking that I qualified, but I did. And that's helpful in the sense that there are times when I don't plan to be here all day but I'm here all day.

Financial support was not the only non-academic support resource utilized by participants. Relating to financial concerns, non-traditionally aged participants expressed appreciation for Student Health Services and Counseling and Psychological Services that provide physical and mental health services to students at a reasonable price. Participant C said, "I did take advantage of the school's psychological counseling last term which was really helpful." Participant B said, "Student Health Services—awesome."

Unlike the non-traditionally aged participants, the traditionally aged participants attributed support for their persistence in part to the non-academic support resources of living in the residence halls and becoming involved on campus. All three of the traditionally aged participants lived in the campus residence halls during their

first year. Participant E expressed appreciation for the experience saying, "I lived in a dorm so that really helped me a lot because there's a lot of information for especially freshmen, for new students, and they show you the services are the campus." She continued to explain saying, "Live in the dorm at least your freshman or first year in college. I made some really good friends in the dorm and I learned a lot because they really help you keep track of your academic work."

Living in the campus residence halls can provide students with access to support staff and campus resources. However, for the participants in this study, living on campus was a more viable option for those who are traditionally-aged. Even so, the benefits of living on campus had to be balanced with the cost. Participant F explained, "My second year I moved out with my cousin because the cost was too much."

For one traditionally aged participant, her involvement in two campus organizations provided her opportunity to make connections on campus with faculty, staff, and students. Participant E explained,

> I know that we will be organizing events and connections is a big thing because we will constantly work with administration, with the dean, all the faculty and they know you, so I thought it would be great for networking.

Another positive impact of her organizational involvement in a student club was that she had opportunity to develop skills related to her future career. "It helped me develop my professional skills because every year they send members to a training conference." Developing a future career path was the same reason that another participant noted for his organization involvement. "There's a big conference where they have workshops and a career fair." Participants noted that developing a peer

group, wider campus and professional network, and developing career goals supported college persistence.

Although campus involvement was reported to support some of these students' persistence, it was not a realistic option for the non-traditionally aged participants in this study. Because these students were balancing parenting and family responsibilities, outside work commitments, and often commuting to campus, their schedules did not easily allow for on-campus involvement. In addition, because of their age, these students may not feel that campus involvement activities were a good fit for them. When asked about why she was not involved on campus Participant B replied, "I just don't have time. I hear about groups. I try to take advantage of seminars that are available when I have time. My time is very tight right now but I wish I was involved." Participant C, another non-traditionally aged student explained,

> Actually, I'm one of those unfortunate students that don't spend a whole lot of time on campus, you know. I come here, I learn, and I leave. I know there is a lot going on that I would like to take advantage of.

Non-academic support resources were critical to student persistence except when the resources were too difficult to find. Difficulty finding and accessing resources caused participants to be frustrated with the college experience. Just as with academic support resources, participants expressed frustration that they were on their own to find non-academic support resources.

Nevertheless, participants found and utilized a variety of non-academic resources on campus to support them financially, to maintain their physical and mental health, to develop networks and peer groups on campus, to develop career goals, and to connect with other resources. These resources included emergency loans, MealBux,

subsidized family housing, residence halls, student organizations, Student Health

Services, and Counseling and Psychological Services. For these participants, these

non-academic resources were vital to their college persistence.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

General Conclusions

This study chronicles the experiences of seven persisting, low income, first-generation students' experiences in college, illustrating the successes and challenges of these students in their pursuit of a college degree. Each of these students has faced long odds and is now on track to graduate. One will complete her degree before this study is concluded. Others will complete their degrees in no more than four quarters from now. Their stories are shared so that their insights, experiences, and suggestions may serve other low income, first-generation students as they complete their college degrees in the future.

Because this qualitative study illustrates the personal experiences of seven students in their pursuit of a college degree, the results are not generalizable to all low income, first-generation students. It cannot be inferred that the experiences of these students are the same as other low income, first-generation students. The challenges they faced may differ, just as the most useful support services may be different. Nevertheless, the results of this study may still be useful to student affairs practitioners and university administrators. The college experiences of these seven students and the results of this study will impact my personal practices as well. I hope that the findings may influence the daily practice of those professionals who serve this population and that on a larger scale, the study paves the way for further research and structural change to the manner in which institutions of higher education serve this population of students in their degree attainment.

