The Neglected Minority: Interviews with Successful Community College Students from Poverty

Heather Hollifield-Hoyle
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd

Part of the Community College Education Administration Commons, Community College Leadership Commons, Education Policy Commons, and the Higher Education and Teaching Commons

Recommended Citation
Hollifield-Hoyle, Heather, "The Neglected Minority: Interviews with Successful Community College Students from Poverty" (2012). Theses and Dissertations. 469.
http://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/469

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact scholar@uark.edu, ccmiddle@uark.edu.
THE NEGLECTED MINORITY: INTERVIEWS WITH SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM POVERTY
THE NEGLECTED MINORITY: INTERVIEWS WITH SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM POVERTY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Higher Education

by

Heather Hollifield-Hoyle
University of North Carolina Asheville
Bachelor of Arts in Literature, 1999
Western Carolina University
Master of Arts in Higher Education, 2002

August 2012
University of Arkansas
ABSTRACT

Poverty in the US is growing at an alarming rate. The current economic climate demands higher education to embrace the economic diversity of all students and to prepare them, regardless of economic class, for a globally competitive workplace. Unfortunately, the higher education community is not as adept at serving low-income students, as it is middle- and upper-income students. Low-income students are less likely than their more affluent peers to enroll in college or graduate. Employing qualitative narrative methods, this dissertation explores the factors that contributed to the persistence and success of 18, low-income, community college students. This study addresses the following research question: What influences students from poverty to enroll and succeed in college? The researcher conducted an interview study utilizing semi-structured and open-ended questions. Purposive sampling identified four Achieving the Dream Colleges as the research sites. The study included interviews with highly successful, Pell Grant recipients in community colleges who came from diverse backgrounds. The participants had a 3.0 GPA or above, and they were enrolled in their second consecutive year of coursework. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher used multiple sites, collected rich and thick data, developed a comprehensive audit trail, maintained a reflexive journal, and participated in prolonged engagement in an effort to address issues of trustworthiness. The seven findings of this study illuminate the variables that influenced the participants’ decision to attend college, the resources that supported their successful transition into college, the hardships endured due to a lack of adequate financial resources, the individual attributes that contributed to the participants’ successes, the college interventions and programs that the students deemed to be critical, and the people who encouraged their college enrollment and persistence. In addition, the
participants made timely recommendations to other low-income students, educational practitioners, and policy makers. Findings from this study point to the need for a heightened awareness and understanding of the experiences of this marginalized and underserved group. Feedback from low-income students should be used to shape federal, state, and campus programming and planning. The findings of this study demonstrate ways that educators and policy makers could potentially improve the enrollment and persistence of students from poverty.
This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Dissertation Director:

___________________________________
James O. Hammons, Ph.D.

Dissertation Committee:

___________________________________
Ketevan Mamiseishvili

___________________________________
Daniel Brian Kissinger, PhD, LPC

___________________________________
Suzanne McCray, Ph.D.
DISSECTATION DUPLICATION RELEASE

I hereby authorize the University of Arkansas Libraries to duplicate this dissertation when needed for research and/or scholarship.

Agreed __________________________________________________________________________
Heather Hollifield-Hoyle

Refused __________________________________________________________________________
Heather Hollifield-Hoyle
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without question, the recent years of doctoral work posed the most significant academic challenges that I have faced. I strove to balance academics, career, family, and spiritual and physical health in the midst of this journey; however, I know there were times when work trumped relationships. Without the relentless encouragement, patience, understanding, and guidance of the following people this study would not have been possible.

First, I owe my deepest gratitude to Cindy and Harry Hollifield, my parents, who believed in my dreams before they were even dreamt. When I reflect on my education, my parents never asked, “Do you want to go to college?” Rather, they asked, “Where do you want to go to college?” Their assumption and expectation was that I would go, and they supported me emotionally, financially, and unconditionally at every stage.

I am grateful for grandparents who made me believe that I am intelligent, unique, and loved. In particular, my grandmother, Eddie, would have been proud of this study and my educational accomplishments. She was an avid reader, writer, and storyteller. Unfortunately, she grew up in an era and in economic conditions that were not conducive to her college participation. Nonetheless, she championed my decision to become a teacher.

To the little girl who grew and kicked inside of me while I conducted the interviews for the study, and who napped in my office as I composed the final chapters, you were my motivation for writing tirelessly into the night and early morning. I worked diligently to guard our precious time together. Hadleigh Claire, you challenge and inspire me to make the world a better place. I love you.
It is a pleasure to acknowledge Dr. Jim Burnett, the late Raymond Goodfellow, and Dr. Pat Akers, who modeled exemplary leadership and served as mentors early in my career. They are the types of leaders that I aspire to become.

A special thanks goes to my dissertation chair, Dr. James Hammons, who has spent countless hours reflecting on this study and editing my efforts along the way. Dr. Hammons recognized and supported my commitment to being an excellent student and a new mom. In striving to meet his uncompromising standards, I have become a better student, writer, and educator.

I would like to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Kate Mamiseishvili, Dr. Kissinger, and Dr. McCray for their time, insight, and expertise.

I would also like to thank my sister, mother-in-law, friends, and Susan Hill who reassured me during the challenges and celebrated with me during the successes.

It is a privilege to recognize my colleagues in the EdD program. Their commitment to higher education and to their students is inspiring. I am lucky to have each of them as friends!

Finally, I have been blessed to serve so many hardworking, low-income students in my career. Their tenacity and desire for a better life prompted this study. For the students who participated in the study, I am indebted to your willingness to share your stories candidly and courageously. Undoubtedly, I have learned more from students than they will ever learn from me!
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Christopher Hoyle, my husband, without whom this endeavor would have been impossible. Even when you did not understand this goal, you were willing to support it. You carried more than your share of our responsibilities without expectation or recognition. You live a life of quiet confidence, integrity, and selflessness.

Simply stated, “Thank you.”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE

- INTRODUCTION 1
- Statement of the Problem 3
- Theoretical Framework 4
- Purpose of the Study 7
- Research Questions 7
- Significance of the Study 8
- Definition of Terms 9
- Organization of the Study 12

## CHAPTER TWO

- REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 13
  - Overview 13
  - Current Literature Gaps 13
  - Deficit Model Studies 16
    - Student Demographic 17
    - Educational Barriers 17
  - Institutional Studies 25
  - Summary of Literature Review 37

## CHAPTER THREE

- METHODOLOGY 38
  - Overview 38
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Research Design</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Research Sites</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification and Selection of Participants</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Securing IRB</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Protocol</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s World View</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**PRESENTATION OF DATA** 56

Overview 56

Participant Demographics 56

Participant Descriptions 59

Responses to Interview Questions 92

Chapter Summary 134

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS** 135

Introduction 135

Research Design 135

Findings 135
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Even though the Great Recession technically began in December 2007 and ended in June of 2009, its effects are still compromising the health of the U.S. economy and the quality of life for many Americans. A recent report by Seefeldt, Abner, Bloinger, Xu, and Graham (2010) demonstrates the magnitude of this problem:

Poverty in America is remarkably widespread. In 2010, about 4.62 million Americans were living in poverty according to the official measure or about 15.1% of the U.S. population. . . . Poverty is expected to increase again in 2011 due to the slow pace of the economic recovery, the persistently high rate of unemployment, and the long duration of spells of unemployment. . . . A slow recovery is underway, but the severity and extended duration of the downturn have inflicted long-lasting damage to individuals, families, and communities. (p. 5).

Low-income families do not experience the implications of widespread poverty alone; these consequences reach all Americans. Poverty influences the costs of government services and the competitiveness and productivity of the U.S. workforce. A recent estimate found that children who grow up in poverty cost American taxpayers $500 billion annually; this does not account for the adults who were not raised in poverty and have become part of the “new poor” in adulthood (Reeve, 2010). This estimate does include the $170 billion lost each year in annual income from poor people who are unemployed or underemployed. It also accounts for the $170 billion spent on crime and the incarceration of low-income citizens (Reeve, 2010). Not only are
these expenditures costly for tax payers, but the unemployment and incarceration of low income citizens reduces the U.S. economic productivity and global competitiveness.

Escalating poverty rates and economic instability create intensifying pressures for higher education. Community colleges and universities are expected to facilitate economic development and reduce the burdens of poverty by both their leaders and citizenry. Historically, the U.S. has relied on higher education, specifically community colleges, to be a solution to poverty through retooling displaced workers and enabling their improved employment. Miller (2009) points out that “Two-year colleges have been the pathway to middle-class careers for millions of Americans” (p. 24). It is evident that President Obama also believes that higher education plays a critical role in reversing current poverty trends and restoring the U.S.’ economic stability. In his February 24, 2009, address to the joint session of congress he asserted:

I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be at a community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. And dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting yourself, it’s quitting your country – and this country needs and values the talents of every American. That is why we will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.

The current climate, characterized by economic chaos and a growing percentage of the populace in poverty, demands that higher education welcomes the economic diversity of every
student and successfully prepare students, regardless of economic class, for a globally competitive workplace. Students are coming to higher education from increasingly diverse economic backgrounds. In fact, 70% of community college students received Pell Grants in 2009-2010 (Equal Justice Works, 2011). Unfortunately, the higher education community is not as adept at serving low-income students as it is middle and upper income students. Recent research by the Pell Institute (2011) shows that in the past 30 years degree completion for students from wealthy families has steadily increased, while degree completion rates for lower income families has remained virtually unchanged. Even at the community college level, fewer than 3 out of 10 low-income students will finish a degree or certificate within three years (HCM Strategists, 2010). Because low-income students are less likely to complete their degrees than their more affluent peers are, Leonhardt (2004) accuses colleges and universities with “reproducing social advantage instead of serving as an engine of mobility” (1a).

Statement of Problem

Regrettably, higher education’s understanding of how to serve low-income college students is limited. Higher education researchers routinely examine the roles of gender, race, and sexual orientation, while ignoring the role of socioeconomic status (Putten, 2001; Walpole, 2003). Additionally, while college and university practices and activities have recognized and embraced the diversity brought to campus by adults, women, racial and ethnic minorities, and gay and lesbian students, college administrators, student-support staff, and faculty are still lacking in awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the diversity of low-income students. Consequently, students from poverty are less likely than their more affluent peers to enroll and persist in college (Aronson, 2008; Bergerson, 2007; Oldfield, 2007; Putten, 2001; Sacks, 2003).
An increased awareness of students from poverty that shapes campus policies, practices, retention efforts, and instruction ensures that there is sound alignment between institutional efforts and the needs of these students.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Framework of Poverty**

One of the nation’s leading experts on socioeconomic status in K-12 education is Dr. Ruby Payne. Payne’s work explores the complex framework of poverty. She is an author, international speaker, publisher, and career educator. She has authored and created more than 125 books, DVDs, and workshops on poverty-related issues, and she is recognized as a leading expert in understanding poverty and the mindset of economic classes (About Ruby Payne, Ph.D., 2011). Dr. Payne is a leader in K-12 education whose ideas are now being used to facilitate educational change for students from poverty by higher education initiatives such as Achieving the Dream Inc. Her descriptions of poverty’s framework and the deficit model, in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), provide a lens through which to interpret the reported experiences of college students who come from economically depressed backgrounds.

Her framework of poverty evaluates and explains that poverty is not limited to a lack of financial resources. While poverty can be based on a lack of financial resources, it may also involve a lack of emotional, mental, spiritual, or physical resources. Further, her framework suggests that a lack of support systems, the absence of appropriate relationships, and ignorance of hidden class rules are forms of poverty (Payne, 2005, p.7). She also argues that those from poverty have a communication style that is different from the way those from the middle- and upper-class communicate (p. 28-35). Thus, based on Payne’s description, poverty can shape
multiple aspects of a student’s values, perceptions, and way of life. Students from poverty may find their values, perceptions, and way of life at odds with the middle and upper class culture of higher education.

In an effort to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, policy-makers and educators must first accurately understand the nature and causes of poverty. Shipler (as cited in Payne, 2004, p. 165) insisted that “in the United States we are confused about the causes of poverty and, as a result, are confused about what to do about poverty.” Because of their own middle or upper class frames of reference, many legislators and educators misinterpret the abilities and experiences of students from economically challenged backgrounds, and consequently they implement policies and practices that fail to meet the unique needs of this student population. Payne (2005) elaborated on this lack of understanding by asserting:

Naming the problem is the first step toward a solution, and the most important step, for if the problem is not named accurately the course of action based on the faulty assumption will only lead further and further from a solution. So naming problems accurately . . . is crucial because it is on those definitions that the theories of change and program activities are based. (p. 169)

The inability to accurately name the problem can lead to misguided educational policies and practices.

Deficit Model

The deficit model is a term used to describe a situation when members from a more affluent group make inaccurate assumptions about those from poverty; they discredit differences
as being a type of shortage, disadvantage, lacking, or handicap (Payne, 2005). Too often research, planning, and problem solving are rooted in the deficit model approach. Bergerson (2007) explained that “It is tempting to look at differences among college students from a deficit point of view and ask: how can we make up the difference in the capital in our students? However, a deficit approach ignores the goals and attributes of some students, as well as the resources they do bring to campus” (p. 116). Thus, the deficit model approach is shortsighted because it fails to acknowledge the strengths that students from poverty bring to higher education.

Payne (2005) emphasized that it is problematic for policymakers and researchers to work from “deficit thinking” because “its features are that it fixes the problems on the individual and therefore focuses on fixing the individual. Environmental conditions are translated into characteristics of the individual and gradually turn into negative stereotypes. The talents, gifts, and skills of an individual get lost” (p. 170). Oldfield (2007) insisted that the differences students from economically challenged groups bring to campus should be “reinterpreted as differences rather than shortcomings” (p. 3). For example, it is common for current literature (Adair, 2005; Bergerson, 2007; Howard, 2001; Oldfield, 2007; Putten, 2001) to try to explain or identify areas where students from poverty have deficiencies or limitations that contribute to their academic failures. It is essential to reconsider and expand upon this research because it is based on the previously described deficit model. Research is needed that approaches this issue from an assets or strengths based approach (Aronson, 2008; Payne, 2005). A study that focuses on the successes of Pell Grant recipients will explore the differences of these students’ college experiences without mislabeling any differences as “deficits.”
**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of the factors that contributed to the persistence and successes of low-income community college students. I hope that disseminating the stories of successful students from poverty will lead policy makers and educational practitioners to acknowledging this population in their research, embracing their economic diversity in campus and classroom activities and practices, and eliminating impediments to the successes of students from poverty. This study focused on experiences and successes that could not be evaluated via the lens of the deficit model approach.

**Research Questions**

To fulfill the purpose of the study, a central question was formulated and had to be answered:

1. What influences students from poverty to enroll and succeed in college?

Sub-questions for this question were:

a. What influenced the student’s decision to attend college?

b. What facilitated the student’s successful transition into higher education?

c. Did financial concerns affect the student’s college experiences, and if so, how?

d. Which individual motivations, strengths, skills, or abilities did low SES students credit for their own success and persistence?

e. Were there any college programs or interventions that contributed to the students’ success?

f. Were there people who encouraged or supported their academic achievements, and if so, how?
g. What advice do students from poverty have for other students, policy makers, and educational practitioners?

**Significance of Study**

There is limited research about why low-income students fail to enroll and persist in higher education (Adair, 2005; Bergerson, 2007; Howard, 2001; Oldfield, 2007; Putten, 2001); or about the experiences of students from poverty who successfully enroll, navigate, and persist in the US higher education system. This study documents the experiences of successful Pell Grant recipients, and it will help bring an identity to this invisible population and a voice to their struggles and victories. Community colleges are the appropriate research sites because Pell Grant recipients are more likely to attend community colleges than elite universities (Aronson, 2008; Supiano & Fuller 2011). It is essential that the research seeks to understand and explain why these students succeed. The feedback from successful students from poverty could inform federal, state, and campus planning and programming. Ultimately, if poverty awareness and sensitivity shapes institutional mission and vision, there would be an increase in enrolling and retaining students from economically challenged backgrounds. Engle and Tinto (2008) demonstrate the importance of educating this student population:

As the United States continues to realize the importance of increasing the educational attainment of its citizens as the key to its future economic stability in the global marketplace, improving postsecondary access and success among underrepresented populations, such as low-income, first-generation students is paramount….Without action by policymakers and practitioners at all levels, it appears that not only will these students be left behind, but so too will the United States. (p. 29)
A more informed understanding of the experiences of successful students from poverty has the potential to radically change the way our society approaches education. As Patton suggested, low-income student interviews and “strategic stories” could be used to influence organizational change in higher education (2001, p. 196). If the experiences and stories of impoverished students are not known or told, then those in higher education are uninformed about how to serve this student group. This study intends to collect and disseminate such stories. It is essential for research to explore the experiences of these students, and for the findings to be shared with policy-makers and educators.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms are explained and defined as they were used in the study:

1. **Poverty** Many economists have an over simplistic definition of poverty, and they set an annual household income as a determinant of those who live above or below the poverty line. However, a more holistic measurement of poverty is essential if research and educators are to have a complete understanding of students from such backgrounds. Payne (2005) agreed that the issue of poverty is multifaceted and more complex than a lack of financial resources. She indicated that a student’s lack of resources may be financial in nature; however, she asserted that poverty may exist when one has a deficiency in emotional, mental, spiritual, or physical resources. Further, she included support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules in the list of necessary resources (p. 7). Bartlett (2010) supported Payne’s multidimensional approach to defining poverty. He contended that researchers have previously defined poverty based on income levels alone, “But maybe there’s more to it. Maybe poverty is about not
having enough food, access to health care, reliable transportation, adequate sanitation, and a dozen other things that make life bearable” (p. A1). Thus, within the context of this study, poverty is “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (Payne, 2005, p. 7).

In Payne’s (2005) view, there are two types of poverty: generational poverty and situational poverty. For the purpose of this study, generational poverty references students who come from families who have been in poverty for at least two generations (p. 47). Situational poverty describes those students who are experiencing poverty as “a lack of resources due to a particular event (i.e., a death, chronic illness, divorce, etc.)” (p. 48). Payne (2005) observed that each of these types of poverty has its own “culture, hidden rules, and belief systems” (p. 48). When reviewing the student interviews, it is important to consider each participant’s lack of resources and consequently his or her poverty type. Based on the student’s responses, one must determine whether the participant’s poverty is generational or situational. While the phrases “low SES,” “economically disenfranchised,” and “Pell Grant recipient” will be used interchangeably in this study to reference students from poverty, the students’ interviews may reveal that the nature of their poverty is not solely based on a lack of financial resources.

2. **Student Success** As used in this study, the term “student success” refers to a community college student who is enrolled in his or her second year of coursework, is making progress towards graduation, and has a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher.

3. **Persistence** For the purposes of this study, persistence refers to students who have consecutively enrolled in and completed their first year of community college
coursework, and who have returned to the same community college for their second year of coursework. By focusing on second-year students who have maintained consistent enrollment patterns the study hopes to capture students who will persist until graduation.

4. **Achieving the Dream College**  Achieving the Dream Inc. is a national non-profit initiative that is committed to the success of students of color and low-income students. There are 160 ATD community colleges in 30 states (Achieving the Dream, 2011). This study utilized the four ATD community colleges in Arkansas.

5. **Career Pathways**  The Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) is a program in Arkansas that serves low-income, adult caretakers who have a child under the age of 21. Participants must be receiving Transitional Employment Assistance, food stamps, or Medicaid, or have a family income below 250% of the federal poverty level to qualify for the Career Pathways program. The program attempts to remove barriers to community college education by providing textbook, transportation, and childcare vouchers. CPI provides participants with coaches who serve as academic and career advisors (Arkansas Career Pathways, 2012).

6. **Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)**  WIC is a federal grant program that provides funding for each state’s low-income, nutritionally at-risk women and children who are under the age of five. WIC programs include supplemental foods, healthcare referrals, and nutrition education (Food and Nutrition Service, 2012).

7. **General Educational Development (GED)**  This refers to the diploma received by students who do not complete high school, but who have passed a five subject test that
demonstrates that they have an academic skill set comparable to an American high school graduate.

**Organization of the Study**

The following chapter reviews the existing literature that is relevant to this study. The literature review documents that the research on this student population is limited, and that there is a gap in the literature regarding students from low SES backgrounds who have enrolled and succeeded in higher education. It also evaluates deficit model research which seeks to explain why many students from poverty fail to enroll or persist in higher education. Finally, it considers an emerging branch of literature which identifies institutions that appear to be having initial successes with working with low-SES students. This branch of literature makes institutional recommendations for colleges that seek to improve their enrollment and retention of students from poverty.

Chapter 3 describes the research methods I utilized. The chapter also provides a rationale for sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 provides a description of each participant and presents the interview data. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the research questions, suggests data-based conclusions, identifies the limitations of the study, and makes recommendations for future research and improved practice.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This chapter reviews the existing body of literature that is relevant to a study of the experiences of successful community college students from poverty. The chapter is divided into three parts. Part 1 demonstrates current literature gaps. The second section, deficit model studies, evaluates the research (Adair, 2005; Bergerson, 2007; Howard, 2001; Oldfield, 2007; Putten, 2001) that seeks to explain why students from poverty fail to enroll or persist in college. Part 3 describes institutional policies and practices that may facilitate the access and success of students from poverty.

Current Literature Gaps

There is an abundant body of research that documents the need for additional studies that examines the role of socioeconomic status and how it may influence enrollment and persistence by college students. A review of the literature reveals that other minority student populations are frequently considered by the research and by educational policy makers. However, students from poverty represent a population which is underrepresented in both educational research and decision making.

As observed by Walpole (2003), “Although this group of students is widely acknowledged as educationally disadvantaged, they have received scant attention from researchers” (p. 45). Further, these students are often left out of diversity definitions and discussions. Putten (2001) observed, “With few exceptions, working definitions of diversity have been limited to race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and on rare occasions,
disability” (p. 15). Oldfield (2007) echoed similar sentiments by stating that “While sexism, racism, homophobia, and other prejudices offend most Americans, both inside and outside the academy, fewer people articulate the profound effects of social-class bias” (p. 2). The diversity work of scholars has failed to explore and consider the experiences and challenges of college students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Chen & DesJardins, 2007).

Walpole’s (2003), Putten’s (2001), Oldfield’s (2007), and Chen’s and DesJardins’ (2007) work reported that the research on college students from poverty is limited; my own effort to locate literature on this topic further confirmed their findings. To locate literature on this topic I conducted computer searches on ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), Ebsco Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Research Library, and Google Scholar databases for 1985-2012. Descriptors utilized in these searches included: low-income college students, students on Pell Grant, college students from poverty, social class and college students, at-risk college students, low socioeconomic college students, student-attrition, factors affecting college enrollment, factors affecting student success, community college students, and Achieving the Dream Colleges. Next, I worked with the Education Librarian of the University of Arkansas. She used a second search strategy that included the more general descriptors “meta-analysis” and “literature review.” She also included the descriptors: graduation rate, school holding power, educational innovation, and program effectiveness. Finally, I conducted searches directly on specific computer sites with pertinent information. These sites were: Achieving the Dream, Inc., the Center for Community College Student Engagement, and the Pell Institute. While I found some articles and books that addressed low-income first-generation students and low-income minority students; studies that focused exclusively on social class or income alone were scarce.
The failure to include social class in our consideration of diversity allows students from poor or working-class backgrounds to be “largely invisible on campus” (Putten, 2001, p. 16). “Class nowadays is the ‘uncool subject’….it is the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand….Accordingly, matters of class power are now sanitized and its powerful effects of the life chances of working-class students is denuded or made invisible” (Pearce, Down, & Moore, 2008, p. 257). Unfortunately, if educators assume that they are only serving middle and upper class students, then the instruction, culture, and climate on campus may not be conducive to the needs of low SES students.

Research and disaggregated data on the experiences of students from poverty is necessary for assisting this group in establishing an identity, voice, and presence in educational decision-making and in campus life. Walpole (2003) complained that the limited research on “low SES students has revealed mixed and inconsistent data on income and occupational status” (p. 48). Further, the research has not “adequately isolated the effect of SES and college impact” (Walpole, 2003, p. 48). In *Developing 20/20 Vision on the 2020 Degree Attainment Goal: The Threat of Income-based Inequality in Education* (2011), the Pell Institute asserted:

Disaggregation of data by race/ethnicity has become a common practice, but data indicating differences based on family income or socioeconomic status are less frequently published and made accessible. The disaggregating of outcome data by family income quartile, free and reduced price lunch status for K-12 students, and Pell Grant receipt for college students must become standard practice. These data must be publicly available in a format that allows for easy access, interpretation, and analysis. These data will be useful information that can inform federal policy decisions. (p. 3)
Considering the roles of age, gender, race, and disability has become common practice when planning campus policies, access, support services, and instruction. Equally important is making data available on socio-economic diversity and utilizing this information in campus planning and practices: “Low SES students have not received sufficient attention from policymakers because of a lack of group identity and political mobilization” (Walpole, 2003, p. 46). The Pell Institute (2011) makes clear that the connection between income and college success is inextricable:

most federal education policy discussions of the 2020 goal neglect the issue of reducing income-based disparities in educational attainment through targeted intervention for students from low-income and working-class families. Without such targeted action, it is likely that the 2020 goal will remain more of an improbable aspiration instead of a practical objective. (p. 3)

In short, without data on low SES students, this group remains unstudied, misunderstood, and under assisted. A failure to understand the complexity of this group perpetuates low student success rates. Consequently, the needs of these students do not shape educational policies and practices. Thus, it is imperative that the experiences of low SES students be studied, and that the data pertaining to these students be readily available for policy makers and educators.

**Deficit Model Studies**

This section begins by providing an overview of the demographics of students from this population. The overview is followed by a discussion of the existing barriers to higher education that are documented in the deficit model studies.
Student Demographics

While the research on students from poverty is limited, it does provide educators with a demographical overview of characteristics common to students from poverty. Low-income students “disproportionately come from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds….They also tend to be older, less likely to receive financial support from parents, and more likely to have multiple obligations outside of college” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 3). These students are more likely than their more advantaged peers to be non-native English speakers or born outside of the U.S. They may have dependent children and be single parents. Further, they tend to delay entry into higher education after college, attend colleges closer to home, live off campus, attend part-time, and work full- or part-time off campus while enrolled (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These demographical factors all have a negative correlation with college enrollment and persistence.

Educational Barriers

The literature notes that there are barriers to higher education that are frequently experienced by students from poverty (Adair, 2005; Bergerson, 2007;). These barriers include restricted access and enrollment, a lack of cultural capital, limited financial resources, inadequate academic preparedness, and a lack of self-esteem. In addition, low-income students’ lack of self-concept makes the initial transition into college difficult. Because these barriers seek to explain reasons that students from low SES backgrounds may fail in higher education, they stem from research that is based on the deficit model.

Restricted access and enrollment patterns.

Critics demonstrate that equitable access to higher education for low-income students remains questionable, and that students from poverty have been historically underrepresented in
higher education (Walpole 2003). Economic class, measured by parents’ level of education, income, and occupational status has been proven to dramatically influence whether or not a student will even consider higher education as an option (London, 2006; Sacks, 2003).

“Students from low socioeconomic (SES) families have been part of American higher education since its earliest days, although always in small numbers, and are still underrepresented in higher education, particularly in four-year institutions and more selective colleges” (Walpole, 2003, p. 45). The differences in educational goals and persistence between students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from middle- or upper-socio-economic backgrounds are dramatic. “. . . 60% of low-income students graduate from high school, 33% enter college, and less than 15% obtain a bachelor’s degree” (College Access and Admissions, 2007).

Students who come from affluent backgrounds are more likely to have parents whose definition of success is based on college attendance, and who consider earning a bachelor’s degree to be the norm. In contrast, students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to have parents who view high school graduation as an adequate level of educational attainment, and who may not even consider college to be an option or necessary (College Access and Admission, 2007; Putten, 2001, Walpole, 2003). As one might expect, economically challenged students are less likely to attend college than their more affluent peers. Further, when poor students do attend college, they are more likely to attend less selective institutions or community colleges that have open-door admissions (College Access and Admission, 2007; London, 2006). Additionally, students from low socio-economic status are more likely to attend high schools that do not focus on college preparation, and are more likely to be tracked into vocational programs (College Access and Admissions, 2007).
When selecting a college, these students have limited knowledge about college admissions processes and do not understand the differences among college types; in addition, they lack access to counselors or mentors who could advise them on these issues (Bergerson, 2007: Oldfield, 2007). Thus, low SES students have a propensity to base their college decision on the conveniences of an intuition’s location and its scheduling. Further, students from poverty weigh the cost of institutional tuition and fees more heavily than their affluent peers (Public Agenda, 2009, p. 12). The research consistently indicates that economically disenfranchised students are “less likely to aspire to, apply to, be prepared for, or enroll in postsecondary education” (College Access and Admissions, 2007, p. 31).

**Lack of cultural capital.**

When low SES students enter higher education, they often face obstacles that are not encountered by their more affluent peers. **Bordieu’s social reproduction thesis** (Bordieu and Passeron, 1977) reasoned that one of the most significant of these obstacles is a lack of cultural capital. His theory presents a paradigm of class analysis that suggests that inequality exists in education because schools and teachers reward elite cultural capital. By favoring elite cultural capital in students, upper- and middle-class children are supported and encouraged, while lower-income children are ignored or discouraged. This treatment facilitates inequality in educational and vocational opportunity. Oldfield (2007) explained that **cultural capital** is “the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (p. 2). As Walpole (2003) pointed out, “In addition to economic capital, each social class possesses social and cultural capital, which parents pass on to their children as attitudes, preferences, and
behaviors….Cultural capital refers to specialized or insider knowledge which is not taught in schools” (p. 49). A lack of cultural capital is problematic for low SES students because “Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of the middle class. These norms and hidden rules are not directly taught in schools or businesses” (Payne, 2005, p. 3). In short, students from low-income backgrounds are at a disadvantage because they lack the cultural capital necessary for successfully navigating a higher educational system that is characterized by middle-class norms and values.

Furthermore, students without cultural capital may have difficulty fitting into the culture of higher education, and these students may feel unwelcome or marginalized in a higher education environment, which may seem foreign to their own background (Thayer, 2000). As a consequence, as Walpole (2003) observed, “Because educators differentially value high-status cultural capital, they reward students from higher SES backgrounds who possess this capital, leaving students with low-status cultural capital at risk for lower success rates in school” (p. 49). Achieving the Dream’s model of structural inequality demonstrates the concept of cultural capital, and describes “the interplay of cultural, national, and individual values, policies, and practices that causes us to allocate opportunity and support in ways that give unfair advantage to certain groups of people” (Achieving the Dream, 2011). The model of structural inequality and the concept of cultural capital begin to explain the complex systems at work which limit both access to and success in higher education for low SES students.

**Limited financial resources.**

Another barrier to higher education is that it is deemed cost prohibitive by many low SES students (Adair, 2005). Recent increases in college tuition have made it even less likely for poor
students to consider attending college (Putten, 2004, p. 21). Further, research also indicates that a lack of financial resources may continue to be a problem for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds once they enroll in college (Bergerson, 2007). In a time when student fees and tuition are rapidly increasing, the availability of needs based grants and work-study programs are diminishing (Aronson, 2008). This forces students from poverty to seek additional sources of income for both their educational and living expenses.

Students from poverty, particularly those at community colleges, tend to work more hours than students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds: “Among students in four-year schools, 5% work more than 20 hours a week. Among those attending community colleges, 6 in 10 work more than 20 hours a week, and more than a quarter work more than 35 hours a week” (Public Agenda, 2009, p.4). Bergerson’s (2007) research further showed that students with financial difficulty often work multiple, low-paying jobs in an effort to afford college.

Due to financial hardships, these students may have limited time and money available for campus activities. According to Walpole (2003), low SES freshmen “engage in different activities than their high SES peers while in college. Low SES students spend less time in student clubs and groups than their high SES peers. Almost half of the low SES students report spending less than one hour per week on such an activity” (p. 53). Unfortunately, their restrictive budgets may increase stress and prevent low SES students from fitting in with their peers. For example, students from poverty may not be able to afford decent housing, textbooks, student organization fees, technology, or tutoring which could enhance their academic successes and their college experiences. Things middle-income students take for granted like participating
in student activities or simply going out to eat with peers are cost prohibitive for many of these students.

In addition, work obligations may interfere with class attendance and time spent studying. Many low SES students can only attend college part-time in order to work more hours off-campus; consequently, these students report spending fewer hours per week studying, and have lower GPA’s than their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Walpole, 2003). Part-time enrollment correlates with delayed receipt of degrees and with a greater likelihood of non-completion (Aronson, 2008, p. 47).

Tinto (1993) has explained that social integration is essential for student retention. Finding a balance between work, school, and family obligations is often difficult for these students. Work obligations and a lack of financial resources may delay or prevent the social integration process for students who come from economically challenged backgrounds. The dilemma of finding this balance between work, college, family, and financial pressures is one of the great obstacles that “few government or higher education programs readily address” (Public Agenda, 2009, p. 6).

**College preparedness.**

A third documented educational barrier for low SES students is a lack of college preparedness (Aronson, 2008; Howard, 2001; Muraskin, Wilner, & Watson, 2004). Prior to enrolling in credit-bearing courses, many economically disadvantaged students have need of remedial programs that target reading, writing, oral communication, mathematics, study skills, and time management skills (Howard, 2001, p. 7). Howard (2001) reported that students from poor backgrounds often require remedial coursework, which can be both costly and delay degree
completion. If the student is from poverty and is a first-generation student, the research shows that they “are more likely than those whose parents have a college degree to enroll in remedial course work, have difficulty choosing their majors, and trail in the number of credits they complete, even by the first year” (Aronson, 2008. p. 47). In short, the limited academic proficiencies, along with the time and financial resources allocated to remedial coursework, negatively correlates with degree completion.

**Lack of self-confidence and college transition.**

As pointed out by Aries and Seider (2005) students from economically challenged backgrounds may have more difficulty transitioning into college life from high school than their more affluent peers, and they may be more likely to struggle with self-esteem issues. Unlike their more affluent peers, students from poverty are also less likely to have the confidence, mentors, and support structures necessary for transitioning and persisting in college (Howard, 2001, p. 6). Aries and Seider (2005) have found when lower income students attended elite colleges they reported a “heightened awareness of class [that] led to feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy, deficiency, exclusion, and powerlessness” (p. 419). Adair (2005) has extensively studied the experiences of welfare recipients in higher education. When summarizing student explanations for leaving higher education she reported, “only 20% noted that they received a failing grade…and a startling number-almost 60% - indicated that they left school because they had been made to feel ‘shamed,’ ‘worthless,’ and ‘invisible’ in their classrooms” (p. 13). These emotions and self-doubt may delay or prevent a student from successfully transitioning into college life.
Another issue pointed out by Levine (2004) is that students from poverty who enter college will have a sense that they are “living in two worlds. There is the world of college and the world they come from. The worlds are dramatically different in terms of experience and values. The sad news for the poor kid…is that he or she doesn’t fit in either world anymore” (p. 22). The transition for students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds into the culture and climate of higher education may be easier because colleges and universities operate from a norm and perspective that is comparable to the environment in which they were raised, and they may more rapidly find peers from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the differences in this environment may heighten the insecurities and anxieties of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Their difficulty fitting into a middle- or upper-class culture, coupled with experiences that undermine their self-concept, may be another contributor to a lack of persistence for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Levine, 2004).

Summary

Each of the studies discussed in the preceding section provided reasons why students from poverty are less likely to enroll and succeed in college than their more affluent peers and pointed to the educational barriers that are socio-economic specific. The studies demonstrated that low SES students tend to have more limited access to higher education, and they often lack the cultural capital, financial resources, academic preparedness, and the compatible self-concept necessary for enrollment and persistence in higher education. However, these deficit model studies ignore those students from poverty who are successful in applying, enrolling, and persisting in higher education.
Institutional Studies

The final section of the literature review, institutional studies, examines research that describes institutional policies and practices which may encourage low SES students to enroll and persist in higher education. The findings of Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, and Swail (2004), Engle, Bermo, and O’Brien (2006), Engle and Tinto (2008), and the Pell Institute (2011) share common recommendations for colleges committed to recruiting and retaining low income students.

There is an emerging branch of literature that evaluates institutional characteristics that may facilitate access and success for students, and this body of literature makes institutional recommendations (Engle, Bermo, & O’Brien, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, & Watson 2004; Pell Institute, 2011; Smith, Miller, & Bermo, 2009). This branch of research identifies and compares institutions that are more successful than their peer institutions in recruiting or retaining students from poverty (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engle, Bermo, & O’Brien, 2006; Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, & Watson, 2004). These institutional studies seek to identify shared practices and programs that may explain a college’s initial success in working with low-income students. From these studies, common recommendations emerge. Each of these studies advocated:

- Improving pre-college academic preparation
- Identifying meaningful ways to increase the engagement of low-income students
- Offering innovative developmental education programs
- Enrolling students in orientation or student success courses
- Providing students with clear academic pathways, structure, and sound advising
The following sections provide a more detailed explanation of each of these institutional recommendations.

**Improving Pre-college Academic Preparation**

Colleges that wish to work with students from poverty must be mindful of current shortcomings in K-12 education. One of the first recommendations made for assisting low-income students’ enrollment and persistence in higher education is improved academic preparation for college at the earlier K-12 level. Academic preparation at the K-12 level for students from low-income backgrounds is often inferior to the educational preparation received by middle- or upper-income families. According to Muraskin, Lee, Wilner and Swail (2004), “Students from low-income families are less likely to receive high quality K-12 education because they are more likely to attend schools with limited resources” (p. 8). An inferior K-12 education may, in turn, limit their college choices and financial aid opportunities” (p. 8).

There are 1,750 high schools in the United States that are identified as “dropout factories” because they are responsible for producing 50% of the nation’s dropouts (Pell Institute, 2011). Many of the students attending high school in “dropout factories” are students receiving free and reduced lunch. The Pell Institute (2011) reported, “only about 68% of high school seniors in high-poverty high schools graduate, and fewer than 30% enroll in college. In comparison, seniors in low-poverty schools achieve a graduation rate of 91% and a college enrollment rate of 52%” (p. 4). This report from the Pell Institute (2011) concludes, “Poverty appears to be the key correlate of high schools with weak promoting power” (p. 4). Both low academic performance and high school graduation rates help explain why students from poverty are less likely to pursue higher education. Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, and Swail (2004) also
suggested that low-income students “may not receive the same information and encouragement to attend college from families, teachers, and counselors as do their more advantaged peers” (p. 8). Thus, to improve the enrollment and persistence of students from poverty in higher education, it is first necessary to evaluate their pre-college experiences and academic preparations.

**Ineffective, low-income K-12 education.**

Studies by Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien (2006) and Engle and Tinto (2008) demonstrated that one of the greatest deficiencies of K-12 schools serving low-income students is that there is a lack of academic rigor, and that teachers in these schools often have low expectations for students from poverty. Enrolling in a rigorous middle and high school curriculum, including programs that require advanced mathematics, greatly increases the chances that students will attend college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Often these curriculums are not offered in predominantly low-income high schools, or they are offered in “watered-down formats that do not do much to prepare them [students] to succeed in college” (p. 28). As a result, the low-income students who do graduate high school and attend college often find themselves underprepared to succeed academically in higher education.

Another shortcoming of current K-12 preparation is a lack of alignment between high school exit criteria and college entrance criteria. Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien (2006) proposed that “An important step in achieving alignment is to make the college preparatory curriculum the default curriculum for high school, as many states have already done” (p. 41). They also suggested that to bridge the academic gaps in student performance there must be supplemental
instruction and tutoring outside of the high school classroom in order to prepare students for the academic rigors and expectations of college.

Finally, K-12 schools that serve the neediest students are frequently underfunded and consequently have difficulty hiring well-prepared educators. Engle and Tinto (2008) emphasized that K-12 schools, which serve a high-population of students from poverty, need improved financial resources to hire well-prepared teachers and counselors to work with students who may require greater assistance in preparing for college. Too often, educators in predominantly low-income schools have low expectations for their students. Engle and Tinto (2008) also maintained that the educators working with these students need on-going professional development. Well-trained professionals are instrumental in creating a “strong college-going culture” in schools serving students from poverty (p. 3).

**The role of colleges with K-12 preparation.**

Research by Smith, Miller, & Bermeo (2009) pointed out that higher education can play a meaningful role in supporting K-12 programs in better preparing low-income students for college. To do so, higher educational practitioners must work with K-12 educators to improve alignment between high school exit criteria and college entrance criteria. Further, colleges that desire to recruit and retain students from poverty should be actively engaged in community outreach. Individual colleges can play a critical role in better informing high school students and their parents about “financial aid availability and deadlines, college programs, courses, services, and transfer opportunities” (p. 30). There are nationwide bridge programs like Community in Schools, TRIO, GEAR UP, and Talent Search Upward Bound that target low-income students and encourage partnerships between the higher education community and K-12 schools. These
programs address dropout prevention of low-income students; they encourage students and their parents to begin the college exploration process, and they collaborate with secondary school guidance counselors in educating students and their parents about college and financial aid application processes (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Smith, Miller & Bermeo, 2009). They also help to educate students about college-entry requirements and academic expectations. This ensures that students enroll in and satisfactorily complete the proper courses starting in middle school. College participation in bridge programs and community outreach are frequently recognized as institutional best practices for enrolling and retaining students from poverty (Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, & Swail, 2004; Engle, Bermeo, O’Brien, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Smith, Miller & Bermeo, 2009).

Identifying Meaningful ways to Increase the Engagement of Low-income Students.

An additional best-practice recommendation for colleges interested in improving the retention of students from poverty is to find meaningful ways to increase student engagement on campus (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Smith, Miller, & Bermeo, 2009). Student interaction and integration on campus have been found to improve academic success and retention (Deil-Amen, 2011; Dowd, 2004). Unfortunately, low-income students are “less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college (often referred to as academic and social integration) such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities and using support services” (Engle & Tinto, 2008). When students from poverty fail to engage in academic and social opportunities on campus, it is often because they lack financial resources, live and work off campus, or they only attend college on a part-time basis (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; Deil-Amen, 2011). Colleges
must find innovative and flexible ways to engage these students. Frequently recommended strategies for promoting student engagement include utilizing active learning, developing learning communities, and implementing campus activities that are sensitive to the needs of low-income students.