Personal Reflections and Implications for My Practice

As noted earlier, my interest in studying the experiences of persisting, low income, first-generation college students originally stemmed from my experience teaching underserved students in Phoenix, Arizona and San Jose, California. My passion arises as a result of all the energy that I had put toward my middle school students, helping them imagine the college experience, convincing them to believe that college was in their future, and striving to prepare them academically for college.

But what if students like those that I taught in Phoenix and San Jose graduate from high school? What if they apply to college and are accepted? Although this might seem like the end of a long road and the achievement of their goals, I know that in reality this is only the beginning of a hugely challenging college experience. Getting to college is not enough; the real goal is a college degree. These students will enroll in college and face financial and academic challenges: language barriers, the lack of role models, and scant knowledge of the college system and experience. I cannot bear to imagine that these students would overcome every hurdle in their path to college enrollment and then lack the institutional support needed to attain a college degree. I conducted this study for my former students, in the hopes that they will receive a college diploma rather than become an attrition statistic.

Completing this study has impacted me in multiple ways. At the start of this research project I had little confidence in my ability to complete this study. The undertaking seemed huge and at times, insurmountable. I was overwhelmed through the early stages of research but drew motivation from my genuine passion for this population of students and my desire to learn how they could be better served. It was

not until I was conducting interviews that I became thrilled by this project. The participants were real people, with real experiences and real struggles. My study provided them with the opportunity to have their voices heard and to potentially impact the experiences of those low income, first-generation students that enrolled in college after them. Meeting these students and hearing their stories motivated me to complete the study. For the first time, I could imagine the potential of doing further research during my career. Completing this study has given me the confidence that I am a capable researcher and increased my interest in doing further research.

In addition to giving me more confidence in my research abilities, this study has forced me to evaluate and reflect on my personal biases. At the outset I imagined low income, first-generation college students as being similar to my former students, like Cesar, Pedro, and Cynthia. I imagined traditionally-aged, Latino students with few financial resources. When I set the criteria for participant selection for the study, I included neither age, nor race or ethnicity, as it simply did not occur to me to include them. As I found participants for the study, my biases became clear. I completed four interviews before I spoke with a traditionally-aged student. Not one participant identified as Latino. While my teaching experience was my motivation for this study, it did not prepare me for the wide spectrum of people who face the challenges of being low income, first-generation college students.

Additionally, I was not prepared for the fact that low income, first-generation students also often have other aspects of their identity that can impact the college experience. As multiple studies have shown, first-generation students are disproportionately represented in other groups (Choy, 2001; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005;

Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton, et al., 2001). The participants in this study were not only low income, first-generation students. They were also non-traditionally aged, female, disabled veterans, parents, and racial and ethnic minorities. Each of these facets of identity affected their college experience. Therefore, the completion of this study has shown me that being first-generation is not something that can be easily separated from other aspects of student identity and to effectively serve this population of students, one must be aware of, and address each aspect of the student's identity.

The completion of this study and its results will impact my personal practice in my work with college students. Clearly, the demographics of the college student population are changing. Students are not easily placed into categories such as first-generation, or low income, or non-traditionally aged. Therefore, to serve the low income, first-generation student population it is critical that I get to know each individual student as well as possible in order to understand all facets of their identity and their college experience. In order to effectively serve and support this population of students, it is critical to understand and address all the factors that are impacting their experience. Just because the student fits in a category such as first-generation, I cannot make assumptions about the student's experience. I should know if they are parents, if they work off-campus or full time, or if they have other family responsibilities. This study has shown me that there is not a "one size fits all" way to serve students. I must pay special attention to individual circumstances and support should be tailored to meet individual needs.

Secondly, in my work with students, I will strive to be a connector. One of the most prominent frustrations for participants was that resources were often difficult to find and that at times they felt that they were getting the campus run-around from advisors and support personnel. On a positive note, a couple of participants expressed appreciation for an individual who connected them with other resources on campus. Therefore, I will stay up to date on the services that are available to students on campus, where they are located, and the name of the individual that they should speak with so that I can connect them to other resources with ease. I will make phone calls and set up appointments for students and walk students to other offices and introduce them to the professionals they need to know. I will serve as a gateway to all the other support networks that are available and actively connect students with them.

Implications for Practice

Although the findings of this study are not generalizable, they can provide insight into how individuals can adjust practices and how institutions can make structural changes to better serve this population of students. This study illustrates the general challenges that the seven study participants faced while pursuing their college degrees. It suggests that as individual practitioners we should get to know the students that we work with and actively seek to understand the challenges that they face including academic preparedness, financial concerns, family and work commitments, and isolation. University personnel should strive to meet student need and lessen each of these challenges.

The study makes it clear that one way to serve these students is to provide appropriate orientation. For first-generation students who may lack knowledge about the college experience and the resources available to them, new student orientations are very important. However, practitioners should be aware that not all students fit the traditional student mold. Non-traditionally aged students may have differing needs than 18 year olds, including parenting/family responsibilities, and the challenge of returning to the classroom amidst younger students after a long absence from academia. Therefore, an orientation directed at non-traditionally aged students may be helpful. This population of students may also have family and work commitments that make attending a day-long orientation difficult. Financial concerns could make missing work for a mandatory orientation less desirable. We should consider other ways to meet these students' needs. Could an orientation specifically for non-traditionally aged students be offered in the evening or online? What about ongoing smaller, more flexible orientations that can be scheduled at *any* time?

This study also points out that the quality of advising greatly impacts the college experience of low income, first generation college students. Therefore, we can strive to better serve this student population through effective and informed advising. In this study, those students who considered their advisor to be an important support to their college persistence had developed personal relationships with their advisor and felt that their advisor had a vested interest in their success. Advisors can work to get to know their advisees on a more personal level, thus understanding the individual challenges that the student may face. Advisors should strive to be knowledgeable not only about academic and transfer requirements, but also about the other resources

available to students on campus. Advisors have access to student grades and therefore they know if additional academic support could be helpful to the student. Advisors should actively promote both academic and non-academic support resources on campus and connect students with them, providing students with information about available resources, contacts, and their locations. If necessary, advisors could make phone calls, send emails, or personally introduce students to other resources.

This study showed that support resources are available to this student population. When students were able to access them, they were generally satisfied with what was available. Student frustration stemmed from a lack of awareness of available resources. Participants expressed that they had to go out and personally search for supports. This negatively affected students' views of their college experience and took valuable time and energy away from academics.

On a structural level, it could be beneficial for institutions to consider how to increase transparency of available support resources. Could all resources such as disability support services, financial aid, EOP, SSS, tutors, and others all be located in the same physical area? Instead of brochures about individual resources, could there be an all inclusive brochure or web resource that lists all services available to students and where to find them? Could it become the practice of support professionals to give referrals to a wide range of support resources outside of their department? Can these teams work together to offer complementary, seamless programs? Helping students become aware of what is available to them and how to take advantage of the resources is critical to their persistence and positively affects campus climate and student attitudes.

The participants in this study made it clear that their outside responsibilities affected the amount of time and energy they had to devote to their academics. The non-traditionally aged students discussed the challenges of financially supporting and caring for their children and the burden of commuting to campus. Traditionally-aged participants discussed the benefits of living in the residence halls. Therefore, I believe that non-traditionally aged students would benefit from more affordable family housing located close to the university, as well as more MealBux-style programs and on campus childcare. Computer access was an issue for multiple participants. These students would benefit from more computer labs and free printing. More than one participant expressed an interest in quiet study spaces with computers, free printing, and tutors.

Although there is a large variety in the experiences and needs of low income, first-generation student population, I am particularly drawn to considering how to better support the non-traditionally aged study participants. When I daydream about how to better support this group, I picture affordable, subsidized family housing community near campus. This facility would have an onsite computer lab with free printing and quiet study area adjacent to a drop-in childcare facility. These resources would allow students to complete their academic work without having to worry about childcare. The facility would have a live-in resident advisor, also a current or former non-traditionally aged student. Their professional responsibility would be to have knowledge of all the services and resources on campus available to the residents and to connect the residents with those resources. This arrangement could also combat the isolation that the non-traditionally aged participants felt, providing a non-traditional

student community. The complex's close proximity to campus and available daycare might allow the students to pursue wider campus involvement.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its scope, including the small sample size and the single interview with each participant. The time constraints of this research made it difficult to conduct a large number of interviews and did not allow time for lengthy follow-up interviews with participants. The recruitment method for the study also resulted in a smaller number of participants. For this study, I was required to distribute information on my research to the Student Support Services and wait for students who were interested and thought they met participant criteria to contact me. I believe that I might have had a larger sample size if I could have had access to a list of students who met the criteria for the study and then personally contacted them. A final factor that contributed to the small sample size was that I made one of the criteria for the study for students to be Student Support Service program participants. This criterion was selected as a way to facilitate participant recruitment. However, it may have limited the pool of potential participants.