**Active learning.**

Utilizing active learning is a proven practice for engaging students from poverty (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Because low-income students tend to spend fewer hours on campus than their more affluent peers, it is critical that the time spent in the classroom meaningfully connects students to the college. Engle and Tinto (2008) argued that classroom time should be used to build interaction and engagement through active learning because this is the only time that many low-income students spend on campus. In active learning environments, instructors facilitate activities that encourage analytical thinking and peer-collaboration, rather than relying strictly on classroom lecture. Smith, Miller, and Bermeo (2009) noted that this approach encourages social integration. “Students get to know one another through classroom activities. They can relate to each other’s personal and academic barriers that often affect their performance in class. If students need to miss class due to work or family demands, peers from their group activities can help catch them up on materials” (p. 18). Thus, it is essential that instructors utilize active learning in the classroom to encourage the engagement and retention of low-income students.

**Learning communities.**

A second recommendation that encourages the engagement of low-income students is the implementation of learning communities. Smith, Miller, and Bermeo (2009) described learning communities as programs where students enroll in two or more common courses within a
structured curriculum that are often thematically based. These students participate in social activities and group projects that relate to academic coursework, and they often study together: “These learning communities encourage student ownership of their academic experience and campus engagement” (p. 25). In addition, participation in learning communities creates the opportunity for building peer relationships. Students consistently report that building relationships with other students “strengthened their resolve to return to class the next day, then next month, and the next year” (CCCSE, 2010, p. 3). Thus, creating and implementing learning communities is a second institutional intervention that strategically utilizes the time spent on campus by low-income students to encourage peer-interaction and campus engagement.

**Campus activities.**

Too often low-income students do not participate in campus activities because they are commuters; they work off-campus; they have limited financial resources; or they fail to meet GPA minimums (Deil-Amen, 2011; Walpole, 2003). However, there are some institutions that are beginning to implement creative plans to encourage low-income students’ participation in campus activities. These colleges are careful to implement activities that do not detract from study time. According to Smith et al (2009), “Many colleges set aside an hour of free time each day when no classes are scheduled to encourage participation. As one student confirmed, ‘if you can fit social activities into your schedule, they make classes that much more meaningful’” (p. 27). Some examples of engaging campus activities include faculty-sponsored clubs that are discipline specific such as science, creative writing, math, or art clubs. North Texas Community College has been successful in encouraging low-income students to participate in campus activities. This community college has 35 student organizations. The clubs include mentoring
programs, a commuter organization, community service programs, Phi Theta Kappa, intramural sports teams, and a student government association (Smith et al, 2009). With creativity and flexibility, it is possible to create student activities that are mindful of the special circumstances of low-income students. Activities that are inclusive of low-income students help to facilitate engagement and consequently persistence.

**Offering Effective Developmental Education Programs**

A second best-practice, institutional recommendation for schools working with low-income students is to provide quality developmental education. Developmental education, sometimes referred to as “remedial education,” is designed to assist underprepared college students in developing their basic academic skills. Developmental education typically targets academic skills deficiencies in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. These courses are typically non-credit bearing, non-transferable courses that must be taken prior to enrollment in credit bearing, subsequent courses.

Unfortunately, low-income students tend to be less academically prepared for college than their more affluent peers are; consequently, they are more likely to enroll in developmental coursework in all sectors of non-profit higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Collins, 2009). At the community college level, almost 60% of students take at least one developmental education course; in community colleges serving low-income students, 80% or more of students may be referred to developmental education (Collins, 2009). Students who have significant remedial needs are less likely to be persistent and earn a college credential than those students who do not enroll in developmental education (Collins, 2009).
Fortunately, there are emerging, research-based recommendations that are linked with helping remedial students (many of whom are low-income) address their skills deficiencies in order to be persistent in college. First, it is critical that colleges have carefully thought-out and consistent assessment and placement policies (Collins, 2009; Smith, et. al., 2009). Thorough assessment and placement plans help to ensure that those students with skills deficiencies get necessary remediation and are not set-up for failure in college-level courses. A second characteristic of effective developmental education programs is that they are continuously conducting formative self-assessment, and then they use the assessment data to redesign and improve their course offerings (Smith, et. al, 2009). For example, many developmental education programs are experimenting with “fast track” remediation options, summer intensive sessions, and they are coupling their developmental requirements with student success courses. Finally, successful developmental education programs tend to be centralized (Boylan, 2002). Centralization allows developmental courses and services to be housed in a single department or program, and a single administrator heads them. Students benefit from centralization because it helps to unify course offerings with the necessary support services and learning laboratories (Boylan, 2002).

In sum, institutions wishing to better serve students from poverty must first recognize that these students are more likely to have skill deficiencies than their more affluent peers. Their challenge is to find innovative ways to introduce and implement exemplary remedial programs that will work in their college environment.
Orientation and Student Success Courses

Many colleges have improved student success and persistence by implementing a prolonged orientation and/or a student success course. “Orientation can be a single two-hour session that helps students find their way around campus, explains registration, and mentions support services. It also can be incorporated into a full-semester program, such as a student success course. Or it can be anything in between” (Center for Community College Student Engagement, p. 10, 2012). These courses often teach students essential college survival skills. For example, the curriculum for these courses often includes note taking, study skills, financial planning, test taking strategies, and goal setting (Smith et al, 2009). In addition, students become more aware of the resources of their college. These programs are designed to “serve as the main point of entry for participants and as a ‘home base’ to help students adjust to and integrate into the institution. Orientation and student success courses strongly structure students’ initial educational experiences by playing a major role in course selection and instruction during the first year” (Tinto & Engle, 2008). Students who participate in these programs are more likely to use student support services, complete their courses, have higher GPAs, and obtain degrees (CCCSE, 2012). Thus, orientation and student success courses have emerged as a best-practice recommendation for encouraging the academic success of low-income students.

Providing Students with Clear Academic Pathways, Structure, and Sound Advising

Low-income students need on-going, sound advising beginning in K-12 and continuing through college graduation. In fact, early and on-going advising is linked with improving college access and completion for students from poverty (Engle, Bermeo, O’Brein 2006; Klein, 2008; Smith, Miller, Bermeo, 2009). Low-income students frequently require this intensive
approach to advising because they are more often first generation students, academically underprepared, and are unfamiliar with college application and transfer processes.

Unfortunately, the availability of advisors and the quality of advising are often limited, especially in school systems and colleges that are financially impoverished. Klein (2008) observes that, “Counselors in schools with a high proportion of students who qualify for free or reduced priced lunches spend less time on admissions counseling than their colleagues in schools with more-advantaged populations” (p. 28). At the college level, students have reported that they did not receive much support from college professors or advisors when they struggled academically (Engle, et. al, 2006). In fact, they described college advisors as being “unavailable, uninterested, or unsupportive when they faced academic problems” (p. 29). One participant in the article, *Straight from the Source: What Works with First-Generation College Students*, explained, “I don’t have an advisor because you don’t need an advisor to register” (p. 29). A second student complained:

They’re [college advisors] as brain-dead as the counselors in high school.

Honestly, when they gave me my first four classes, they gave me four reading-intensive courses. They don’ttell you anything. At all. They just let me take whatever classes I wanted to, and then I did, and they were all pretty hard. And I pretty much failed that semester. (p. 30)

The other participants in this study echoed similar frustrations with the quality and availability of advising on campus.

Fortunately, there are studies that point to the benefits and characteristics of effective advising. At the K-12 level, there are emerging programs such as The National College
Advising Corps that places recent college graduates into low-income high schools to help students identify and apply for college (Klein, 2008). This program recognizes that there is “an information barrier that hinders many academically qualified low-income students in gaining access to college” (p. 22). This program helps students identify prospective colleges; it assists them in securing fee waivers for the SAT and ACT, and it helps them complete early applications for financial aid and scholarships. It also places advisers in community colleges to help facilitate university transfer of low-income students (Klein, 2008). Further, Engle and Tinto (2008) recommended that a best practice for retaining low-income students is to take an “active and intrusive approach to advising” (p. 27). They clarified that programs that take such an approach meet with students on a regular basis, at least several times a semester. Active and intrusive advising programs track student performance and use of student support services. These effective programs monitor student academic performance from early in the semester, and they intervene and make referrals if necessary. Engle and Tinto (2008) demonstrated that this approach to advising focuses on the “whole student,” because it uses a case management approach (p. 27).

Fortunately, effective advising can help low-income students navigate the college application process, and it can contribute to their persistence in college (Deil-Amen, 2011). Encouragement and sound advising are credited with helping students “foster clear, realistic goals and commitment, and have been found to be significantly related to retention” (Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, Swail, 2004). Thus, colleges interested in assisting low-income students must carefully consider this institutional recommendation and examine the advising on their own campuses.
While these studies provide practitioners with valuable institutional guidelines, there is still a need to balance the recommendations of educational experts with the direct feedback of the students that higher education seeks to better serve.

**Summary of Literature Review**

This chapter provided an overview of the existing body of literature that is pertinent to a study of the experiences of persistent, low-income, community college students. The chapter was divided into three sections: Section 1 reviewed gaps in current literature; the second section considered deficit model studies and institutional recommendations. The deficit model studies explained educational barriers to students from poverty and presented reasons these students may fail in higher education. Section 3, institutional recommendations, championed institutional best practices that have had initial successes with recruiting and retaining low-income students. Unfortunately, there is a gap in this body of literature; studies that identify and solicit the input of successful students from poverty are missing. This work will add to the body of literature related to college students from low SES backgrounds. The following chapter identifies the methodology and procedures used for the study.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the experiences of successful students from poverty who had enrolled and were making progress towards graduation in community colleges. This chapter begins with a rationale for the selection of the qualitative narrative research design utilized in the study. This is followed by descriptions of the processes used to identify research sites and participants, the procedures used to construct a standardized set of semi-structured and open-ended interview questions, and finally the methods used for interviewing the participants and analyzing the interview responses.

Selection of Research Design

The purpose of the study was to explore the enrollment and persistence of low-income community college students. A central research question and seven sub-questions were developed, and they were:

What influences students from poverty to enroll and succeed in college?

Sub-questions for this question were:

What influenced the student’s decision to attend college?

a. What facilitated the student’s successful transition into higher education?

b. Did financial concerns affect the student’s college experiences, and if so, how?

c. Which individual motivations, strengths, skills, or abilities did low SES students credit for their own success and persistence?
d. Were there any college programs or interventions that contributed to the students’ success?

e. Were there people who encouraged or supported their academic achievements, and if so, how?

f. What advice do students from poverty have for other students, policy makers, and educational practitioners?

A qualitative narrative design was needed in order to give participants the opportunity to tell their stories. As noted by Whitt (1991), “the aim of qualitative research is understanding, not generalization” (p. 408), and, as Seidman (1991) explained, interviewing “is a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues through understanding the experience of individuals whose lives constitute education” (p. 7). A narrative approach was very appropriate for this study because I needed to rely on open-ended interview questions that did not “restrict the views of participants” (Creswell, 2008, p. 213).

The use of open-ended interview questions was essential to this study because it allowed the participants who were from low socioeconomic backgrounds the flexibility to interpret and articulate their own unique experiences. A quantitative design would have limited participants’ choices or responses to more specific, predetermined questions and answers. The qualitative approach removed such presumptions and allowed the participants to have greater freedom in communicating about the aspects of their experiences that they deemed to be most relevant and meaningful.
Selection of Research Sites

Purposive sampling was used in determining the research sites because, as stated by Merriam (1988), “Purposive sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most” (p. 48). The research sites for the study included four Achieving the Dream, Inc. (ATD) community colleges. Achieving the Dream is the nation’s largest, non-governmental reform movement for student success in higher education (About Achieving the Dream, 2011). This reform initiative includes “160 community colleges and institutions, more than 100 coaches and advisors, and 16 state policy teams – working throughout 30 states and the District of Columbia” (About Achieving the Dream, 2011, para. 1). Further, ATD “is a national nonprofit that is dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree” (About Achieving the Dream, 2011, para. 1). Achieving the Dream community colleges are committed to assisting low-income college students. This commitment made these institutions compatible and ideal research sites for the purpose of this study.

National statistics on poverty were used to further narrow the potential number of research sites within the 160 ATD community colleges. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, five states in the U.S. had an estimated poverty rate at or above 17% in 2009. These are the poorest states in the nation, and they include Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and West Virginia (Bishaw & Macartney, 2010, p. 2).

I selected the four Achieving the Dream community colleges in Arkansas based on purposive sampling. The site selection was based on the use of homogeneous sampling.
Creswell (2008) advised that homogenous sampling is appropriate when the researcher is trying to identify sites or participants that possess a “similar trait or characteristic” (p. 215). By selecting Arkansas’ ATD community colleges, which are institutions that deliberately strive to serve low-income students, and that are located in one of the nation’s poorest states, there was a greater likelihood that the students on the campuses came from impoverished backgrounds, than if the research sites had been randomly selected.

**Identification and Selection of Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to select participants. As Patton (2002) described, “Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, even single cases (N=1), selected purposefully.... The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 230). This method was necessary because I was primarily interested in exploring the experiences of successful, low-income community college students. Homogenous sampling allowed me to identify participants who shared the characteristics of impoverished backgrounds and initial success in undergraduate studies.

It is appropriate in purposive sampling to “begin with a key person who is considered knowledgeable by others and then ask that person for referrals” (Merriam, 1988, p. 77). With this in mind, I began with my dissertation chair who is a Leadership Coach for Achieving the Dream. He knew other ATD coaches in Arkansas, and he was able to discuss initial plans for the study with these coaches. In addition, he provided me with the contact information for these coaches. I utilized Achieving the Dream coaches to garner support for the study and to identify a campus contact person who was knowledgeable of students who met the participant criterion for this study.
Next, I provided the institutional contact persons with the criterion for interview participants. The two criteria used for identifying participants were that they be Pell Grant recipients who were academically successful and who were enrolled in at least their second year of community college. I selected Pell Grant recipients because the U.S. government indicated that these recipients are students from “low-income” families (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). From this list of potential participants, I included those successful students who had a GPA of 3.0 or above. By using these criteria, the study included only those students from economically challenged backgrounds who had been successful in enrolling and persisting in their undergraduate studies to date. Each campus contact person worked diligently to identify participants who met the criteria.

According to Patton (2002), “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry….In-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information rich” (p. 244). He further stated, “The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p. 245). Therefore, as approved by the dissertation committee, I planned to interview 4 to 5 students per campus, for a total of 16 to 20 interviews. Each institution was asked to schedule additional, potential candidates in case there were “no shows” or students who were not comfortable with completing the interview process.

Initially 20 interviews were scheduled; however, there were two participants who were not interviewed. One of the students did not participate due to personal scheduling conflicts; the second participant’s grades had dropped below the pre-established 3.0 standard and was
therefore not eligible for participation. Thus, the study consisted of 18 total participants and interviews. Because of the sensitive nature of the research topic, and the personal nature of many of the reported stories, each participant was assigned a random numerical pseudonym to protect his or her identity.

**Securing IRB Approval**

Approval to conduct the interviews was needed from the University of Arkansas. Following the University’s prescribed procedures, the IRB protocol form was submitted to the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board. The University was made aware that human subjects would participate in the study, and that the researcher did not anticipate any foreseeable or significant risk to participants. All required materials were reviewed by the board, and the board found the proposal to be within their guidelines for research using human subjects. These approval forms are included in *Appendix A*. In addition, all identified and selected participants were asked to sign an individual consent form (*Appendix B*) prior to conducting the interviews.

**Interview Protocol**

As explained by Patton (2002), “Validity in quantitative research depends on careful instrument construction to ensure that the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure” (p.14). He then emphasized that in quantitative studies there must be careful administration of the instrument in a standardized and prescribed manner. However, “In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument. The credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill competent, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork” (p. 14). In the study, I strived to maintain credible, ethical, and unbiased standards during the research processes. In alignment with the prescriptions of Patton (2002), I sought to adopt a stance of neutrality that
allowed for the unbiased exploration into the experiences of students from poverty that were successful in higher education. Patton (2002) contended:

> The investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths. The neutral investigator enters the research arena with no ax to grind, no theory to prove (to test but not to prove), and no predetermined results to support. Rather, the investigator’s commitment is to understand the world as it unfolds, be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge, and be balanced in reporting both confirmatory and disconfirming evidence with regard to any conclusions offered. (p. 51)

In an effort to achieve such neutrality, open-ended questions were carefully developed. Guardia and Evans’ (2008) research and Patton’s (2002) examples of open-ended interviews served as models for developing the interview questions for this study. Patton (2002) indicated that there are six types of questions that can be asked of participants (p. 348-352). Interview questions may include experience and behavior questions, opinion and values questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, background/demographics questions, and distinguishing question types (Patton, 2002). As the interview questions for this study were created, I was mindful to include a variety of the six question types referenced by Patton. The questions needed to allow the participants room for reflection on past and present experiences. In addition, responding fully to the open-ended questions required students to describe a combination of their behaviors, feelings, opinions, attitudes, and knowledge.

All participants in the study were asked the same set of open-ended interview questions. Patton (2002) argued that by answering the same set of open-ended standardized questions,
respondents’ answers can be easily compared, and interviewer effects and bias are reduced (p. 349). In keeping with these recommendations, the interview guide was constructed as follows:

1. What are the factors that influenced you to continue your education after high school? (If necessary follow-up with questions about parental attitudes, parental expectations, and individual goals that are higher education specific).

2. Once you recognized that you wanted to attend college, how did you go about deciding where to go? (Probe into factors that the student considered. Cost? Location? Schedule?).

3. As a college student you are eligible to receive a Pell-Grant. How did you learn about the Pell-Grant? Tell me about the application process. What enabled you to successfully complete and receive the Pell-Grant?

4. Talk to me about expenses other than your tuition. Does your Pell-Grant cover those costs? (Follow-up to determine if and how much they are working outside of school. Are they experiencing stress as a result of inadequate finances? Were they surprised by costs other than tuition?)

5. How is college different from high school? Was there anything about the first semester in college that you found surprising or difficult? How did you cope with the changes? (Probe for details about advising, orientation courses, or student-support services)

6. When you started attending your college courses did you find you were academically prepared? If yes, what helped you the most in your precollege
preparation? If no, were there programs/services on campus that helped you get caught up?

7. How did you do your first semester? (Follow-up with “Why did you do so well?” or “Explain what went wrong, and how did you correct the situation?”).

8. Is there someone on campus (an instructor, employee, or peer) who you have been able to form a positive relationship with? Tell me about that process and relationship.

9. In spite of financial limitations, you have successfully enrolled in college and are making progress towards graduation. How do you explain your successes?

10. How would you coach new students who are also Pell Grant recipients? What advice could you give them to help them be successful in college?

11. What is a moment in your college experience that you are proud of? Please explain the significance of that experience.

12. What does the higher education experience mean to you? What do you hope to gain from this experience?

13. Have there been any other ways that a lack of financial resources has affected your education that we haven’t discussed? (If yes) How? Would you elaborate on that?

14. Are there any other thoughts or feelings you might share with educators or policy makers to help them work more effectively with other students who have limited financial resources?
As shown in the table, the interview questions were designed to match the central research question and seven sub questions.

Table 1

*Research Sub Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Sub Question</th>
<th>Corresponding Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. What influenced the student’s decision to attend college?</td>
<td>1, 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. What facilitated the student’s successful transition into higher education?</td>
<td>5-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Did financial concerns affect the student’s college experiences, and if so, how?</td>
<td>2-4, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Which individual motivations, strengths, skills or abilities did low SES students credit for their own success and persistence?</td>
<td>9, 11-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Were there any college programs or interventions that contributed to the student’s success?</td>
<td>3, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Were their people that encouraged or supported their academic achievements, and if so, how?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. What advice do students from poverty have for other students, policy makers, and educational practitioners?</td>
<td>10, 14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As pointed out earlier, the interview questions were meant to provide a starting point. However, both Whitt (1991) and Patton (2002) recommended the need for “emergent design flexibility” during the interview process. Whitt (1991) encouraged the researcher to develop initial interview questions based on his or her knowledge of the phenomena: “Then, as the study
progresses, questions can be added as needed for clarification, such as when contradictory information is obtained, or to obtain additional information” (p. 411). Additionally, Patton (2002) argued, that the researcher needs to avoid “getting locked into rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness and pursue new paths of discovery as they emerge” (p. 40). While no additional interview questions were added to the study, there were times when the interviewer had to ask participants follow-up questions to clarify or elaborate on responses to the existing interview questions.

**Pilot Test**

Seidman (1991) maintained that the “best” advice ever given to researchers is to pilot their proposed studies (p. 29). The pilot allows the researcher to assess whether or not the research structure is appropriate, and it allows the researcher to come to terms with practical aspects of the study (p. 30). Pilot tests for this study occurred in the fall of 2011. Prior to scheduling interview dates with participating institutions, I first tested the interview questions with three student volunteers from the college where I was employed, and then I made necessary adjustments. From this, it became apparent that participants desired to have the interview questions prior to the interview in order to have time to reflect upon their responses. The field test also revealed that each interview would require 1 to 2 hours depending upon participant elaboration. According to field test participants, the interview questions were easy to understand.

**Data Collection**

Once institutional contacts were identified, they were emailed a letter of introduction and a description of the proposed study. After email and telephone correspondence, the four ATD
institutions indicated that they were all willing to participate in the study. Each institutional contact person played a critical role in determining potential student participants because they had access to the students’ financial and academic records. The identified student participants were offered minimal compensation in the form of a $30.00 gift card for their participation. As recommended by Patton (2002), “Participants in research provide us with something of great value, their stories and their perspectives on the world. We show that we value what they give us by offering something in exchange” (p. 415). In this case, the respondents were being compensated for their time. They were not being paid for a coached response; they were told their answers should be candid and true of their individual experiences (EvalTalk, as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 413). An additional incentive for participating in the study was that it allowed participants to tell their stories, and thus lead to increased research and advocacy for college students from similar impoverished backgrounds.

The study involved an initial 10-question demographics survey, and it was followed by the in-depth interviews. Seidman (1991) validated the need for student interviews: “So much research is done on schooling in the United States; yet so little of it is based on the perspectives of the students…whose individual and collective experiences constitutes schooling” (p. 4). Seidman’s research further supported the use of semi-structured interviews explaining, “interviewing provides a necessary, if not completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry” (p. 4). The interviews were scheduled at convenient times for the participants in conference rooms at their community colleges. During the interviews, each participant was asked the same set of open-ended questions.
In an effort to fully engage participants in dialogue, I took minimal notes during the 1 to 2 hour interviews. However, the interviews were both audiotaped and videotaped and then transcribed. I used both audio and video recording to ensure that the interviews were captured; if one form of the recording was to fail, the second recording would have served as a back-up source of data collection and documentation. When the interviews were transcribed, the video recordings were destroyed; when the study is complete, the audio recordings will also be destroyed. Immediately following the individual interviews, I recorded my initial reactions and reflections in a research journal.

Once interviews were transcribed, they were analyzed. Procedures used to ensure trustworthiness of the data, data limitations, and the procedures used for data analysis are described in the following sections.

**Trustworthiness**

Replicability, which is essential to reliability, is critical in quantitative studies (Whitt, 1991). However, in qualitative studies replicability “is impossible, given the context-boundedness of qualitative studies” (p. 413). If qualitative studies are to be taken seriously, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that their methods and findings are worthy of consideration. As noted by Whitt (1991) and Twycross & Shields (2005), Lincoln & Guba (1985) created the standard of trustworthiness to bring legitimacy to the work of qualitative researchers. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Patton (2002) argued that Lincoln’s and Guba’s standard replaces “the traditional mandate to be objective…by being
balanced, fair, and conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, multiple interest, and multiple realities (p. 575).

**Credibility**

Schwandt (2001) explained that the role of credibility is to ensure that the researcher accurately represents the experiences of the respondents when the interviews are reconstructed and reported. In an effort to maximize credibility, this study required prolonged engagement. The study included pre-interview emails, one-on-one interviews, and follow-up emails with respondents. Schwandt also pointed out, “The importance of obtaining information and feedback from insiders throughout the process of data collection and analysis-not only about the phenomena but also about the researcher’s emerging interpretations and understandings-cannot be overemphasized (p. 413). In keeping with this recommendation, I actively asked follow-up questions and used paraphrasing to check my understanding and to allow respondents the opportunity to provide corrective feedback if necessary.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to the ability to see similarities in a study’s findings to other potential research settings, and it allows readers to determine if a study’s findings could be applicable in other locations (Twycross & Shields, 2005). The use of four institutions as research sites, as opposed to conducting a single-institution study, encouraged transferability. In addition, there was great diversity in the age, gender, and race of the participants; this maximized the potential for their experiences and responses to be similar to those of other college students.

Another way to heighten transferability is by collecting “rich and thick” data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In an effort to collect rich, thick data, open-ended questions were utilized in this
study’s one-on-one interviews. Thick descriptions require “the researcher to provide a lot of detail about the setting and the events taking place” (Twycross & Shields, 2005, p. 36). The emergent data in this study were rich and thick which increases its transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Dependability**

Dependability is improved when a researcher provides evidence of the “appropriateness of the inquiry decisions made throughout the study” (Whitt, 1991, p. 413). Dependability is often referred to as “auditability” (Twycross & Shields, 2005). The researcher should establish an audit trail that documents the research process and evolving decision-making. Whitt (1991) explained that the audit trial left by the researcher should include raw data “(tape recordings, transcriptions, and notes from interviews and observations), products of data analysis and synthesis (all phases of category-development and themes), process notes (including decisions about research strategies and researcher reflections, questions, and insights), and materials relating to the intentions of the research, such as notes and journals” (p. 413-414). By maintaining and organizing the research drafts, collection of data, transcripts, feedback from the dissertation committee, and a reflexive journal, the dependability of this study was enhanced.

**Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocated keeping a reflexive journal because it has broad-range application for enhancing the four areas of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The reflexive journal was of great use in enhancing the study’s confirmability because it allowed for ongoing documentation and reflection upon the study’s schedule, methods, and data collection processes. The personal journal allowed me to reflect upon any
biases that might taint the study, and through this on-going reflection any potential biases were minimized. Further, data-triangulation contributed to the confirmability of this study. To check for consistency, the initial responses to the demographics survey, notes from the research journal, and video recorded interviews were compared to the transcribed interview responses.

**Researcher’s World View**

A possible limitation to the study is that I do not come from a background of financial hardship; consequently, some participants may have viewed me as an “outsider.” This could have potentially limited their willingness to disclose their experiences.

While I do not share the same background of the participants, I have worked with community college students in economically-depressed regions for over 10 years. Most of my current and former students have come from backgrounds of poverty, and I have always been able to successfully establish a strong rapport with them. I believe that these experiences have made me sensitive to the needs and circumstances of students from this population. This understanding increased my ability to earn the trust of participants, so that they gave complete and honest responses. While it is often uncomfortable to discuss socioeconomic status, the participants were eager to talk about their successes, and they freely described their financial hardships. I believe the interview process was a positive experience for the participants, and they appreciated that both their financial distresses and their successes were being recognized.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began after the first set of interviews, and was ongoing until all interviews were completed. The hand analysis method was used for the analysis instead of computer based data analysis. Creswell (2008) pointed out that this method was appropriate for researchers that
“want to be close to the data” (p. 247). Seidman (1991) asserted that “Although there are computer programs that can sort out and combine all the text in which a particular word appears, a computer program cannot produce the connections a researcher makes while studying the interview text” (p. 85). By personally transcribing the data from the audio recordings, I was able to evaluate the tone of voice and nuances used during the interview, and I was able to see emerging similarities and differences early in the research process. Once the data from the audio were transcribed, the videotaped interviews were reviewed, and the research journal was consulted for consistency.

The data were examined on a question by question basis following Maxwell’s (2005) guidelines for cross-case analysis. Through the analysis process, I was able to conceptually organize the text data, divide it into manageable text segments, and discover overlapping themes (Creswell, 2008). As themes emerged, they were assigned an individual color. Each transcript’s responses were color coded in an effort to identify emerging themes and differences. Key participant quotes that support emerging themes were circled (p. 252). Creswell (2008) noted that “The identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences” (p. 521).

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the study’s methodology. First, a rationale for the selection of the qualitative narrative research design was given. Next, I explained why I used purposive sampling to identify research sites and the target population. Then the rationale and procedures used for creating the 14 open-ended interview guide were discussed. The chapter also detailed
data collection processes that ensured trustworthiness. Finally, data analysis methods were presented.
CHAPTER 4
PRESENTATION OF DATA

Overview

The purpose of this research project was to identify students from poverty who had successfully enrolled and persisted in community college, and to explore the factors that they believed had contributed to their decisions and successes. To do so, 18 participants were asked the same 14 open-ended interview questions. As described in Chapter 3, the 18 members of this population were all Pell Grant recipients. Each participant had a 3.0 grade point average or above, and was a second-year student who was making consistent progress towards graduation.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the characteristics and life stories of the students from poverty who were being successful in higher education and to present their answers to the study’s research questions. This chapter will begin with an overview of the study’s participant demographics that were collected in the pre-interview survey. This is followed by a more detailed and individualistic description of each of the 18 participants. Finally, participants’ answers to the study’s 14 interview questions are presented. The interview questions are provided in Appendix C.

Participant Demographics

Demographics

While the study did not deliberately strive to achieve or control for participant diversity, the 18 participants did come from a variety of diverse backgrounds. Thirteen of the participants were women and five were men. The study involved both traditional and nontraditional aged students; six of the participants were 19 to 29 years old; six were 30 to 39 years old, and six were 40 years old or older. Twelve of the 18 students were first-generation college students. Eight of
the participants identified themselves as white/Caucasian; eight were African-American/black, 
one participant was Native American/Indian, and one was Latino/Hispanic.

**Academic Overview**

The survey included questions that were designed to gain a basic understanding of the 
participants’ academic backgrounds and aspirations. Prior to conducting the study, I inaccurately 
assumed that the participants were all high school graduates. However, I learned that eight of the 
participants had dropped out of high school and completed their GEDs prior to enrolling in 
college. In addition, eight of the participants remarked that this was their second attempt at 
college. Fifteen respondents self-reported that they required developmental course work prior to 
enrolling in credit-bearing courses. Thirteen of the students also enrolled in a student-orientation 
or student success course their freshman year. Finally, three of the 18 participants took English 
as a Second Language courses. Participants expressed a variety of long-term academic goals. 
Four planned to complete an Associate’s Degree, and 10 desired to pursue a Bachelor’s degree. 
There were two participants who indicated they would like to complete a Master’s degree, and 
finally, two expressed a goal of completing advanced graduate work or earning a Ph.D.

**Time Management**

Participants were asked to reflect about how they utilized and managed the average hours 
in a week. In terms of hours spent studying, four of the participants said that they studied 1 to 5 
hours a week; seven participants said that they studied 6 to 10 hours a week; six participants said 
that they studied 11-20 hours a week, and one participant indicated that she studied 30 or more 
hours a week.
Those interviewed were also asked about the hours they spent in a week working for pay. Three participants indicated that they were students who did not work for pay outside of class, and that they were not looking for work. Two participants indicated that they worked 1 to 5 hours a week for pay; two participants indicated that they worked 6 to 10 hours a week; six participants indicated that they worked 11 to 20 hours a week for pay; finally, five participants indicated that they worked 30 hours or more per week for pay.

In addition, students were asked about the hours per week that they engaged in college activities. Two of the participants did not engage in any college activity outside of coursework. Fourteen of the participants were involved in 1 to 2 college organizations or activities; one participant was involved in 3 to 4 college organizations or activities, and one participant was involved in 5 or more organizations or activities. In the average week, three of the students said that they did not spend any hours per week involved in a college activity. Nine of the participants indicated that they spent 1 to 5 hours per week in a college activity. Four of the students engaged in a college activity for 6 to 10 hours per week, and two students said that they spent 11-20 hours per week in a college activity.

Next, students were asked about the hours per week commuting to and from campus. Fourteen of the participants commuted for 1 to 5 hours per week. Three of the participants spent 6 to 10 hours per week commuting, and 1 participant required 30 hours or more per week for commuting.

Finally, students were asked about the hours they spent per week providing care for their dependents (children, parents, or spouse). This was one area of their lives where many of the
participants reported spending a significant portion of their time. Two of the participants reported that they were not responsible for taking care of any dependents. Two participants indicated that this required 1 to 5 hours per week; two participants reported that this required 6 to 10 hours per week. However, a majority of 12 of the study’s participants indicated that they spent 30 hours or more per week providing care for dependents.

**Participant Descriptions**

This study focuses on the experiences of 18 students from poverty who have enrolled and made successful progress towards graduation. To truly understand and appreciate the participants’ responses to the 14 interview questions, it may be helpful to first become more familiar with each individual participant through descriptions of each. The ensuing descriptions provide details about the participants’ backgrounds, family life, the nature of their poverty, and the situations which make their stories particularly unique or inspiring.

Participant 1 was a student who was African-American and non-traditional. She married in eleventh grade when she found out that she was pregnant with her first child; she is now the mother of eight children. While she did not graduate from high school, she did complete her GED. In addition to caring for eight children, she was, until recently, the sole care provider for her elderly father. Now that six of her children are in college and her father is deceased, she has decided to return to college. She explained, “up until now, well it’s been about taking care of everyone else. Now it’s about taking care of me. It is my turn.” She hoped to complete an Associate’s degree in Business, and then transfer to a four-year institution. She was dependent upon governmental housing, TRIO, Career Pathways, Pell Grant, WIC, and student loans.
Participant 1 indicated that it will take her 6-10 years to pay back her current student loans. She has maintained a 4.0 GPA since her first semester, and will graduate in May. This was her second attempt at college. This participant grew up in poverty, and meets Payne’s (2005) previously discussed criteria for *generational poverty*.

Participant 2 was a 20 year old, African-American male. He was a high school graduate, but this was his second attempt at college. He initially started college at a private institution. However, during the summer after his freshman year, his father, a police-officer, was killed in the line of duty. Shortly after his father passed, his family lost their house. Within a few months of his father’s death, his mother also passed away. This participant quickly became a victim of *situational poverty* (Payne, 2005).

Having lost both parents, he realized he could no longer afford private school and dropped out. He said, “I had to make a choice to do something different or just stay there and decay. I had a situation that really woke me up; I knew I had nothing left. It’s a process. I had to just sit and think about where did I want my life to go.” He identified his current community college as being his only viable option, and he moved in with his aunt. In addition to relying upon his aunt for housing, he received Pell Grant, academic scholarships, and worked at Home Depot and as a work-study on campus. In his first semester of community college, providing documentation of the death of *both* of his parents, and completing all the necessary paperwork, delayed his ability to receive much needed financial assistance. In spite of his personal loss and hardships, he had a 4.0 GPA, and he planned to transfer to a four-year institution after his May
Participant 3 was a non-traditional, Caucasian, single-mother. This participant grew up in poverty and was physically, sexually, and emotionally abused throughout her childhood. In an effort to escape this abuse, she dropped out of high school in tenth grade and got married just to get out of her parent’s house. However, her husband became abusive early in their marriage. This participant’s background meets Payne’s (2005) description of *generational poverty*. Participant 3 acknowledged that her whole life had been spent in the “vicious rut and cycle of poverty.” She explained that she had made a life of struggling to survive:

> It’s just day to day. You’re poor; all your problems could be solved if you had money to throw at them. You are poor. You can’t get out of it. I have to pay the bills, so I have to keep a job. And that is what you do; you just take one job after the other, and when you are in that cycle you attract other people that are not good for your life, toxic people. So you just keep making bad choices, choices that keep you where you are. That’s what happened to me for 30-35 years of my life.

The participant drove to the local community college when she found out her job was being outsourced and her marriage was ending. She said that when she arrived on the campus she just wandered around:

> I didn’t have a clue where to go or what I was doing. I didn’t know who to talk to, or even what I wanted to ask them. The lady I ran into dropped everything for two hours
and talked to me…I will never forget her. At times I told her, ‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be here; I shouldn’t have wasted your time.’ But, she told me to sit down, and she kept working with me. By the end of the day, I was started on the enrollment process. They took me through it every step of the way, or I wouldn’t have gotten through it. It was pretty amazing.

This participant completed her GED and immediately enrolled in an Associate’s degree program. She received academic scholarships, Pell Grant, support from Career Pathways, and had student loans. Participant 3 will graduate in May, and was a member of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society. She planned to transfer to a four-year institution, but had not determined a major. She indicated that her most important goal was to set an example for her 12-year-old daughter. She hoped her example would set a new standard of college graduation for their family, and that higher education would free her and her daughter from the poverty cycle.

Participant 4 was a 24-year-old Caucasian woman who was making a second attempt at college enrollment and completion. The student dropped out previously because she wanted to work more hours so that she could save for a car and “spend more time shopping at the mall.” This was one of the more challenging interviews because at times the participant seemed flippant in her responses, and her financial concerns were trivial in comparison to the other participants involved in the study. The student explained that she had tremendous credit card debt:

The cable bill is a arm and a leg, and I use my credit card for Netflixs, shopping at the mall, and fun things like the movies. I also will use my credit card for eating out and maybe groceries, and I got my computer with it.
This student lived at home with her mother; she explained that this living arrangement was her motivation for returning to college. “The only reason I am here is so I can get a better job and just get out of my mom’s house. I do not want to live with her forever, and I can’t wait to have an apartment of my own.” In addition, she credited working in “the real-world” for motivating her to return to college: “It helps that I worked for so long. I worked for three years and I got laid off three times in three years. I need a good paying job where I won’t have to worry about lay-offs.” This participant’s goal was to earn an Associate’s degree and enter the workforce.

Participant 5 was an African-American, single mother of four children. Reflecting upon her experiences, she described herself as an “A” honor roll student throughout high school. Her parents had become parents at a young age, dropped out of high school, and entered the workforce. She had hoped to take a different path and further her education immediately after high school. As an 18 year-old, she initially enrolled in a private college. However, she dropped out her freshman year when she found out she was pregnant. She had since had three more children. She delayed returning to college until her first two children were enrolled in public school. When she decided to return to college she said, “I had to search for a college that was budget friendly; I knew I couldn’t go back to the private school I went to earlier.” Not only did she need a college with affordable tuition, but she also required governmental housing, food stamps, and Career Pathways’ help for childcare for her youngest two children. While this participant was raising four children and working 20 hours a week for UPS, she was also maintaining a 4.0 GPA, and she will graduate in May with an Associate’s Degree in Accounting. Participant 5 powerfully described that poverty, not academic ability, had been her greatest barrier to higher education:
It has been empowering to earn straight A’s in college, but really I knew I would have no problems with the courses. I was a model student in high school. It was other things that was blocking my success. I don’t want to be on government assistance and get food stamps. It can be embarrassing. The way I look at it though is that I can take advantage of all the free money and help that is out there. Career Pathways is designed to help you get your education. I can get this help and government help for the next 4 to 5 years, and I can get on my feet. Or, I will be like those people that need government assistance for a lifetime. I think it is better to just use it to the full advantage for 4 or 5 years. Then, I can support myself and my family. All I want out of college is a better tomorrow for me and my kids.

Participant 5 hoped to continue her education and receive a Bachelor’s Degree in Accounting or Business.

Participant 6 was an African-American, adult woman who was the mother of three. This was her second attempt at college. She had started college in Mississippi in 1997, but she had a severe a car accident. The accident prevented her from being able to write; at the time, she was not aware of how to receive accommodations for her disability, and she withdrew from college. While “stopping-out” of college she had three children. This participant explained that between 1998 and 2008, she frequently thought about returning to college. However, insecurities about her academic abilities, lack of childcare, and financial hardship deterred her from actively pursuing reenrollment.
This participant had a friend and neighbor who was enrolled in the local community college. The neighbor repeatedly encouraged Participant 6 to re-enroll and utilize the support of Career Pathways. Participant 6 discussed that she was reluctant about reenrolling, but her neighbor and the counselors at Career Pathways were persistent in their support and encouragement:

I made lots of excuses, but my neighbor and then the ladies in Career Pathways told me if I was receiving any public assistance I could get childcare through Career Pathways. Career Pathways also walked me through getting accommodations for my disabilities. Any times times got tough Mrs. Zelda, Mrs. Shonda, and Mrs. Geneva, and Mrs. Deborah Gentry, my Career Pathways counselors, encouraged me. Everybody over here goes out of their way to help students. Some days the bills was too high or school was too hard, and I would come over here and say, ‘I’m ready to give up, withdraw me.’ But they said, ‘Girl you done come too far to quit now.’ And I’d say to myself, ‘The Lord ain’t gonna put no more on you than you can stand; he ain’t gonna let you fail.’

I started doing a work-study job, and got my gas vouchers from Career Pathways. Then students, Mrs Zeldas, Mrs, Shondas, and Mrs. Vicki encouraged me to apply for scholarships. Man, I was so surprised. I did not know how good my GPA was. I had always felt kind of dumb. But, I got academic challenge scholarships, incentive awards, and the single-parent scholarship. The scholarships, Career Pathways, the work-study, and my grades all worked together to help me not just pay the bills, but realize I could do this.
Even with the combined financial support of scholarships, governmental assistance, a work-study position, and Career Pathways, Participant 6 explained that she still experienced financial hardship:

I don’t have enough money for school supplies for me and my daughter. Sometimes me and my oldest daughter share school supplies. She uses the pencils, pens, and paper during the day, and then I use them at night. However, when she needs notebooks, or folders, or paper, or whatever, I just let her have mine. I have to make sure she stays organized first.

Participant 6 will graduate in May and hoped to transfer to a university to continue her education. She wanted to become an elementary school teacher. In thinking about her future, she mentioned:

I would always get discouraged and depressed when I thought I was not going to ever graduate from college. But, when I got the email about applying for graduation I was like yeah, the day has come, my day has come. I just want a good paying job, and I want to buy me a home. There is so much bad stuff going on in the world. I just want to get my kids to a safe environment. I want to be a teacher and move to a good area so my kids don’t have to be afraid to go outside and play. I want them to feel secure. I need a nice home for my kids with a nice yard.

This Participant acknowledged that she was not confident in her ability to finance the additional two years of college necessary for earning her bachelor’s degree, and she was uncertain of the
transfer process. She needed to enroll in an online program, or find a program that was conducive to her scheduling needs as an adult student who had parenting responsibilities and was limited in her ability to commute long distances. Regardless, of her academic success to date, there was significant uncertainty surrounding her ability to finish her four-year degree and change her way of life.

Participant 7 was an adult, African-American who was the mother of four children. This participant endures an ongoing battle with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. She grew up in a violent household. She revealed, “My mom was a victim of domestic abuse. We had to move around a lot. We had to be able to get packed up and get gone quickly.” Consequently, she changed schools frequently as a K-12 student and had a shaky academic foundation. In her first attempt at college, immediately following high school, Participant 7 enrolled in a community college. However, her first attempt was unsuccessful:

I had a jealous boyfriend. My first semester of college I missed a lot of class because of him. I got put on academic probation; then I got kicked out. Within a year, I was pregnant with my first daughter. I found a job at a fast-food restaurant; I still had the desire to go back to school and finish what I started, but outside distractions threw me out of balance.