Another limitation of the study is that the participant population is quite varied and not uniform. When setting the participant criteria for this study I did not include age, gender, or race and ethnicity as factors. My goal for the study was to understand how being low income and first-generation affect college persistence. However, I did not realize how this aspect of student identity could not be separated from other aspects of identity that also impact students' college experience and persistence rates.

As a result, it is not completely clear which of the study findings are directly relate to being low income, first-generation students and which are related to other factors such as being member of an ethnic minority group or being a non-traditionally aged student. It is clear from the participant interviews that it is difficult to separate out the effects of each facet of student identity.

Emergent Questions and Areas for Further Research

The nature of this study was appreciative, looking at those students who were successfully persisting in college and what was working for them rather than studying those students who were dropping out and the factors that contributed to their attrition. It is my hope that future research on this topic can continue to be appreciative and take this positive approach to the topic.

Future research on this topic will allow for some of the limitations of this study to be addressed. It would be beneficial to conduct a similar study with a much bigger sample size in order to determine if the findings of this study hold true for a broad range of low income, first-generation students. Similar studies with more selective participant selection criteria could also be informative. It would be interesting to conduct a study in which all participants are non-traditionally aged students, or all parents, or all members of a specific ethnic group to consider how these aspects of student identity affect the college experiences and persistence of low income, first-generation college students.

All of the participants for this study were students at the same institution. It would be interesting to conduct a similar study with participants from different types

and sizes of institutions. These studies could determine if the frustration that this study's participants expressed about the difficulty of locating and accessing support resources was institution specific, a result of the size of the institution, or is a common experience of low income, first-generation students.

In his study on student attrition, Tinto (1987) acknowledges academic and social integration as important factors in student attrition, stating that those students who are less integrated have higher rates of attrition. In this study participants discussed their campus involvement and social integration to varying degrees. Future research could be focused more specifically on the effects of student involvement on low income, first-generation persistence rates.

Lastly, the aim of this study was to determine how professionals and institutions of higher education can better support the persistence and degree attainment of low income, first-generation college students. To this end, it would be beneficial to seek out institutions that have high four to five year graduation rates for this student population. Once these institutions were identified, researchers could study the support systems that are in place and the student experience at those institutions, in order to evaluate which factors are related to the high persistence rates. The findings of this study could be used by other institutions to improve services and increase low income, first-generation persistence rates on other campuses.

In conclusion, this study gave voice to seven persisting low income, first-generation college students. Conducting this study has greatly affected the way that I will serve students in my career. It is my hope that through this study others may begin to better understand the experiences of low income, first-generation college students

and make individual adjustments to their practice to provide more effective support. In addition, further research in this area may result in structural institutional change of student support services.

My hope is that the students I taught in Phoenix, Arizona and San Jose, California have the support they need to graduate from college. I believe that by becoming more effective in how we support the low income, first-generation student population, we will more effectively serve all students to graduation by providing them with the needed supports to achieve their full potential.

REFERENCES

Astin, A. W. (1975). *Preventing students from dropping out.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Barratt, W. (2007, April 25). Talking about social class on campus. *NASPA NetResults.* Retrieved May 2, 2007, from http://www.naspa.org/netresults/index.cfm

Billson, J. M. & Terry, M. B. (1982). In search of the silken purse: Factors in attrition among first-generation students. *College and University, (58)*1, 57-75 .

Byrd, K. L. & Macdonald, G. (2005). Defining college readiness from the inside out: First-generation college student perspectives. *Community College Review, 33*(1), 22-37.

Choy, S. (2001). *Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment* (NCES 2001-126), U.S. Department of Education, NCES, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC.

Corrigan, M. E. (2003). Beyond access: Persistence challenges and the diversity of low-income students. *New Directions for Higher Education, 121*(1), 25-34.

Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research; Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Cushman, K. (2007). Facing the culture shock of college. *Educational Leadership, 64*(7), 44-47.

Dahl, J. (2004). Orientation focuses on Latino, first-generation families. *Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education, 18*(5) 1-2.

Dennis, J. M., Phinney, J. S., & Chuateco, L. I. (2005). The role of motivation, parental support, and peer support in the academic success of ethnic minority first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 46,* 223-236.

Gladieux, L. E. & Swail, W. S. (2000). Beyond access: Improving the odds of college success. *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(9), 688-692.

Horn, L. & Kojaku, L. K. (2001). High school academic curriculum and the persistence path through college: Persistence and transfer behavior of undergraduates 3 years after entering 4-year institutions. *Education Statistics Quarterly, 3*(3), 65-72.

Ishitani, T. T. (2003). A longitudinal approach to assessing attrition behavior among first generation students: Time-varying effects of pre-college characteristics. *Research in Higher Education, 44,* 433-449.

Ishitani, T. T. (2006). Studying attrition and degree completion behavior among first generation college students in the United States. *The Journal of Higher Education, 77,* 861-885.

Lohfink, M. M. & Paulsen, M. B. (2005). Comparing the determinants of persistence for first generation and continuing-generation students. *Journal of College Student Development, 46,* 409-428.

Muraskin, L. & Lee, J. (2004). *Raising the graduation rates of low-income college students.* Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. (Eric Document Reproduction Service No. ED490856)

McCarron, G. P. & Inkelas, K. K. (2006). The gap between educational aspirations and attainment for first-generation college students and the role of parent involvement. *Journal of College Student Development, 47,* 534-549.

Neuman, W. L. (2003). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (5th ed.). Boston: Ally and Bacon.

Nunez, A. & Cuccaro-Alamin, S. (1998). *First-generation students: Undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education* (NCES 1999-082), U.S. Department of Education, NCES, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC.

Office of Postsecondary Education. (2007). Retrieved May 30, 2007, from http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/incomelevels.html

Pascarellla, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education, 75,* 250-284.

Pike, G. R. & Kuh, G. D. (2005). First and second-generation college students: A comparison of their engagement and intellectual development. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76,*276-300.

Rodriguez, S. (2003). What helps some first-generation students succeed. *About Campus, 8*(4), 17-22.

Student Support Services Program. (2007). Retrieved May 30, 2007, from http://www.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/index.html

Terenzini, P. T. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in Higher Education, 35*(1) 57-73.

Thayer, P. B. (2000). Retention of students from first generation and low income

    backgrounds. *"Opportunity Outlook," The Journal of the Council for*

    Opportunity in Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No.

    ED446633)

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student*

    attrition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Tseng, M. S. (1971). Social class, occupational aspiration, and other variables. *The*

    Journal of Experimental Education, 39(4), 88-92.

Warburton, E. C., Bugarin, R. & Nunez, A. (2001). *Bridging the gap: Academic*

    preparation and postsecondary success of first-generation students. (NCES

    Statistical Analysis Report 2001-153). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of

    Education.

Wiersma, W. & Jurs, S. G. (2005). *Research methods in education: An introduction*

    (8th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

APPENDIX A
Letter of Approval

August 28th, 2007

To: IRB Review Board

This is a letter of support for IRB application No. 3673. As Director of the TRiO Student Support Services program here at Oregon State University, I give my permission and support to Gretchen Jewett to conduct research on persisting low income, first-generation students who are enrolled in the TRiO Support Services program.

I am unable to provide Gretchen Jewett with a list of students who meet the criteria to participate in her study. Instead, my role in this research will be to provide information about the study to the students in my program who meet the study criteria. This criteria as set out by Gretchen Jewett includes:

- Being identified as low income in the Student Support Services program
- Being a first-generation student whose parents never attended higher education classes
- Having junior or senior academic standing

I will give those students who are interested in participating in the study the information necessary so that they may contact Gretchen Jewett personally.

If there are further questions for me, please contact me at weira@onid.orst.edu or at 737-4770.

Sincerely,

Anthony Weir
Director, TRiO Student Support Services
Oregon State University

APPENDIX B
Student Support Services Listserv Recruitment Email

I Need Your Help for a Research Project!

Are you interested in being interviewed for a master thesis research project?

As a graduate student in the College Student Services Administration major in the Oregon State University College of Education I am working on a thesis as part of the Master of Science degree requirement. The study, titled *Persistence Stories of Low Income, First-Generation Students at a Large Research University* seeks to answer the questions, "What are the experiences of persisting low income, first-generation students during their enrollment in college?" and secondarily, "What factors contribute to low income, first-generation student persistence?" and "How can the university better support low income, first-generation students to graduation?"