I have major mental health issues. When I was working in the fast-food restaurant, I was robbed at gunpoint. I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and major depression. I got on my medication, and eventually went back to work in the fast-food restaurant. A similar experience happened again. After that
episode, I walked off the job, and I never went back. I mean they even had to mail me my paycheck. I became a hermit. I would not leave the house. I lost the desire for everything. That went on for years, all the way until 2003, but my husband stuck with me. We had two good years, but in 2005, the economy went bad. We experienced financial difficulties, and I started sliding down again. Mortgage rates, insurance premiums changed, interest rates changed. I lost my house in 2005. That was devastating. But, one good thing happened. Arkansas Rehabilitation Services sent me information on going back to college, and in 2008, I started back. I got through my first semester, and I was excited. I had never achieved that before.

This participant was scheduled to graduate in December of 2011. The most memorable aspect of her story centered on her inability to walk at graduation. She disclosed:

The moment I am most proud of is receiving a letter saying that I’ve met the requirements to graduate. Unfortunately, I will not walk across the stage for the simple fact that my anxiety prevents me from walking across the stage. I will pick up my certificate. My son graduated from 6th grade this past year also. One Saturday we came back up here in our caps and gowns on, and we took our pictures in front of the college and in front of the college sign. It was just exciting. We posted the pictures on Facebook, and our family has just emailed and messaged us so much when they saw our pictures. That was my graduation. My son is going to think outside of the box. I want to give my children the motivation to go to college. They can say, ‘my mother did it, so I have to at least try.’ I want them to go outside of that box.
Participant 8 was a 29 year old, African-American woman who had planned on making a lifetime career in the military. She had been in the military for nine years, but “was forced out because of a liver condition.” She explained that she had to enroll in college because she had two children to support and limited job skills. Since she enrolled in college, she has had a third child. Participant 8 explained that she had a comfortable way of life when she was in the military because she had a steady income, military housing, and health insurance. However, now that she is not on active duty, she was experiencing greater financial stress. This unexpected change in her income is consistent with Payne’s (2005) description of situational poverty. According to Participant 8:

As of right now, I am not working outside of school, and I have really had to cut back. I get a temporary check from the military and unemployment, but it’s just not enough with the three kids. You got to cut back on a lot. I get WIC for the milk for the baby. I used to shop for things like new clothes and any groceries I liked, but I just can’t do that anymore. Maybe that will change after college. I hope.

One situation in Participant 8’s story that was remarkable was when she described having her third child during the previous fall semester. Prior to having her baby, she planned and worked ahead diligently on assignments, so that the birth of her child would not delay her academic progress. She revealed:

I’m really proud I’ve made it this far and I haven’t dropped out. I mean even when I had the baby. I had the baby and I went back to class the next week. I only missed that 1 week, and then I was back. Before I had the baby, I came in and did all my work for the
next lesson. I was ahead. So, when I came back they were just getting to the lessons I already did. The questions I had on those chapters I got a chance to still ask them. They were truthfully moving a little slow for me.

This participant will graduate in May with an Associate’s degree in Medical Office Technology, and desired to transfer to a university to complete a Bachelor’s degree. In expressing her feelings about graduation, she disclosed:

I have a goal and a point to prove. It’s like proving a point, like when I was in the military. They say women can’t do this, so I deployed twice. After graduation, I want to get a real good job and a degree of course. I have a ‘Me Book’ for all my awards and certificates. It mainly has military stuff, so I want to add my degree to my ‘Me Book.’

This participant expressed a desire to continue her education; however, in December she had not started the application or transfer process. She explained that she did not know where to transfer or how to enroll in a four-year college. She also was not sure how to logistically participate in an additional 2 years of college with her three children. However, she was optimistic that it “will all work out.”

Participant 9 was a non-traditional African-American woman, who had grown up in poverty. Her story was demonstrative of Payne’s (2005) description of generational poverty. In December, she had not broken this generational pattern, but she was hopeful that her impending May graduation would radically improve her financial status. She recounted:
I’d been out of school 13 years when I decided to go to college. My momma had nine kids and a sick husband. We was poor, and we all had to help out. I do remember she went and got her GED, so she was a good example for us kids. But, there was no focus on school; we was just trying to get by and take care of the other kids and her husband.

I knew I do want to go to college, but I got pregnant with my first child when I was 16, so I had to drop out when I was 16. I am proud that I got my GED the same year I was supposed to graduated from college. I do want to go to college after my first child, but then I had my second, and my third, and then my fourth. But, my oldest child is deceased now. I thought I would just work at the casino until my kids was old enough and in school then I’d go to college. When you’re working at the casino you are really more focused on work and kids rather than going to college. I was a black jack dealer, and it was easy money. But I just decided I didn’t want to do that all my life.

As early as high school, the participant knew that she wanted to go to college, but it was the loss of her son that finally prompted her to action:

I lost my son in October of 2009. I needed something to keep my mind off of it. It was a major reason I come back to school. There were mornings I did not feel like moving. It was coming up close to my son’s birthday, and I was in depression mode. I would not move; I would not eat, and I just withdrew. I knew I had to keep going to set a good example for my other kids. I made myself snap out it; I enrolled in classes, and I learned from that. I always wanted to show my kids that they could accomplish going to college, so I just put one foot forward and the other foot forward. So, that is why I come back.
Not only did this participant have to cope with the loss of her son, but securing money for college and managing financial hardships was a never-ending process:

SSS and Career Pathways always trying to help me out. Plus, there is Mrs. Beverly that is over the math lab. She is like my momma; that is what I call her. She’s always like, ‘you smart; you can go to school; there is all kinds of help out there.’ So, I got Pell and gas vouchers and childcare through Career Pathways. But there’s so much to pay for. Books. I was shocked. Seems like they are more than the tuition. It is a major point to have your books for class. Almost more important to have your book than the pencil. Then there is fees like lab fees and publication fees. You know I cry when my car breaks down. Really I just sit and cry, and my car breaks down a lot. My car gets me from point ‘A’ to point ‘B.’ Car repairs are expensive, and you never know when you are going to have them.

In spite of growing up in poverty, the death of her child, and on-going financial hardships, this participant will graduate in May. She hoped to be an example for her other brothers and sisters and her own children. She desired to find a job in the medical field. Her long-term aspiration was to earn enough money to be “a little more comfortable,” and then she would like to explore the possibility of earning a Bachelor’s degree.

Participant 10 was a non-traditional, Caucasian, single mother of three children. Two of her children were special needs children. As she described her life experiences, it became clear that she was enduring situational poverty (Payne, 2005):
I was married 13 years, and my husband made good money. I quit work after I had my third child. We ended up getting divorced, and I ended up in the position my mom warned me about. I had no husband, no job, no nothing. I think that fueled my decision to go to college a lot. I went from having a house with a pool and all that, and now I’m living in low-income housing. I’m trying to shuffle money that doesn’t exist to pay bills. I can’t take it. Watching my kids go from being able to go out to McDonalds with a friend, and I could take them, to not even being able to invite friends over because we have to budget how much money we have for food in our home, and we can’t afford to feed anyone else. I don’t like living like that, and I am not going to do it for long. I want to do it on my own. I take a lot of pride doing it on my own, and I don’t want pity.

Don’t feel bad for me; just give me a minute.

This year is my year. I’m going to graduate. I love that my kids have watched this. I’ve gotten really good scholarships. My daughter actually went with me to our big AAUW scholarship luncheon. I may cry a little bit, but this weekend, in my speech, I pointed out to her, ‘You’ve seen how hard I work. I’m sorry I don’t have a lot of time to spend with you, and I’m sorry we don’t have a lot of money right now to have nice things and have fun. I want you to realize that getting your education and working hard does pay off. It is going to get better.

This student explained that she had worked diligently to “stack scholarships.” She also received an American Opportunities Grant, Pell Grant, and worked over 30 hours a week. In spite of these efforts, her family still faced great financial hardships:
It is a stretch and a struggle. I had to take out loans, and that pains everything inside me, but I am financing our future. That’s how I have to look at it, I am financing our future. Getting books was difficult. I ended up renting; I just couldn’t afford them. There are more costs than you can possible imagine.

Everything it costs to do this takes away from my kids. My kids haven’t had glasses in I couldn’t tell you how long. My oldest two both broke their glasses years ago, and I don’t have the money to go out and buy them new ones right now. They suffer a lot for me to go to school. I just want to make sure my kids are taken care of. That there is food in the house, and gas in the car to take them back and forth to school. I budget when food is low in the house. Food doesn’t last long with a 15 year old boy. I get an EBT card, but still with three kids it’s hard. We have a lot of evenings where it is a can of chicken noodle for all of us or peanut butter and jelly. The kids are okay with it because they think ‘yea, no dishes.’ But, it’s depressing as a parent to have to do it. But I tell you what, we have the countdown going until mom gets out of school and things change. My kids have a calendar, and they are counting down until May.

In May, this student will receive an associate’s degree in accounting. She hoped to find fulltime employment once she graduates.

Participant 11 was a 42 year-old, African-American woman who had delayed enrolling in college because she had her son when she was fifteen. Because she had her son at an early age, she dropped out of high school and earned her GED. Prior to enrolling in college, this participant explained that she had worked her “way up in accounting” and made “good money,”
but she watched her older brother go to college. “College was not talked about in my home, but I saw my brother go on an athletic scholarship. And his going made me want to go one day, but I had to keep putting mine off to put my family first.”

This participant finally enrolled in college when she and her husband moved to Arkansas from Texas. She explained that her husband was hired to work in Arkansas based on the wages he had earned in Texas. Because the cost of living is more affordable in Arkansas, the move enabled them to be able to afford her enrollment in college. In addition, this participant was eligible for a Pell Grant, support from Career Pathways, and a work-study position.

This participant was reluctant to disclose or complain about financial limitations. I do not know if this she felt that her financial status was adequate, or if she was embarrassed or uncomfortable discussing this aspect of her life. She did share that she was unable to purchase her books, but that Career Pathways allowed her to borrow textbooks, and they supplied her with a gas voucher. Further, she said that when she did not have the money or supplies that she needed, “God sends people in my path. I am blessed with caring instructors and family. My needs have been supplied.”

Participant 11 shared that her greatest obstacles had been a lack of confidence and time management. She said she was a “nervous wreck” her first semester, but all of her advisors and instructors had been very reassuring. In addition, she mentioned that she had struggled to manage all of her roles. In addition to being a student, she spent 30 plus hours a week caring for her children and other family members; she was active in her church, and was employed on campus as a work study. She credited the workshops offered by Career Pathways for teaching
her how to manage and balance each of her responsibilities. This participant had a 4.0 G.P.A., was active in Phi Theta Kappa, and was President of the Diversity Club. Due to encouragement from her teachers, she hoped to earn a B.S. in Business after her May graduation. Participant 11 planned to work in hotel management or event planning. She believed her higher education experience had helped her gain self-confidence; “When I am finished here, I will have new knowledge of where I am headed in life. I may be 42, but for the first time in my life I have a direction. I have a plan.”

Participant 12 was a 40-year-old, white male with three children. He dropped out of high school and had been working in a coffee shop since then:

I started working in the coffee shop when I was 14. It’s not good pay, lot of hours. It’s a coffee shop. I decided I needed a G.E.D. and a degree to ever have a decent job. It was kind of a scary decision. I’ve been out for over 20 years. I’m thinking ‘Wow, can I do this?’ I decided to come back for accounting because I like math and numbers. When I was in school I was in the gifted and talented program, but I hung out with the wrong crowd. You can always look back and wish you had done things different. That’s the course I took, but at least now I can change that course. I can’t change the past, but I can change my current path.

His local community college was the only feasible higher education option because it was both affordable and conveniently located. As a student, this participant had balanced school with extreme family and financial stress. During his first semester of college his third child was born; this child had a serious heart defect:
It was one of those things that you are just in shock. He had blue hands and feet. He had to go to the children’s hospital; I was like ‘wow your whole world just come crashing down.’ They flew him to children’s in the helicopter. He was in ICU for two and a half weeks. The doctors were great; they fought and got it done.

During this time, I only missed two classes. I was taking night classes. I still had to work just to be able to pay our bills. I stayed the first week, but then I just got to stay on the weekends, so I could work. We couldn’t afford to drive back and forth or the food when we got there. We would just pack sandwiches, and we had to trust the nurses and doctors to take care of him when we weren’t there in the week. You can’t imagine what it’s like to leave your new born baby several hours away in someone else’s care.

I made all ‘A’s’ though. Who would have thought a high school dropout would become an overachiever? I made a 4.0 even though we had everything happen with our son. I usually just get four hours of sleep a night, but my family motivates me, my kids especially. I just want to make a good life for them.

Not only was this participant troubled and distracted by his son’s medical condition, but he had endured financial hardship while being a student:

There are so many expenses. I had to have Pell, Career Pathways, scholarships, and even loans. Sometimes that still isn’t enough. Career Pathways helps with my books and childcare. It’s tough though. I still took out two loans. I had to take out the max amount to cover us, especially during the winter time. The coffee business here doesn’t make
much money in the winter. If it doesn’t make money, I don’t make money. Plus, I have my commute to pay for. I drive here 6 miles and home 6 miles. Twelve miles a day gets to be expensive. Income tax money will help this spring, and it’s not uncommon for us to have to ask help from family. They help us get through the year.

I’m sure we are not as bad off as a lot of people. I manage and budget our money. We don’t get to do a whole lot. We don’t ever go to the movies or eat out, but we are too busy anyway. Our kids’ needs are met. They are fed. But, we rely on food stamps and WIC. Without that help it would be impossible. The loans scare me though. I really wish I would not have had to of taken out loans. But we had to just to pay for our living expenses.

This participant’s wife was currently enrolled in the nursing program, and they believed her forthcoming graduation, coupled with his, would radically change the family’s financial status. Participant 12 aspired to find a job immediately in accounting. He indicated that the only way he would pursue a four-year degree would be if his employer required it, or would help finance it. He acknowledged, “The degree and a good job has been the goal all along. I want to retain what I’ve learned to actually use it for work. I want it to catapult me into a good job.” This participant was on track to graduate in May with a 4.0 GPA.

I found Participant 13 to be the most intriguing student involved in the study. She was a Native American student who was in her twenties with two children. She was forthcoming about her conservative, Pentecostal upbringing, her extensive stays at a psychiatric hospital for mental health issues, and her limited fourth grade education. What was most unexpected about this
student was that she had been accepted by both Harvard and Columbia Universities, and she was waiting on a response from Yale University.

This participant explained that her parents had a limited education and were highly religious, so she was not allowed to go to public school. Her mother had a 6th grade education, and her father had a 10th grade education; they homeschooled her until 4th grade when the curriculum became too challenging for them to teach. Because of this upbringing, the participant described that she had an inferior academic background and limited opportunity to develop her social skills:

The way I was raised was different from how almost everyone else is raised. My parents are good parents, but misguided. When I was growing up I couldn’t be very social. I was not allowed to go to birthday parties or swimming, or anything that wasn’t part of the church. I wasn’t very social. My parents would not let me cut my hair. I had to wear jean skirts all the time. I couldn’t exercise or ride a bike. Other kids didn’t accept me; I did not have the opportunity to be social.

My only goal was to marry a man in the church. To have his children, raise his children the way he wanted me to, to clean his house, and that was it. Women don’t have careers. They worked to help support the family if needed, but our goal is to be the husband’s ‘handmaiden,’ that is what we are referred to is the ‘handmaiden.’ We are never to question the husband. Never, ever, ever do you question the husband. It was a challenge for me to overcome those things I grew up believing. I thought I was
incapable. I found out I was quite capable, quite intelligent, and able to do things. I always wanted an education, but I always thought it was out of reach, just not an option.

After 4th grade, when her parents were no longer able to teach the homeschool curriculum, the participant explained that she read a lot and taught herself through the 9th grade curriculum:

I did not graduate. I finished 9th grade, and that was it. That is as far as I went, and I started working. I worked 40 to 60 hours a week, and I was able to do that because I was homeschooled, so I got to work fulltime. I blew off school to make money; I wanted to make money because I wanted to move out. That was my main goal, so school faded, and after 15 my main goal was just getting out of there. I worked, worked, worked like crazy. Saved a lot of money, and moved out the day I turned 18. Got an apartment, and that was that. School went to the wayside because I had to work so much supporting myself. At 19 I met my boyfriend, who has been my boyfriend ever since. We had kids. I had my first one at 20 and my second before I turned 21.

I always wanted to go to college, but how I fell into it was weird. I’ve always had a hard time keeping jobs. All my managers say the same thing, that I work really hard, and I always get the job done, but I don’t socialize well with others. In jobs that were team oriented, I stuck out. So, I ended up losing a job I had for a while. Since neither of us had any education, we couldn’t find good or stable jobs. I had a good job working for the Art Exchange making $12 per hour. The most I had ever made. And ended up getting laid off due to problems there. I was so upset that day. I went home and drank; I
mean I drank a bunch. I didn’t know how we were going to pay our bills. We could never get caught up on our bills.

I decided to go and take my GED. I was drunk when I took it. I passed it. I met Mrs. Latisha Harris, who works for Career Pathways. She pretty much enrolled me on the spot. She sorted out all of my first semester classes. That day, that day ended up being my turning point.

This participant admitted that she was socially awkward and academically underprepared when she arrived on campus; yet, she managed to maintain a 4.0 GPA every semester and was even elected president of the college’s Phi Theta Kappa chapter. This success was not without sacrifice and hardship. She noted that she did not have “time for fun,” and that at times she felt guilty for putting school in front of her family. However, her greatest obstacle had been enduring poverty as both a mother and a student:

I never thought my life would allow me to take this path, from my background to my financial issues. You know, I have taken out a loan every semester I have been here. I have had too. Already, I owe $30,000 in student loans. Already. I haven’t been able to pay any interest on them. Every loan the interest is compiling and compiling. I don’t have the income to pay the interest and stay in school.

Sometimes I have to call people and say, ‘Can I have $10.00 this week so I can go to school?’ We get food stamps, and the food stamps don’t cover all the food cost. My boyfriend was injured on the job last February and hasn’t been able to work since then.
Now that he is able to do light work, he hasn’t been able to find any work. So, there hasn’t been any income since last February. So, it’s one of those things where I’ve missed a couple of days because I have to drive my kids to school because Head Start doesn’t have a bus. So, it is like do they go to school, or do I go to school? It comes down to some days they go to school, and I stay home, or they stay home, and I go to school. And especially toward the end of the semester when Pell has been spent and the loan money is all gone….

But, it will get better. Once I have my Bachelors, I can hopefully get a paid internship and have a steady income while I work on my Masters. All semester long it has been, ‘Do I sacrifice my grades? Do I drop the presidency of PTK to work?’ If he doesn’t find work next semester, I am going to have to resign, do my work study, and find a job.

While many Americans believe that higher education is the remedy for poverty, this participant’s future was uncertain. She had been accepted by several Ivy League colleges; yet, her ability to transfer and her future may be restricted due to her financial status. She was fully aware of this uncertainty:

I’m just trying to keep a house afloat, a relationship a float, and take care of children. Um, then you factor in can I even afford to transfer? Can I even afford to take the next step? Because, I do not know if I will have the money to do it. It is really trying at times, and you just want to throw your hands in the air. This just isn’t working out for me. But, so far so good, and I’m almost done with my Associates. I will know about the Jack Kent
Cook scholarship in February or March. That is solely what I am basing my next step on. Unless I get a full ride to another institution, then I can’t go. If I don’t get that scholarship, I will have to find something that is cheaper.

A lack of talent, intelligence, or drive, or even the admissions’ criteria of elite universities did not limit this student; rather, it was a lack of income that may derail her academic future.

Participant 14 was a non-traditional white male that had been out of high school for 10 years. As a student in high school he prioritized athletics over academics. After high school he had a successful career as a welder, and he had planned on being in that profession until retirement. Welding required him to be away from his family for extended periods, but he had a stable annual salary of $50,000. Tragically, while he was away, the family’s childcare provider molested his four-year-old son. This father was in college because he was desperate for employment that would allow him to stay closer to home and protect his family.

This participant’s experiences as a student were characterized by working significant hours, while trying to balance family and academic responsibilities:

I’ve got family at home. I work at Sears 40 plus hours a week, and I go to school fulltime. There is never enough money. I rent a house and there is a car payment. And school is a fulltime job. I don’t care what they say, in and of itself, school is a fulltime job. I don’t have a clue how I do it. I manage. Family is number one. I get a lot of support from my wife; if it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be here at all.
I study late at night. I hardly ever get to sleep. I have break periods in between classes, so I study then. I get to school before classes so I can study, and I set up my schedule so I have study time in between. I have to schedule in those break periods for studying.

Like many of the other participants, this student also struggled to afford living expenses as a fulltime student:

The lack of money definitely distracts me from school. I do my studying at night, and it’s always lingering there. How am I going to pay my bills? With the vehicles the worst they can do is pick them up. But, I’ve got an energy bill due tomorrow. I have no money in the bank. It’s hard. Money is a big issue. If I don’t pay my electricity I have no power and lights. It’s not my kids’ fault. So, that is a big thing. No matter what you do you always think about it. I have a 5 year old that is pretty smart. We talk to him like a normal person. He knows when he goes to ask for something that no, he can’t have it.

In spite of the financial hardship, and the appalling abuse endured by his son, this student had managed to be very successful academically. He could not help but smile as he discussed his GPA and recent scholarship awards:

I was fixin to take out loans, but I became SGA president and things started to fall in place. I got the SGA scholarship, and bigger than that I’ve got an Academic All-Star Scholarship. It is a full ride to any four-year college in the state. I worked my tail off to get that. It includes community involvement, grades, participation in school. I was
picked the top finalist in our school to get it. It is a big deal [laughter!]. I will go to Henderson or ULAR. ULAR has sent me an additional scholarship. It is incredible! You are telling me! I never saw this coming!

Once this participant graduates in May, he planned to transfer and complete a Bachelor’s degree. He wanted to become a public school math teacher.

Participant 15 was one of the few students interviewed that was a traditional age college student who had started college immediately after high school graduation and was being successful in his first attempt. This participant was a white male who had spent his recent years in foster care. He had to grow up quickly and had become completely self-reliant at a young age. He faced different pressures and had greater “adult responsibilities” than his peers from more affluent families where parents may provide financial and academic support. Participant 15 was aware that his situation was unique compared to many of his peers, and he articulated that his path had not been an easy one:

My family dynamic doesn’t exist, so I have been in foster care. Being on your own is hard. Rent, electricity, water, buying my own food, gas, car repairs, it’s not easy. Not only the costs, but just getting up in the morning on my own. It’s not easy.

If I budget right, I can get by but not save much. With work study and my other job, I work 55 hours a week. I work at a call center. Everybody is worried about me, and they wonder how I am going to do it. I don’t have a choice. If I don’t work and go to school, it is on me. I don’t have anyone to bail me out. If I don’t, I don’t have food or...
electricity. I don’t have family support. I just don’t have any other choice; it is self-survival.

Unlike some of the other participants in the study, this student explained that he simply did not have time to be involved in campus organizations. Balancing academics with work consumed his time. He explained that sometimes he gets depressed and even jealous of his peers:

There are days when I just want to be normal. You know have time to hang out with friends, or go home to a family and have dinner, or see a movie. I don’t have that. I work, I budget, budget, budget, and if I am lucky I use Sundays to sleep and work ahead on my homework because I work during the week. This is not how people my age live.

The one thing I want to do sometime is I just want to go on a road trip. I don’t care when or where. I just want to see a different state and see some sights. I have never been sightseeing, anywhere. I have never been out of the state! I have never been able to do that because I am always working and going to school. I hear other students going on spring break or trips at Thanksgiving or Christmas. Just once I want to do that. I want to do that before I transfer.

This young man was very driven and planned to transfer after he graduates in May. He was completing the general education plan of study, and had originally planned to earn a B.S. in Business. However, as he neared graduation he was exploring his career options in the sciences. He admitted that he loved animals, and he was considering veterinary medicine or environmental
science once he transferred. He was proud of his initial academic successes and optimistic about his future:

I’m proud I stuck with it, and I didn’t drop out like so many other people I know. I mean a lot of people drop out their first semester. I never made an “F,” and I never took a “W.” I never go into a class thinking if this is hard or this doesn’t work out I will take the “W.” I go in with the mindset that I have to have this class, and even if it is hard I am going to finish it. I am not wasting my time on “W’s.” I am just getting it done.

I want a good job one day. I don’t want to be one of those 40-year-old people who are in their jobs that they hate, and they don’t have an education, and they are stuck. They are stuck in that job. I don’t want just a job; I want something I like doing. I really like animals. I hope one day I am working in the rainforest, or a zoo, or something cool like that.

Participant 16 had returned to college after dropping out of a junior college 10 years previously. Her higher education options were limited because of her past academic record and blemished transcripts. Therefore, in her second attempt at college, she enrolled in her local community college, which had proven to be a wonderful opportunity for redeeming her academic transcript, developing her math and English skills through remedial courses, and getting prepared for transferring to a university. She was an African-American woman who spoke candidly of trying to balance her relationships with her husband, children, school, work, and financial stress.
As previously mentioned, this student returned to college academically underprepared and required several semesters of remedial education. While many students complain about the extra hours spent on remedial coursework, this student was glad that she had the opportunity to improve upon her basic skills:

My English was a problem; I needed help on that. I could not go into my other classes not knowing how to structure writing. That was a problem. I knew I was rusty with the English, but once I got into the remedial class and tutoring it started coming back to me. I never got to the point that I felt like I was drowning in my other classes or anything.

Then there was remedial math. I’m glad I took remedial math because it led me to wanting to be a math teacher. For the first time, I made an “A” in math, and most of all I really understood it. Then I took higher level math courses. One of the teachers approached me about tutoring, and once I started tutoring I really liked it. That is how I decided to be a teacher. I always knew that I wanted to work with youth, but I didn’t know in what way. When you think about who is the most influential people you know, it is always a teacher. I feel like I know the path for me.

College had clearly helped this participant find direction in life, but pursuing higher education had not been without its struggles, stress, and sacrifices. Like many of the other participants, she described the financial challenges she had faced each day as a student and parent:
It has been so stressful. My kids need new winter clothes and jackets, or do I spend the money on gas to get to school? I have to budget money for my family, but I also need things for school, like paper and backpacks. I couldn’t afford the graphics calculator. I actually made a friend that let me borrow her calculator. I try not to stress, but it is inevitable. But, I try to keep it from interfering with my school or family. It is hard. At night I talk to my husband and ask, ‘How are we going to do this?’ We make ends meet, but by the end of the month when we pay the bills and buy the diapers, it’s pretty much gone. You have to really budget, and prioritize, and think about what is most important and what can wait until next month.

Between the interview and her May graduation, this participant indicated that she would be actively applying for scholarships and undoubtedly taking out additional student loans to pursue her dream of becoming a math teacher.

Participant 17 had previously dropped out of high school and junior college. This participant was a 44 year old, Caucasian, administrative assistant who was beginning to think about and plan for retirement. She was a single mother who worked 40 or more hours a week outside of school. As a child, academics were not prioritized in her household, and like most of the other participants, she was a first generation college student. She explained, “My mom didn’t go to college. No one in my family went. I don’t even have cousins that have gone. How can I expect my daughter to go if I don’t?” She hoped to change her family’s attitudes about college through her own participation and graduation.
There were many obstacles that made college persistence difficult for this participant. She described that her greatest barrier to higher education was a lack of self-confidence. She had been sexually abused as a child, and she said that she had never been proud of herself until last year when she received her first college report card. She also indicated that it had been a struggle to maintain her 4.0 while working fulltime and caring for her daughter. This participant said that in order to be successful in school that she had to “give up everything. I don’t have the time or money for friends, movies, going out to eat, or anything. I have to stay focused on just the essentials: school, work, bills, and my daughter. Nothing else.”

Her daughter and her lack of career opportunities motivated her to return to college at this stage in her life. She was hopeful that her decision to go to college would set a positive example for her 16-year-old daughter. She explained that her daughter had recently been put in rehabilitation for alcohol and drug abuse, and that she had a history of “cutting.” The participant was optimistic that her example as a college graduate would be more influential than the negative example being set by her daughter’s peer group. In addition, she explained that the current economy and job market prompted her return to college:

I’m tired of having dead end jobs. I need to make more money in my last 5 years of working to improve my retirement. I have the drive; I see how it all works in life and in the real world. Coming back at this age, you get it now, or you better get at this age. I didn’t even know what scholarships were back then, but now I have found so many scholarships, and I found the benefits to education. I wish I hadn’t put it off so long. I needed to do this a long time ago. It would have made my life so much easier.
This participant will graduate in May of 2012, with an Associate’s Degree in Accounting. She dreamed of pursuing a Bachelor’s Degree in accounting following her graduation. However, because of her job, she needed to find a local or online program. She found one university that offered an accounting degree, but it required an hour commute, and many of the program’s classes were offered during the day. Participant 17 knew that logistically the program was simply not an option for her. She did not want to earn a degree from an online, for-profit institute because of the expense. At the time of the interview, she felt that her only option was to compromise and change her major to business. She did not believe this degree plan would open as many career doors for her, but it was the only in state, comparable degree option offered strictly online.

Participant 18 was a nontraditional Caucasian male. He was the father of five children. Immediately preceding high school, this participant enlisted in the military. He explained that no one in his family went to college, and the expectation was for him and his siblings to get a job and move out as soon as they turned 18. He felt that the military was his best option, and he knew little of the higher education processes. He commented on his limited understanding:

I knew I needed to go and wanted to go even if it was when I got out of the military. It took my wife’s support and experience, but I still had to learn a lot on my own. No one helped me. I have learned a lot through poking and hoping, just finding it out by myself. I have learned that there is all kind of money and scholarships out there. That is something high school needs to know. You can go to college without relying on parents’
support. Kids like me need to hear that, but seems like no one is talking to kids like me about college.

While this participant has been able to obtain a work-study position, and support from Pell, TRIO, Career Pathways, and local scholarships, he explained that he still endured financial limitations and hardship:

We live paycheck to paycheck. It worries me a lot. I have no savings, no insurance. I would like to go to the doctor, but if something is wrong with me I can’t afford to fix it.

I have five kids; I try not to let my kids see financial worries. I hate December. Christmas time comes around and you are broke. I don’t let my kids know that we don’t have some of the things other families have. But there are certain things my kids want, like money for books at the book fair. They ask for $10.00 for books, and I just have to say ‘no, not this week.’ But, it really wouldn’t matter what week it was.

This student will complete his Associates Degree in May, and then he plans to transfer to a university. He wants to earn a four-year degree and work at the Smithsonian, in a museum, or teach history.

Responses to Interview Questions

The next section presents the study’s 14 open-ended interview questions, and includes a summary of the participants’ responses. A rationale and description explains the connection between each interview question and the research purpose. Direct student quotations that are poignant, colorful, or insightful are provided for each interview question.
Question 1: What Are the Factors that Influenced You to Continue Your Education After High School?

This question allowed participants to reflect upon their backgrounds and individual motivations in an effort to explain their decision to enroll in higher education.

In response to this question, 13 of the 18 participants indicated that they had always wanted to go to college immediately following high school. However, many of them lacked an understanding of how to select, apply, and pay for college. Others had life situations, such as early pregnancies, that prevented them from enrolling in college immediately after high school. Most of the study’s participants postponed college enrollment for several years after their GED or high school graduations for these reasons.

In explaining the factors that influenced their decisions to attend college, some participants had single motivators, such as the desire for career advancement. Other participants were influenced by several factors simultaneously such as job security and setting a positive example for their children. The three most frequently referenced catalysts for college enrollment were career opportunities, family, and defining life events or tragedies.

Career opportunities.

The most frequently referenced motivator given for enrolling in higher education was the belief that higher education was a path towards a more desirable career; in fact, 16 of the 18 participants’ responses included some form of a job related reference. These participants indicated that they enrolled in higher education because of the instability of the economy; they had grown tired of working a series of bad jobs, or they were attending college to create new job opportunities for themselves. Participant 3 explained her decision to attend by stating:
I had horrible, low paying jobs, one after another for my whole life. I am 44 years old. I really panic sometimes because I am getting really old, and it is really volatile out there. The economy is bad; it’s hard to find a crappy job. I was just so tired of it. I have been taking care of myself for years. I kept waiting on someone or something else to happen to take me out of it, but I finally came to realize it is never going to happen that way. There is not going to be some magic thing happen like it does in fairy tales. I am going to have to make this happen myself.

Participant 18 also enrolled in college to improve his vocational options. He indicated: I have the “want to” now that I’ve been in the real-world. I have been a garbage man; I’ve worked in the factories, cashier, I’ve done every menial task you can think of. I have realized that this is not what I want to do. I want to find my passion, and I want to make a living doing something I like, rather than waking up every morning having to go to a job I hate. I am goal oriented. College is really the small goal now; it’s just 3-4 years. The big goal is to live out in Washington, DC and work for the Smithsonian.

While some of the participants did reference concerns about the economy and job shortages, they still felt that a college degree was essential to their ability to be competitive and competent in the difficult job market.

**Family as motivation.**

In response to question one, 11 of the participants also referenced wanting to set an example for their children as motivation for enrolling in college. As previously mentioned, none of the participants credited their parents with positively influencing or affirming their decisions to enroll in higher education. Yet, 11 of the participants mentioned a desire to end this cycle
with their own children. They hoped that their enrollment and graduation from college would be a positive model for their children to follow. Participant 14 explained that his parents did not prioritize academics or enrolling in college, and that they continue this trend with his niece whom they had adopted. He explained:

She got a “C” on a math test, and their response was at least she didn’t get an “F.” No. That is very low standards. I have a 5-year-old son, and a 7-week-old baby, and I am going to lead by example. That is how me and my wife both see it. Schooling is a very big deal. With all this stuff going on in the world today, our kids need a job, and if they don’t have a college degree they won’t be able to get one.

Participant 16’s response echoed the groups’ sentiments when she described her roles as parent and student:

Even though I started my family early, I want to show my kids that it is still possible to follow your dreams and make them happen. I hope that they don’t do it the way I did, and that they wait to start their families because it is hard, very hard. I just want to set that example for my kids. We are a family that believes in school. I don’t let my kids go to school and be bad. If they don’t do well or act good in school, they lose their video games. I try to instill educational values in them. Everything is learning. We practice colors when we are driving, or I will ask them, ‘what direction am I turning: left or right?’ So we are learning that.

I always wanted to go to college, but no one taught me how to work with recruits. I wanted to play basketball, and especially with women’s athletics it’s hard to get
recruited. Having a family and struggling to make ends meet is hard. I decided I needed to do this to set the example for my kids. Going through life without an education and good job is hard. Now that I have my kids for motivation, that helps.

While some college students might perceive children as an obstacle to pursuing higher education, 11 of the participants credited their children for influencing their enrollment and persistence in higher education.

**Defining life events or tragedies as motivation.**

Finally, five of the participants shared that they had defining tragedies or traumatic experiences that motivated their return to college. For example, several of the participants referenced the death of an immediate family member as a catalyst for their return to college. As previously mentioned, Participant 9 explained her decision to enroll in college was connected with the death of her son:

I lost my son in October of 2009. I needed something to keep my mind off of it. It was a major reason I come back to school. There were mornings I did not feel like moving. It was coming up close to my son’s birthday, and I was in depression mode. I would not move; I would not eat, and I just withdrew. I knew I had to keep going to set a good example for my other kids. I made myself snap out it; I enrolled in classes, and I learned from that. I always wanted to show my kids that they could accomplish going to college, so I just put one foot forward and the other foot forward. So, that is why I come back.

Other defining events mentioned in response to this question were more varied and individualistic. One participant had a successful career in the military for eight years, and had originally planned to make the military her lifetime career. However, a health issue forced her
out of military life and into civilian life. She decided to return to college because it was necessary to find a new career path. Another participant was the victim of a violent crime at her workplace where she was robbed at gunpoint. She had post-traumatic stress disorder, but hoped that higher education would allow her to find employment in a safer environment. As noted earlier, one of the participants had a successful career as a welder that required him to be away from his family for extended periods. He indicated that as a welder he had a stable annual salary of $50,000. However, while he was away, the family’s childcare provider molested his 4-year-old son. This father was in college because he was desperate for employment that would allow him to stay closer to home and protect his family. He indicated that this had been a difficult and trying time for his entire family:

I think I made $10,000 last year, and I work ungodly hours, but my son and his buddy’s molestation has been a big deal. I’ve missed a lot of class, and I’m in the courts right now for my son. Sometimes I ask myself why going back to school is still a priority in the midst of this. But, I just have to keep going. I love my family. I need a job that will allow me to support what they want to do. That is a big deal. If I become a teacher, I will be around my family more, and I can protect them.

Each of these participants described how their defining life events forced them to spend time in reflection, and these events prompted them towards actions that would make for a better future.

It was interesting that none of the participants mentioned having parents or K-12 teachers who positively influenced their decisions to pursue higher education. Participant 14 explained:

I started working construction when I was 15. No one at all pushed college or academics. I was more into sports, and that is what my parents supported. “D’s” were good. No one
else in my family went, but I recently got hurt on the construction site. No retirement, no insurance. I needed a better job, so I decided to return to college to pursue a better career.

When participant 18 responded to this question, he was quite angry and bitter that he was encouraged by neither parents nor teachers in regards to higher education. He complained:

My parents didn’t encourage me. The way it was in my house was when you turn 18 you get a job and you leave. You support yourself. I didn’t have a single high school teacher that encouraged me. They say that one teacher can show interest and care and rescue that one student from that lifestyle or the wrong path, but I didn’t have that teacher.

**Question 2: Once You Recognized That You Wanted to Attend College, How Did You Go About Deciding Where to Go?**

This question was asked in order to gain greater insight into the college selection process of low-income, successful students. Of the 14 interview question responses, this question had the least amount of variation between participants’ responses. All of the participants consistently indicated that they based their selection solely on location or cost. According to Participant 10:

I decided to go here because of its location. I didn’t really have any options or choices. There wasn’t a selection process. My kids and job is here. I can’t afford to drive anywhere else. There was never any decision about where to go.

Likewise, Participant 7 indicated, “Location. I picked here because lack of transportation will not allow me to consider anywhere else.” Finally, Participant 17 explained:

I came here because of location. My family lives here. Why would I pay to go to a private school when I can get the same education here much cheaper? I am afraid that
getting my BS is going to be an even bigger financial and time strain. How am I going to work 40 hours a week and travel back and forth to Henderson?

The other 15 participants’ responses were comparable. More affluent college students may not weigh the issues of location and costs as heavily, and they may select an institution based on its academic, athletic, extra-curricular, or degree offerings. However, for the study’s participants, accessibility and affordability were the two factors that determined where they enrolled.

**Question 3: As a College Student You Are Eligible to Receive a Pell-Grant. How Did You Learn About the Pell-Grant? Tell Me About the Application Process. What Enabled You to Successfully Complete and Receive the Pell-Grant?**

As an instructor, I have often heard students complain about being uninformed about Pell-Grant eligibility, and about the Pell process being arduous. Therefore, question 3 was asked to better understand if the logistics surrounding the Pell process impeded or enabled low-income students to enroll in higher education.

One might anticipate that participants would identify school counselors or college marketing as the most frequently referenced messengers or promoters of Pell-Grants. However, of the study’s 18 participants, only one student mentioned learning about Pell eligibility through a high school guidance counselor, and one student credited a community college counselor for sharing this information. Likewise, only one participant referenced learning of Pell through college marketing. She had seen a FAFSA flier, but did not follow up with the college for additional information. Rather, she asked her brother, who was enrolled in college, about Pell Grants.
The majority of the participants credited Career Pathways’ Coaches, friends, and family for sharing information about Pell. In fact, five of the participants indicated that they were unaware of Pell-Grants until their Career Pathways’ Coach encouraged them to apply for it. Participant 7 stated, “I didn’t know Pell existed. My Career Pathways Coach had me take a closer look at it and other scholarships before I resorted and relied heavily on loans.” The other 10 participants said that they became aware of the Pell-Grant and the application process through their children, siblings, spouses, or friends. Thus, “word of mouth,” was the primary avenue for these low-income students to learn about Pell-Grants.

The follow-up questions to question 3 probed into the actual application processes. Most of the participants spoke favorably about the computer-based application process. In fact, 14 of the study’s participants indicated that they found the Pell application process and the distribution of funds to be straightforward and easy. Participant 15 was one of the study’s younger participants. He explained:

I like how everything on Pell is done on the computer. It saves all your information and you just have to update things. I hate scholarships that you have to fill out forms for or write for, especially if you have to redo things each year. After you apply for Pell once, it is really easy, and you can always see a counselor if you need help. I’ve never had any issues applying for Pell or getting my money.

There were a few complaints voiced about Pell. Some of the study’s nontraditional students were less enthusiastic or comfortable with the computer based application process. For example, Participant 3 said,
I learned about Pell through my Career Pathway’s coach when I first came here. When I think back on it, it was such a scary thing. I didn’t even know how to use a computer when I came up here, but I’ve learned quite a bit. When I first learned I had to use a computer to get Pell I cried over the silly thing. I knew there was money out there. I knew I had to have the money if this was even gonna be possible, but I didn’t know how to work a computer. I was just so scared and so overwhelmed. Finally, I just went to my coach and explained it to her. Thank God I had her, and that I could approach her. She walked me through all the steps, and got me enrolled in a beginner’s computer course!

But, that really did about stop me from even tryin. I cried over that silly thing my whole first semester just tryin to learn how to use it.

While it may not be feasible, or even desirable, to regress the application process back to a handwritten format, it is important to note that the reassurance and guidance from the Career Pathways’ Coach was critical for several of the study’s participants. The only other complaints came from three participants at various locations. These participants indicated that they felt Pell came too late in the semester. They argued that they needed their money earlier in the semester when they faced their greatest expenses. It may be important to review the timing of Pell disbursement to better meet the needs of low-income students.

**Question 4: Talk to Me About Expenses Other Than Your Tuition. Does Your Pell Cover Those Costs?**

This question was designed to gain greater insight into the financial stresses endured by low-income students. The responses to this question bring light to expenses that are hardships for low-income students that members of more affluent income levels may fail to recognize.
There was great consistency in how the participants responded to this question, and each participant identified multiple expenses beyond tuition. Every participant mentioned that the costs of textbooks were daunting; 16 of the participants referenced difficulty affording a vehicle or having money for gas. There were also 16 responses that alluded to a lack of money for living expenses; this included not having enough money for housing or food. Finally, 10 of the participants mentioned not having money for nonessentials such as new clothes, social activities, or entertainment.