If you are a first-generation student with junior or higher class standing and enrolled in the TRiO Student Support Services program, I need your help. I am asking for your participation in the study because I believe you can provide valuable insight into this topic. If you choose to participate, I will conduct one or two interviews approximately 1-2 hours in length, with you. I anticipate that these interviews will take place at the end of fall quarter and during winter quarter.

If you would like to find out more about being involved in this study please contact Gretchen Jewett at (541) 753-7550 or by email at gretchen.jewett@oregonstate.edu.

APPENDIX C
Participant Recruitment Phone Call Script

Hello <potential participant's name>,

My name is Gretchen Jewett and I am a graduate student in the College Student Services Administration program in the College of Education at Oregon State University. I was given your name by the Director of the Student Support Services program because they thought that you might be interested in participating in the research I am conducting as a Master of Science degree requirement.

The study I am doing is titled *Persistence Stories of Low Income, First-Generation Students at a Large Research University*. Through this study I seek to answer the questions, "What are the experiences of persisting low income, first-generation students during their enrollment in college?" and secondarily, "What factors contribute to low income, first-generation student persistence?" and "How can the university better support low income, first-generation students to graduation?"

I am looking for junior and senior first-generation students enrolled in the Student Support Service program who can provide insight on this topic. If you choose to participate your time commitment will be 1-2 hours for the first interview with the potential for a second 1-2 hour follow-up interview. In addition there will some correspondence with me in order to ensure that I accurately portray your thoughts in the final document. The interviews will be completed during fall and winter quarters.

Do you think you might be interested in participating in this study?

(If they answer yes):
Can I ask you some questions to make sure that you meet the criterion for the study?
- What year are you in school?
- How old are you?
- Are you enrolled in the Student Support Services program?
- Did either of your parents graduate from college?
- Do you qualify as low income in the Student Support Services program?

I will be sending you some additional information about the study. Please read it over and contact me if you have any questions. If you are still interested in participating please sign and return the form I send to you. Do you have any questions I might be able to answer for you right now?

Thanks so much for your time. You will receive the additional information shortly.

(If they answer no):
No problem. Thank you so much for your time. Have a good day.

APPENDIX D
Interview Scheduling Email

Dear <Participant>,

I enjoyed speaking with you on the phone and look forward to hearing your perspectives on the first-generation college student experience. I am attaching an informed consent document and potential interview questions to this email. Please look them over and feel free to email me if you have any questions about them.

I am looking to conduct the interviews starting in the next few weeks. Are you available in the afternoon or evening sometime between November 12th and the end of finals week? I am pretty flexible but am generally not available on Tuesday evenings or Wednesday and Thursday afternoons. Please email me some potential days and times that work for you and we can find something that will work for us both.

Thank you so much for your time!
Gretchen Jewett

APPENDIX E
Interview Questions

The participant interviews will be semi-structured around the following questions.

Follow up and clarification questions will be asked as needed.

1. Would you tell me how you came to be at college?

2. What support did you have for this decision from parents, family or friends?

3. Tell me about your experience as a first-generation student at this university.

4. What has kept you here in college and on track to graduate?

5. Did you feel academically prepared for the school work in college?

6. Have any services provided by the university helped keep you in college?

   (If the participant needs some examples of services I would offer: financial aid, university housing, involvement in clubs, organizations or sports, social network, relationships, mentors, advising, tutoring, orientation, and the Student Support Services program.)

7. As a first generation student have you faced any challenges as you have sought to complete your college degree?

8. (If they answer yes to #7) How have you dealt with these challenges?

9. As you consider your college experience to this point, what do you feel have been your biggest successes? What experiences or accomplishments are you most proud of?

10. Could the university have better supported you as you worked to complete your degree? (If yes) How?

11. What advice would you give first-generation students just beginning their

college experience?

APPENDIX F
Supplemental Information Sheet

Name:

Age:

Race/Ethnicity:

Major:

Year in school:

When will you graduate from OSU?

Have you had a job while you were in college? Describe the position and the work. How many hours per week did you work?

Do you have any siblings who have been in college?

Did you transfer from another college or university?

Have you stopped out?

If so, why did you stop out and how long did you stop out?

What are your plans for after you graduate?