**Textbooks.**

Every participant explained that the costs of textbooks were unexpected and overwhelming. Many of the students borrowed books, bought used books from online vendors, or relied on book vouchers or loans from Career Pathways. Several participants admitted they simply had to go to class without the benefit of having a textbook. Participant 17’s response to this question captured and articulated the stress and sentiments of the study’s participants:

Books, oh my gosh. I don’t understand why a book costs $200.00, and you definitely don’t use it $200.00 worth. Look I do my homework, but I am a struggling single parent in accounting. So I am crunching numbers. I run numbers on the computer to see who will give me the most money for my books when I sell them, and who will sell them to me for the least. I make a spreadsheet and factor in the shipping and handling. That is time I could be studying, time I should be studying, but those books are overpriced. What other option is there? It’s like a new prescription that comes out and there’s no generic. If you need it, you’ve got to pay for it.
A lot of times when I just couldn’t afford to buy the books for class, I just googled my homework questions and looked online for the answers. I don’t really think it is cheating if you are finding the answers. So at times I have found ways to get by without the books, but that is really not the way I wanted to do my education.

Sometimes after all the school expense, I just pay my bills at the very last minute, at the last time I can pay them right before they cut my services off. I have tried not to get a student loan, but I know to go to a 4 year school I will have no choice but to get a student loan.

**Transportation.**

A second expense that was problematic for the participants was transportation. Participant 3 explained:

My car breaking down has been a perpetual worry for years. I can never afford a new one, so I always buy a used one that is on its last leg. I usually buy cars with my tax return, so they cost me $1,000-$1,200. It’s not just how expensive the car is but the repairs and the gas money to get to and from school. I drive around 18 miles round trip a day.

When those of middle or upper income levels think of the costs associated with “commuting,” they probably think of a drive of at least 30 minutes or more. As many of these participants described the daunting costs associated with their commutes, I quickly realized that they defined “commuting” differently. As I probed deeper, one participant’s commute was 7 miles; a second participant described the difficulty of finding gas money for their 4 to 5 mile drive to school.
fact, none of the participants lived more than 20 minutes from their campuses. Yet, 16 of them referenced the costs associated with traveling to and from school as being taxing. This speaks to how very limited and volatile their financial status truly was.

**Living expenses.**

As an interviewer, I knew that I needed to remain objective and unbiased. However, I could not help but agonize with the participants when they explained not having enough money for basic needs in response to this question. Many of them were not only worried about feeding themselves, but also feeding their children. Several of the participants discussed trying to hide this burden from their children. They also described how they tried to prioritize and budget for all of the essentials. For example, Participant 16 stated:

I try not to worry about it, but I worry about my kids. They need food and clothes. This winter it was hard to get them jackets. And then there is gas money. I need gas to get to school. At least a quarter of a tank a week. So, it is like what do I want to save to get them coats, or do I want to put gas in the car to get to school?

There are times when I can’t afford food. I never could afford to buy lunch on campus, and sometimes I don’t even have the money to buy food to pack a lunch for when I am here all day. So it’s either starve, or find money to spend on the food.

My husband works and goes to school, and we have loans. He works at Wal-Mart part-time, and I work part-time. We have kids, so we need diapers and wipes. My other son is in school, and he needs supplies. I have to decide do I want to be a participating parent with my son’s school, or do I want to be a good student at my school? I want to do both, but sometimes it is not possible.
Participant 3 explained her strategy for keeping her hunger a secret from her daughter who is in college:

Groceries are a huge burden. I ration and eat cereal every night when my daughter is not home. It does not bother me at all as long as she don’t know. When my daughter is home I have to buy groceries. But, I am cheap to feed. I just buy cereal or eat a sandwich each night of the week when she is not here.

Participant 13 reported similar hardships:

As a student, if you are going to be in college all day, you are going to want to eat at some time in that day. You can eat here or drive somewhere for food, which is more gas money. You have to think about that. It’s not cool to sit out here hungry all day. That has happened a few times. . . .

The last month of the semester is the hardest as far as survival goes. If you saw my kitchen right now you would be horrified. It is down to nothing. It is just a constant struggle. We don’t have bread or sugar. There is meat in the kitchen to make something, but we lack the other ingredients. There are no noodles or sauce or anything to go with it. We are drinking water right now because there is no milk. We have no cheese, no bread.

We donate plasma right now twice a week to try to pay bills; so we don’t get so far behind on bills or to buy food. We try to keep it from the kids. We don’t mind skipping a meal or two, but the kids mind. Especially my 5-year-old son who is always hungry. We try to keep the financial strain off of them.
As the students reported this degree of financial hardships and pressure, it became clear that they were facing obstacles that were quite different from the issues facing their more affluent peers.

**Nonessentials.**

Finally, in response to question 3, 10 of the participants mentioned not having money for new clothes, social activities, or entertainment. These items may seem trivial when compared to the need for food, but not being able to afford clothes, social activities, or entertainment often prevented these students from fitting in or blending in with their college peers. Participant 7 described her inability to fit in due to her financial limitations:

My Career Pathways teachers taught me how to build a budget or I couldn’t make it. There is so many things you need for college. They have what they call ‘jump drives’ and each class requires their own. I had one that got damaged and that really set me back. I was embarrassed when the teacher didn’t understand why I didn’t have one for class and made this big deal about it.

I also wanted a laptop like everyone else. But, with four kids you start buying Christmas gifts in July. After all that and the other costs, I was never able to get one. There was just never enough, so I had to always depend on the computer labs here and when they are open. They really cut us back on printing, and that really hurt me. I was out of luck when I couldn’t afford $.25 cents a page.

My medical copays went up in the middle of this. I had to make adjustments. Seems like something is always popping up, and I’m always having to make adjustments. I always have to put the things I want on hold.

Participant 2 also referenced lacking money for nonessentials:
I think about finances a lot, but I try to keep a check on my mindset and not let that ruin the day for me. I try to focus on something positive and get past that. It is very difficult. For me, it is the things that a normal 20 year old kid would enjoy. A lot of times people at school ask me to go places, or clubs go on trips, and I just have to say, ‘no I can’t go this time, I’ve got other things going on.’ I would just like some money for shopping, or just actually being 20. That is what I look at the end of the day. My life is not like other 20 year olds. It’s like I’m not normal or different or something. But, I just can’t think on that; my most important things are taken care of.

While money for jump drives, shopping, or social outings may be nonessential, it was clear that these students felt marginalized, and they perceived their experiences to be different from their more affluent peers.

**Question 5: How Is College Different From High School? Was There Anything About the First Semester in College That You Found Surprising or Difficult? How Did You Cope With the Changes?**

This question was asked to gain a better understanding of how low-income students adjusted and transitioned into higher education. The participants unanimously indicated that college was different because the curriculum was more challenging, and it required greater self-discipline. They frequently referenced that college instructors had higher expectations than high school teachers did; instructors expected students to complete assignments, prepare for class, and attend. In fact, Participant 10 reported:

This is the exact opposite of high school. High school is about fun and having experiences. Getting to grow up. Now it is not about experiences; it’s about knowledge.
It’s not about fun; it’s about bettering my life. They don’t hold your hand like they do in high school. If you don’t do your homework here, they don’t put you in detention or call you or your parents. You are 100% responsible for your own grade.

Participant 14 echoed similar sentiments:

To be honest high school is a daycare. They don’t care. They just want to get you through there and out of there. In college you have to make your grades, it’s all on you. In college you are paying for it, and you have to take it serious. In high school I was playing football. That is where I put all of my attention, and my teachers were okay with that, and they were lenient on me for that. Here you and everyone else are held to the same standards, and you have to take care of business yourself.

While the participants perceived college required greater self-discipline, the majority of them referenced enjoying the college experience and learning more at this stage in their life.

Participant 12 explained:

This is easier because I am more mature. I’m more focused, and I have goals now. Even though I am busy with work and family, I have the determination to get it done. The work is harder, and the studying is harder. I have actually enjoyed it! I have to study hard. I study at night, after the kids go to bed. I stay up late because I do not have time during the day.

I was nervous at first. I had good teacher and that helped make it easier for me. I developed good relationships with my teachers. Online discussions helped break me in, and I needed that interaction with the teachers and the other students.

Participant 18 shared his similar outlook:
I have the want to now. I didn’t take high school seriously. My family didn’t go to school. I was motivated, so the transition here was easy. College isn’t hard. Just show up, do your work, and review it. I go to class prepared, and I know what to expect.

I use TRIO, not for tutoring so much, but they are just someone to talk to. They help me with my anxiety. I get anxious around people. They have helped me break out of my shell; they have helped me realize that not everyone is my enemy. So, college is much better for me than high school.

Based on the responses, the greatest difference was not between the high school and college environment; rather, the greatest change was in the improved student motivation at this later stage in their academic careers.

When participants were asked the follow-up question about adjusting to college life, they often credited campus faculty and support staff with assisting them in their transitions. Participant 9 described how one of her instructors helped her to make this transition:

Out here you have instructors and advisors that show you concern. It’s like a mother daughter or father daughter communication. It’s a communication thing. You can communicate with your advisors and instructors here. They are understanding. Mrs. Harper, my instructor, will ask me if I need any help in her class. If I do, she will set up a time when I can come meet with her and ask questions. She tells me, ‘if something happens and you can’t make it class, please notify me and inform me.’ She cares about us. So, it’s different from high school that way.

Participant 2 explained that the Network had helped him in his transition:
College is different because no one is pushing you; you have to push yourself. The transition was definitely there. The work we got, I realized I had to go home and study. It wasn’t like high school teachers; I didn’t like high school. I had to look up on Google, ‘how to study.’

The Network helped with the transition. They were picking up students to help make their grades better, because males’ grades here tend to be so low. They helped form study groups, talked with us, had people come in and tell their life stories with us. That was a good program.

Participants 16 and 13 described how their Career Pathway’s counselors helped them transition into and cope with the demands of college. According to Participant 16:

You have to do more independent work here. Here it is homier; it is smaller than high school. I know a lot of the teachers and students. You have to do what you have to do. You have to set your mind to it. You are going to get the grade you deserve.

The transition was easy because I have always liked learning, so I was excited to get back into school and excited to get to go to college. The only thing was that I had to get my routine down. Career Pathways helped me with how to budget and plan time. I had never been to school while I was also raising children. Getting your routine down with family time. Getting your homework done, but still getting in bath time. Getting your homework in and their homework in, or just spending time with them.

Me and my husband are on two different schedules, so we don’t see each other or spend time together. And I work too, so there is a lot of days I don’t even see my kids. I go to school Monday and Wednesday and work Tuesday and Thursday. I don’t see them
at all on Tuesday and Thursday. That is the only part that I would say is hardest. Just getting in the routine and accepting it. Budgeting time.

Just talking with my career counselor about home life and school life was helpful. She helped me see it is just short-term, and she helped me cope. She helped me learn how to plan the week.

Participant 13 also identified the essential role that Career Pathways played in her adjustment to higher education:

Career Pathways is a rock, the lighthouse in the storm for me, especially during my first semesters. Even now, when I am getting ready to leave, I rely heavily on them. I stop by their office every time I am on campus. They help me pick out my classes and match me with teachers that will be a good fit. If I have a question I will call them, even if I am at home doing homework. They are always willing to help.

They are real workforce focused. They teach all kinds of things about interviews, resumes; they teach you how to transfer and fill out applications, how to write your essay, how to get scholarships. They keep us aware of college deadlines. They do all kinds of stuff. They even keep up with us a year after we leave college.

I guess the best is that they care about us. They are like proud parents. They are really proud of us, which helps us be proud of ourselves. They know how hard we have worked, and they know how hard it has been for us do the things we have done. They are ever so proud. They constantly tell me they are proud. They like to embarrass me in front of people. Like when the accreditation board was out here, my counselor told my story four different times in four different meetings. It was so embarrassing, but it was
fun. From going to never being in a public school, to getting my GED, to somehow going to college, to being accepted into Columbia.

Apparently, Career Pathways played an invaluable role in the acclimation processes of several of the participants.

**Question 6: When You Started Attending Your College Courses did You Find You Were Academically Prepared? If Yes, What Helped You the Most in Your Precollege Preparation? If No, Were There Programs/Services on Campus that Helped You Get Caught Up?**

This question was asked in an effort to better understand the quality of low-income students’ academic foundations prior to college enrollment. The follow-up questions were designed to identify the programs or services that helped promote the academic successes of these students. None of the participants indicated that they were academically prepared for college. In fact, 15 of the participants were required to take remedial courses prior to enrolling in credit-bearing, subsequent courses. Regardless of being ill prepared for the rigors of higher education, these students managed to be successful.

When I asked Participant 2 if high school prepared him for college his first reaction was laughter. He then stated:

No, high school did not prepare me. A few clowns in the classroom mess it up for everyone, so I did not get prepared. Especially not in English and math. The remedial courses here helped a lot, and my grades have been outstanding. After getting a good understanding of the basics in math, I went all the way up to trig.
Participant 7 also indicated a lack of preparation, but he credited developmental education for being beneficial: “No, I wasn’t prepared. I took basic reading, writing, and math. It was really helpful. I built a stronger vocabulary base. Each remedial course I passed was lack a stepping stone. It gave me validation.”

Other participants indicated that student success courses, Career Pathways, campus tutoring labs, and TRIO programs helped them develop their academic proficiencies. Participant 8 described the benefits of taking a student success course and the workshops offered by Career Pathways:

I needed tutoring, and I also needed skills we learned about in Student Success. I actually needed to learn about setting aside time to study. I learned about that in my class. I had to get a little recorder that I took to class. I would go to class and record, and then I would go home and take notes from the recording. I got to be good at studying.

Career Pathways helped me get actual note-taking paper and binders. Their workshops helped me a lot too. They taught me about time management and budgeting my money.

Participant 1’s response to this question echoed the collective sentiments of the other participants. She answered the questions by stating:

I had to take remedial when I got here. I didn’t finish high school. I got married in 11th grade. I didn’t feel right in high school. I didn’t fit in, so I went and got my GED. I definitely fit in better here, even if the majority of students are younger. I don’t feel intimidated when I go to class. I hope I am an inspiration to them. I hope they see how serious I am and what commitment I have.
Career Pathways and TRO have excellent counselors. Oh, God they encourage me. It doesn’t matter what I am going through, Mrs. Simmons say, ‘you can do it.’ They have great confidence in me. They have great tutoring services here; it doesn’t matter what subject you need tutoring in, they can help you. There are several tutoring labs. They are open 8:00 am to 8:00 pm, very accessible. Also, the teachers too. They help in their office time. If you need additional help. Also, no matter what you are going through, even if things are just stressful, the counselors are here to talk to.

We have everything we need to be successful here. And, if we don’t use it, it is nobody’s fault but our own. This college really cares about students’ success.

While these students may have been unprepared when they enrolled in higher education, they were fortunate to have resources to help them improve their academic skills and be successful.

**Question 7: How Did You Do Your First Semester? Why Did You Do so Well? Or, Explain What Went Wrong? How Did You Correct the Situation?**

Student success and persistence literature frequently references the critical nature of the first semester in higher education. Therefore, this question was asked to learn more about the initial experiences of the participants in higher education. The participants overwhelmingly indicated that by the end of the semester they did well academically. However, some of the participants did reference initial difficulties; they had to learn how to study and balance their various roles and responsibilities. Then, participants explained their strategies and shared insights into their successes.

Participant 8 shared that initially she found school to be stressful:
I had to take day and night classes because that was all that was available, so I was in class in the mornings, but then I also had classes that met in the evening from like 6:00-9:20. That was stressful with two kids and finding someone to keep them. Sometimes I had to leave class early to go get them. I learned about Career Pathways through fliers and word of mouth. Their help with childcare has really helped alleviate the stress. I was doing fine academically, but it was the life stuff that was hard. I did use the tutoring and the workshops about studying; they both helped a lot.

Participant 13 also mentioned initially feeling out of place, but she utilized campus resources to ensure her academic success the first semester:

I made president’s list my first semester. Thanks to Dana Murphy and Career Pathways. Dana’s success seminar taught us study habits. How to be successful in college. How do you learn, and how to maximize your learning process. You learn about different learning styles and then how to use that information to maximize how you learn and study. It teaches you how to prepare for a test and how to take a test. How to cut down on test anxiety. That class brought out the best of me. I’m actually going to sit in on it again next semester and see how I have changed since my first semester, and to review before I go to a four-year school. I know that my college outside of this state in a university setting will be a lot harder, so I want to take the class to get ready and focused for the next goal.

Remember, I had never stepped foot in any public school. The very first day I stepped foot in public education was here. I walked around all day going, ‘Oh, God these people know I don’t belong here.’ The first few weeks I knew people just knew I didn’t
belong here. And now I’m here so much, I don’t think there is anyone who doesn’t know who I am.

I am more at home here than anywhere else. When I get upset, or depressed, or unsure of where to go with something, I drive out here and sit in the parking lot now, and I look at the school. And I just sit here and think about different things I have done. The grades I have made, the hard classes I have passed. The hard times I have made it through. I think about the teachers I have had and the things they have helped me realize.

In responding to this question, it was clear that those early successes were a great source of pride for many of the participants. As they reflected on the first semester, they often explained what enabled their successes. Participant 1, for example, said:

I amazed myself. Straight A’s, a 4.0. I did it through determination. I am very motivated. I stayed focused, and there was a goal I needed to reach. I knew it would be hard, but I had to keep going. I had to stay up late studying. I had to put forth a lot of effort. I think it is important that I went to summer school and took bridge courses. By being consistently enrolled I didn’t fall out of the habit, and it helped me finish quicker. The longest break was 2 days between summer and fall. Plus, my husband encourages me and prays for me.

Participants 2 and 16 both credited regular attendance as part of their first semester successes. According to Participant 2:

I made a 4.0. I’m still stuck in that high school phase when it comes to attendance. Believe me or not, but I have never missed a single day of school in my life, any school. Attendance helps me stay dedicated to the work. No one is telling me to go to school, but
I take that on myself. I take time to read over things when we are not in class, not just study them, but to inform myself about what is going on in the world and in the class so I will not get bored. Plus, I always read ahead.

Similarly, Participant 16 responded:

I did pretty well, all A’s and one B. I don’t like missing class. That has been installed in me since I was a kid. My mom said, ‘Don’t miss class unless you are dying.’ I have only missed one day of class since I have been here, and it was because my son was sick. I try to come every day. Also, do your homework. Get it done so you don’t have to worry about it. It took a while for me to get the studying part. I would read and just go to class, but now I have learned to read it and study it. I check for understanding and just spend more time with it.

Other participants also mentioned the importance of regular attendance, asking questions in class, utilizing instructor office hours, and participating in campus tutoring services. It was interesting that almost all of the participants referenced their grades as a measure of how they performed their first semester. Perhaps no one was more grades-motivated than participant 17:

I made a 4.0 then and every semester. How I did it, it was all me. I don’t like making a mistake. I know it would be less stressful, and okay to make a B or C, but I need money when I go to get my Bachelor’s degree. A 4.0 might get me the money I need where a lower GPA might not. A 4.0 sounds better than a 3.8.

I have been sexually abused and verbally abused. I’ve been told that I am stupid, and I don’t matter, but I am going to rise up out of the ashes. These grades prove them wrong. I am going to be an example for my daughter. I have been flat on the ground,
suicidal, depressed, you name it. But these grades make me proud. I couldn’t fail back then, and I can’t fall now. My daughter and the world are watching me. While their methods and motivations may have varied slightly, every participant in the study had a solid first semester.

**Question 8: Is There Someone on Campus Who You Have Been Able to Form a Positive Relationship With? If so, Tell me About that Process and Relationship.**

Question 8 was asked to learn more about the connections and relationships built on campus by successful, low-income students. There were a variety of responses to this question; three of the participants revealed that they had not built relationships with others on campus and actually preferred to approach college independently. Other participants mentioned relationships made with other students, their teachers, and their advisors. It is important to recognize that 8 of the participants identified their Career Pathways Coaches or counselors as someone with whom they had formed their most significant relationships.

**Peer relationships.**

Participants 3, 16, and 7 all referenced the value of having strong peer networks. Participant 3 explained, “I’ve met lots of friends in class. Other women who struggle constantly like me. So we help each other all the time. We call each other and just tell each other ‘keep going.’ So you just don’t feel so alone; I don’t feel alone. We help each other a lot. We vent, and we can relate to each other’s struggles.” In addition to being a source of encouragement, Participant 16 described how having a strong peer network had helped facilitate her academic success as well:
I have friends that I have created a study group with. I help out with the math, and some of the girls help out with science or history. We have several classes together; we plan it that way, so when we all get together we can study several subjects at once. We started it on our own. One of the girls is having a really hard time, and she was gonna drop out. But, we told her, ‘We will get you through this. Don’t drop out.’ The teacher told her the same thing, but for some reason none of them like working with the teachers. So, we just help each other out. It’s fun that way too.

Finally, Participant 7 felt that developing these relationships was beneficial in both an academic and real-world setting:

Students need to know that your fellow classmates can be supports. Our teachers paired us up in teams and you take care of your teammates. It is a nice idea because if someone missed a class that’s who you need to connect with to share notes, bring you up to speed. We are all friends and we work on projects together. Sometimes you need to connect with people out of class. That is important in the school setting because it gets you ready for work. You got to get along with others in the employment setting as well.