APPENDIX G
Informed Consent Document

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: *Persistence Stories of Low Income, First-Generation Students at a Large Research University*
Principal Investigator: *Dr. Tom Scheuermann, University Housing and Dining*
Co-Investigators(s): *Gretchen Jewett, CSSA student*

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are being asked to take part in a research study designed to explore the experiences of persisting low income, first-generation students during their enrollment in college. Specifically, this research will consist of a phenomenological study of low income, first-generation students who are persisting at a large research institution in Oregon. Data will be collected through interviews with low income, first-generation students who have junior or senior standing at the institution and are on track to graduate. The end product of this research study will take the form of a document that emphasizes the voices and experiences of the students who were interviewed. The results of this research study will be used towards the completion of a Master of Science thesis, and may be submitted for professional conferences proposals/presentations, and publication in professional journals. We are studying this topic because there is a perceived need for additional academic research that qualitatively studies the experiences of persisting low income, first-generation students. Studying persistence, rather than studying attrition, may provide insight into the college experiences of low income, first generation students.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This consent form gives you the information you will need to help you decide whether you would like to participate in this study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask any questions about the research, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else that is not clear. When all of your questions have been answered, at the end of this form you will find a place to indicate whether you would like to participate in the study.

WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to participate in this study because you meet the criteria for the study of being a first-generation college student, meaning that your parents have not been enrolled in college. You also qualify as low-income in the TRiO Student Support Services program. Finally, you are of junior or senior standing and are on track to graduate.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

The interview questions will be submitted to you several days before the interview is conducted. One of the researchers will then conduct an in-person interview with you, which we will audio record, with your consent. Audio recording is not optional, but is required to accurately capture your responses. The interview will be scheduled to last approximately one to two hours. It will be semi-structured, comprised of open and closed-ended questions generated by the researchers and general discussion about your college experience. One of the researchers will conduct the interview in a secure and confidential location, which will be chosen in conjunction with the participant.

If you agree to take part in this study, your total involvement is expected to be 3 to 7 hours. This includes the initial interview which will last 1-2 hours, a possible follow-up interview that will last 1-2 hours and up to 3 hours of correspondence with the researchers.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THIS STUDY?

The possible risks or discomforts associated with this study include: Possible discomfort or emotional distress when recalling situations during your college experience, if the experience caused psychological or emotional trauma. The questions you will be asked during the interview are designed to gain information on the experiences of low income, first-generation students who are persisting in college. You may choose not to answer any questions during the interview.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

There may be o direct benefit for you from your participation in the study. However, you will have the opportunity to share your experiences with others and we hope that in the future, others may benefit from this study. The data from this study will be useful to personnel of similar campuses as it may provide insight into how to better support low-income, first-generation students at their institution and to help them reach graduation. In addition, it will contribute to the body of knowledge on low-income, first generation college students.

WILL YOU BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You will not be paid for participating in this study. You will be provided with a copy of the study when it is completed.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION YOU GIVE?

The information you provide during the study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. To help protect your confidentiality, we will use only identification code numbers to refer to you on any audio recordings or documents, and in

presentations and publications. Any audio recordings created will be destroyed after the completion of the study. No identifying information about you will be made public at any time. Information will only be shared with members of the research team, the OSU Institutional Review Board, and the transcribers of the audio recordings. This informed consent document and all audio recordings will be stored in a locked location for the duration of the study and then destroyed upon completion of the study.

DO YOU HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to participate in this study, it should be because you are freely choosing to. You will not face any consequences if you choose not to volunteer. You can withdraw from the study at any point with no consequences.

If you choose to participate in the study, during the interview you will be free to skip any questions you would not like to answer. If you withdraw from this study before it is completed, the researchers may retain your responses and they may be included in study reports.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have questions about this research project, please feel free to contact:
Dr. Tom Scheuermann at (541) 737-4771, tom.scheuermann@oregonstate.edu
Gretchen Jewett at (541) 753-7550, gretchen.jewett@oregonstate.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Protections Administrator, at (541) 737-4933 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu.

Your signature below indicates that this study has been explained to you, your questions have been answered, and you agree to participate in the study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (printed):
_____

_____   _____
(Signature of Participant)   (Date)

APPENDIX H
Debriefing Materials

Thank you so much for your participation in this study! I will complete the thesis based on this research by April 2008. Please let me know if you would like a copy of the final product. A bound copy will be available to the public in the Oregon State University Valley Library. If you have any questions regarding the study or your participation in it, please feel free to contact Gretchen Jewett at gretchen.jewett@oregonstate.edu. Thank you again for your time.

Sincerely,

Gretchen Jewett