**Teachers and counselors.**

Other participants in the study identified their teachers and counselors as being people that they had the most valuable relationships with. Participant 6 talked about her teachers and her Career Pathways’ counselors:

There are several people that I have grown close to, Mrs. Zelda Simms, Mrs. Deborah Gentry, and Mr. Malony. The tutors, counselors, and instructors here go beyond their means to help students that they know are trying to succeed and improve their life. Once
I started classes, I remember one time when I was sick, I had the flu or pneumonia. I had studied so hard; I wanted to take my test. I came to class anyway. My teacher said, ‘I can’t let you take the test feeling this bad, and you know he let me go home and make my test up. I don’t like to miss school. My teachers and counselors know that there is something bad wrong if I miss a day. If I miss a day, Mrs. Shondas and Mrs. Gentrys come to my house. One day they came when my son was sick. They knew something was wrong when I missed. They cared so much they come to see me. And they like moma to me. [Participant began crying]. They is my family.

Participant 8 also described her Career Pathway’s counselor and a special teacher as being like mother figures:

Mrs. Simms is someone I have a special bond with for sure. I’m in her office everyday just talking. That’s my Career Pathway’s counselor. And Mrs. Harper has been my teacher like every semester. So, we have grown a close relationship. She’s understanding. She know I just had the baby, and if I come in late she is understanding. She is supportive, like when I was out having the baby she emailed me every day. She just showed me she cared. They like a mother figure almost. If I don’t go to class, these two they call or email. They keep up with you.

It was interesting that four of the other participants also used the phrases “mother” or “family” as they commented on the teachers and counselors with whom they had positive relationships. It became evident that these relationships were a source of encouragement, and that the relationships provided a meaningful connection to the campus for the participants.
Question 9: In Spite of Financial Limitations, You Have Successfully Enrolled in College and Are Making Progress Towards Graduation. How Do You Explain Your Successes?

Saturation occurred early in the interview process with question 9; even so, all participants were asked this question for the sake of consistency. Responses to this question tended to be concise; frequently participants limited their replies to a few mere phrases without even forming a complete sentence. Participants 6, 14, and 16 answered by indicating, “I do my homework.” Four participants addressed the question by stating, “Don’t procrastinate;” while 6 participants simply said, “attendance.” The most common responses were “hard work,” “dedication,” or “determination;” in fact, 13 of the responses included at least one of those phrases. Participant 13 had one of the most elaborated and interesting responses:

Determination. If you don’t have the determination to keep going, regardless of how bad it is, you are never going to make it. My best days are test days. Finals are my favorite days. I know that is odd. I try to study a minimum of 20 hours per final. I’m disorganized everywhere but here. My house can be a mess. I can be a mess, but my school work is in complete order. It’s the only place in my life that makes sense.

Truthfully and honestly. My whole life I never feel like I fit in. I never knew who I was, what I was doing, where I was going. I never had a chance to figure out who I was and where I was going until I got here. For the first time ever I get to be who I want to be. This is the only time in my life where I got to make that choice. For me that is empowering. I’m empowered with knowledge. I love to learn. I love to read. I think that is it. That is why I am successful.
While most of the responses to this question were simplistic, straightforward, and brief, they place great emphasis on the roles of student work ethic and motivation. As stated by Participant 10, “You can’t teach motivation, but you have to have it!”

**Question 10: How Would You Coach New Students Who Are Also Pell Grant Recipients? What Advice Could You Give Them to Help Them be Successful in College?**

Most of the participants answered this question by giving new students a prescriptive list of dos and don’ts. Similar to question 9, there was little variation between the participants’ responses. Each response included some combination of developing time management, learning effective study skills, utilizing available support services, or being goal-oriented and positive.

Participant 14 voiced his recommendations about both time management and studying:

There is nothing hard about this if you study and don’t procrastinate. That is a real problem for traditional students right out of high school. They think they can put it off. Two days before something is due they are freaking out.

Study in between classes and before classes. You are never too busy to study. Use every minute. You don’t have to study every night. It’s not bad. The problem with everyone right now is if they are right out of high school all they think about is partying.

I wish I had went to college right out of high school, right on the spot. Right now, like I said before it is hard.

I study late at night. I have break periods between classes. I’ve already said it before, I get to school before classes so I can study, and I set up my schedule so I have study time between. I have to schedule those break periods. It’s about knowing how to use your time.
Participant 16’s response included time management and studying; however, she also mentioned the importance of having a positive attitude:

I would suggest try not to be nervous and stay positive. You are going back to college, and that is a good thing. Each morning I wake up and I tell myself, ‘I am going to class today, and it will be a good day.’ And then I go from there.

Prepare to do hard work. Do your work every day. Expect homework and projects, and never wait to the last minute. Make time to study. If you work, have a study sheet to look at while on breaks, or do your homework when the kids do their homework. You have to find a way to fit it into your everyday schedule.

The other thing is ask questions. Sometimes I feel like I don’t want to ask and interrupt and have everyone look at me. But, I am learning to get over that fear. You have to speak up and get questions answered to get good grades in college.

Each participant touched on the importance of student survival skills. It is interesting that none of the participants indicated the need to develop a specific academic skill set prior to enrolling in college; rather, it was the ability to learn how to learn and self-manage that the participants identified as being critical to college success.


Initially, it might be difficult to recognize how this question is pertinent to the purpose of this study. However, I had hoped the responses to this question would provide greater insight into the participants’ motivation and persistence in higher education. Several responses were very individualistic; for example, Participant 13 was most proud of being elected as President of
Phi Theta Kappa; while Participant 14 was elated that he had learned how to turn on and run a computer his first semester of college.

There was some overlap between several participant responses. Four participants mentioned that they were proud of their persistence and approaching graduation. Participant 3 explained the significance of her persistence:

I am setting a good example for my daughter. She’s been watching me all these semesters. This is how you do it. She has seen me stressed, but she needs to know that there are times when college is hard. But, I try to keep it positive. I never say I am going to give up in front of her. She has seen her mom for several semesters being successful in college.

It was unexpected, but 4 participants mentioned that they were most proud of learning how to work with others or developing their social skills. Participant 2 described this accomplishment:

I’m most proud that here I am a part of something. Having people look at you; you actually belong to something and are doing something important. The Network has done that. I am in the Pulaski family. I’ve been isolated so long, and you want to be accepted anywhere, and I have that bond here. I feel they have all accepted me. The president shakes my hand, and other students do too. I am part of this family. I finally can say, ‘I fit in.’

Participant 12 explained that he was also proud of his evolving social skills:

I am proud of the whole thing. Learning how to interact with others. The whole experience of college and career pathways is opening me up, and the interaction with the
students I have in there. I am a closed and private person. I am proud that college has changed me in that way. It will benefit me going into a career. It will help me with customer service and interacting with all kinds of people. And it will help me just be more happy.

Finally, eight participants shared that they were most proud of their cumulative GPA’s or a grade received for a course or test.

**Question 12: What Does the Higher Education Experience Mean to You? What Do You Hope to Gain From This Experience?**

This question was designed and included in the interview process with the intent of exploring the factors that motivate students from poverty to enroll and persist in higher education. The majority of the participants were not able to articulate what the experience meant to them, but they identified a combination of tangible goals that they hoped to achieve because of pursuing higher education.

Several of the responses to question 12 referenced the desire to simply earn a degree or become more knowledgeable in a chosen field. Three of the participants indicated that their primary goal was to have the opportunity to transfer to a four-year institute as a result of their initial studies. Four of the participants mentioned that they hoped their pursuit of higher education would influence their children to go to college. An overwhelming majority of 16 participants identified employment or a better job as being what they hoped to gain from higher education. The phrase “stability” was common in many of the responses; participants desired more stable employment, income, transportation, and housing.

This question was included in the interview to allow participants the opportunity to discuss financial limitations and their consequences that were unaddressed by previous questions. If participants had forgotten to mention a financial burden earlier in the interview, this question was also a chance to share that information. Four of the participants mentioned that a lack of money had prevented them from participating in school activities and socials; four students also referenced that poverty had forced them to take out student loans. Six participants mentioned that they did not have enough money for basic living expenses, and 9 mentioned the need for reliable transportation. Furthermore, 7 students said that childcare would have been an issue if they had not received support from Career Pathways. The majority of students responded that the way a lack of financial resources had shaped their college experience was that it had created overwhelming and daunting stress; whether stated directly or implied, the presence of stress permeated almost all of the responses to this question.

Social activities.

The lack of money had forced the participants not to participate in social activities that many college students enjoy. Participant 1 explained:

I don’t feel I have the money I need to just take care of myself. Its kinda hard when you go to college and say for instance they have the little cafeteria downstairs, and you have no money and no food to eat. And you know your classmates are down there. You want both things; you want food of course, but you also want to be a part of the group. It
would be good if I was financially established so I could take care of myself with food and my books.

I would not have taken out these loans. It has put stress on me, especially the thought of paying them back. It will take me at least 6 to 10 years to pay them back. In general students need clothing. I am not financially able to buy clothing. It’s things like that that keep me from being able to blend and fit in. I’ve had to get help with my books. TRIO paid for my last semester; so, I was blessed. I guess there’s always things you’d like to do.

Participant 6 also reflected upon a time she felt left out socially due to a lack of money:

One time when I was in the book club the book club went to Memphis to see a play. I couldn’t go because I couldn’t afford to pay a babysitter. I would have liked to have gone because I have never seen a play or anything like that. I have never been out of Arkansas and this was in Memphis. I just decided to stay at home and take care of my kids, and I just heard about it. At least some of the others told me all about it. But, I guess I would have just liked to have gone myself.

Living expenses.

Participant 3 also identified with being stressed out due to a lack of financial resources, but her need for additional money was for covering her bills:

Yes, I had to get loans. I needed money to just get caught up on bills. If I had more money I would get a college fund going for my daughter so she wouldn’t be like this. Finances are my biggest stress. I know I said it before, but it is easy to fall back into that self-criticism. When I have problems that I can’t pay for my biggest insecurities come
around. It is so scary. What if my car breaks down? I don’t have credit cards; I don’t have anyone I can call. Student loans scare me so big. Those are the biggest misery in my whole world. Again, I’m doing it all alone, without a net, and it’s scary.

Participant 10 explained how not having money for basic living expenses infringed upon her academic experiences:

For one there has been times when I didn’t get to attend classes because I didn’t have money for gas. That is a bad one. I almost got withdrawn from a class, but I couldn’t tell the teacher. I emailed them and told them, ‘somethings come up. I just can’t make it.’ I try to schedule online or just come to campus 2 days a week. I can’t afford to drive 3 or 5 days a week. A lot of times I just have money for milk and a little food. I’m not comfortable sharing these situations with my teachers. I’m kinda private. I believe that my motivation and good grades kept me from being withdrawn. I think the teacher believed me and knew what kind of student I am.

Participant 13 was also dealing with the daunting financial stresses of trying to afford college and while meeting her basic needs:

How has a lack of finances affected my experiences? Stress. Unlike normal people, I have to wonder and worry about how I’m going to provide food for my family for dinner. I receive constant shut off notices. Constant. Someone is always shutting off something. I’ve even had to park my car over the water meter until I could find someone to borrow money from that day, and pay my bill that day, but I left the car over it so that they wouldn’t shut it off.
Sometimes you're just so distressed and distraught because you don’t know what to do. You’ve borrowed money from everyone you know. Coming up against that wall and knowing that the electric company doesn’t care makes it really hard to focus on your studies. There have been times when I was so worried about something getting cut off or bills not getting paid that I have turned in work late or stayed home in bed and just worried about it and take time out to regroup. The stress has caused me to not be able to do some of my best work periodically.

Poverty was not an aspect of the students’ lives that they could “turn off” in order to focus exclusively on college. It was evident that a lack of financial resources caused great stress in multiple facets of the participants’ lives, and that the stress crept into their personal, social, and academic experiences.

**Question 14: Are There any Other Thoughts or Feelings You Might Share With Educators or Policymakers to Help Them Work More Effectively With Other Students Who Have Limited Financial Resources?**

There are many well-intentioned educators and policymakers who would like to help improve the enrollment and persistence of low-income students. However, as explained earlier, they may try to address these issues through a middle or upper class worldview and fail to appropriately target the obstacles encountered by students from poverty. Therefore, this question was asked to allow low-income students to inform and coach educators and policymakers on their true needs.

Participants shared a variety of recommendations for educators who desire to work more effectively with low-income students. Several students mentioned the need for quality,
accessible childcare on campus. Two of the students said that they wished that they had received better college preparation at the high school level. In reference to higher education, Participant 4 complained that her college teachers “dumbed down” education. She felt that college students needed more rigorous coursework to prepare them for transferring to the university or for developing them for the workforce. Five students complained that teachers and college administrators needed to be more mindful of textbook costs and campus fees. Participant 3 explained:

Some teachers think that if your tuition is covered by Pell you have nothing to worry about. We are killed by fees. I pay $20.00 for emergency text service. I don’t even have a cell phone. Why should I be charged $20.00 for services I don’t sign up for or use? These services are so out of touch. Policy makers and educators don’t get the reality. They need to quit looking at statistics and research and walk in our shoes.

It is clear that Participant 3 was upset about fees beyond her tuition, but she also suggested that educators and policymakers lacked an understanding of her situation as a low-income student. This was the most common theme in response to this question; in fact, 10 of the students mentioned the need for improved understanding and relationships between low-income students and educators. These responses included the reoccurring phrases “understanding,” “mutual respect,” “bond,” “family,” and “relationship.” Participant 2 advised educators:

Get to know students’ background. That is most important. A teacher may not understand why a student is struggling on an assignment, and there may be something going on at home. I feel like to help a student better themselves you’ve got to know the student. If a teacher and student actually bonds, it helps the student commit to work. I
have to do my homework for Mrs. or Mr. so and so is a sign of respect. You don’t find many students that say, ‘I have to get home to do Mrs.’ or Mr.’s work.’ That bond has to be there.

I had to reteach myself math because I did not want to be in the spotlight. Too many teachers embarrass students. Don’t embarrass students. It is something they will never forget. You will never bond with a teacher that embarrasses you. If anything that just makes you want to quit. No one knows my background. No teacher knows that both my parents passed my first year here. They just see a smile and think I am living the best life.

Participant 6’s response was dramatically similar; she said:

Educators need to know their students. I feel like teachers and students need to be open with each other and bond. School should be like a family. If you miss class because of your kids, your teachers need to understand. When it comes to your kids you gotta do what you gotta do. They need to know that sometimes your car breaks down. They need to know that poor kids gotta work. If I can work extra hours, I need that money. If I have all A’s, and all assignments turned in, please understand I need to work. Let me be the adult and miss class to work, but I will stay on top of what I need to learn.

Teachers also need to know not to embarrass us. We can’t have a relationship if you embarrass me. If their grades aren’t good don’t embarrass them and put the spotlight on them in front of their peers. Pull them aside and talk to them. That tears down their self-esteem, especially if you compare one student to another student. I know teachers that do that.
Participants also had feedback for policymakers. First, they mentioned the need for on-going support of Career Pathways; in response to this question, 4 students said that college would not have been an option for them if not for Career Pathways. Several students urged policymakers to control escalating tuition and fees. Five students voiced their concerns for finding work after college; they argued that it was the responsibility of policymakers to ensure that jobs would be available for them when they graduated. This was a primary concern for Participant 1 who stated, “We are receiving all this education, and there is no jobs for us. It’s not a waste of time, but with the way the economy is, how are we supposed to take care of our families and pay back our loans? They got to fix this economy.”

Furthermore, participants encouraged policymakers to be more involved in recruiting efforts that specifically target low-income students. Participant 2 explained:

In small, poverty areas, where people struggle the most, it’s not what they want to do, but they are not aware of what is available for them. There needs to be a way to let them know what is out there, and they can go as far as a middle class person. An elected person needs to get that message out.

Participant 14 had the similar feelings:

Community involvement is a big deal. Whether you do it on tv, or get with the college president and get out in the community. I’ve lived here 15 years, and never once has someone elected or from the school approached me or done anything like that. I’m around the community a lot, and they are just not involved. It is like we don’t matter, or they don’t know we are here. I think being involved would help get a lot more poor people to go to school.
Participant 16 also desired for policymakers to be more involved, and she felt these efforts had to target low-income students at an early age:

- Let the kids know their options at an early age and encourage them. Kids need mentors that they can relate to. They need to hear success stories. Let them know with hard work you can do anything. Let them know it can happen, and it doesn’t matter if they are poor. Low-income kids especially need to hear that from you. Low-income schools need to be a priority. Have seminars and guest speakers come into these schools that are impoverished. Get them on the college track early, or you will miss them. Your job is to let them know they have a place in college and a future.

Finally, participants had some unexpected and surprising recommendations for policymakers regarding Pell Grant. Because all of the study’s participants received Pell Grants, one might inaccurately assume that they would advocate for ongoing or increased funding for Pell Grant; however, this was not the opinion or position of the participants. Seven of the participants indicated a need for increased accountability and regulation of Pell Grant. They were concerned that too many students are abusing the current Pell Grant system. Participant 9 was worried that this misuse of Pell Grant would negatively affect students like herself:

- Some students come for the first semester or the first few weeks. Once they get their Pell check, they stop coming. I wonder what their purpose is? They say they do it for the money. I say the money don’t come easy, and I tell them they mess it up for those of us who are in it for the education, not the check. A lot of people say as soon as I get that first grant check I’m gonna quit. They are not learning anything. That needs to change. The government needs to find a way to stop giving that type the money, and just give it to
serious students. There would be more money for those of us who are serious if there
was some stricter guidelines.

Participant 18 had even harsher criticisms about the misuse of Pell Grant monies:

People need to help the ones that show up and don’t worry about the ones that don’t.
Those that get their Pell check and leave, they don’t deserve help because they don’t want
it. I think to get Pell you should have to keep a 3.0 not a 2.0. The last time I checked a
2.0 is almost below average, and grades are inflated anyway. Below average doesn’t get
it or cut it. I don’t want a below average doctor working on me. I would cry if I got a C.
I want to be above average. I want to be excellent.

Participants made suggestions and freely voiced their opinions about the ways that educators and
policymakers could improve higher education for low-income students.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the responses to the study’s interview questions. The participants’
reactions to the interview questions were used to answer the research sub questions. This chapter
began with an overview of the study’s participant demographics that were collected in the pre-
interview survey; it then provided a more detailed and individualistic description of each of the
18 participants. Finally, 14 sections correspond with the study’s 14 interview questions. The
interview questions were stated first accompanied by a summary of participants’ responses.
Poignant quotes were included to add depth to the participant descriptions and to highlight
emergent themes.
CHAPTER FIVE
FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter examines the implications of the data presented in Chapter 4. The chapter begins by reviewing the research design. Next, the findings for each research question are discussed. Then, findings are compared to the related literature, and conclusions are presented. Finally, limitations, suggestions for improved practice, and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to identify students from poverty who have successfully enrolled and persisted in community colleges, and to explore the factors that contributed to their decisions and successes. Achieving the Dream Coaches and knowledgeable faculty and staff helped identify participants who were second-year, Pell Grant recipients with a GPA of 3.0 or above. To fulfill the research purposes, I conducted interviews with 18 of these successful, low-income, community college students. I asked each participant the same 14 open-ended interview questions. Their interviews were audio and video recorded, and then transcribed. The previous chapter described the participants and their responses for each interview question. In the next section, the findings from the study are presented.

Findings

This section answers the study’s research question and sub questions. The major research question central to the study was, What influences students from poverty to enroll and succeed in
To respond to the research question comprehensively, it was necessary to answer the following sub-questions:

a. What influenced the student’s decision to attend college?

b. What facilitated the student’s successful transition into higher education?

c. Did financial concerns affect the student’s college experiences, and if so, how?

d. Which individual motivations, strengths, skills, or abilities did low SES students credit for their own success and persistence?

e. Were there any college programs or interventions that contributed to the students’ success?

f. Were there people who encouraged or supported their academic achievements, and if so, how?

g. What advice do students from poverty have for other students, policy makers, and educational practitioners?

To answer the sub questions, the next section synthesizes the participants’ responses to the interview questions.

**Sub Question A**

*Sub question A: What are the factors that influenced the student’s decision to attend college?*

Participants described a number of factors that prompted their decision to attend college, but there were three common motivators that were mentioned most frequently. First, all of the participants believed that furthering their education would help them to create new career opportunities for themselves. Next, eleven of the participants explained that they were attending college?
college in order to set a positive example for their children. Additionally, five participants shared that they had experienced defining events or tragedies that served as a catalyst for their decisions to enroll in college.

The most frequently referenced stimulus for enrolling in higher education was the desire for career opportunities and advancement. In fact, 16 of the study’s 18 participants indicated that they were attending college to create new job opportunities for themselves. Participant 10’s comments summarized the group’s motivation:

Bottom line, I want a better way of life. I have gone to college to get a better job. I want to have the competence and confidence to do a good job. I want to get job prepared in my classes. I want to improve my financial worth. I want to have confidence and skills. I want to be able to sell myself, and most of all I don’t want to let anyone down.

The 16 participants with strong vocational motivation believed that higher education would lead to improved employment, and it was therefore essential to their families’ financial stability and quality of life.

Next, 11 of the students explained that they were motivated to attend college because they hoped to set a positive example for their children. They frequently mentioned that their parents did not attend college, and consequently they had not encouraged the participants to attend. The participants hoped that their college enrollment and graduation would be a positive model for their own children, and they wanted to break the cycle of not attending. As one participant stated, “I want for us to be a family where going to college is the norm. No one else in my family went, but I have talked my brother and his wife into going, and my kids will go.”
Finally, five participants had major life defining events or tragedies that prompted them to enroll in college. Such events included the death of immediate family members, personal health issues, and job loss.

Missing from the above listed factors were positive references for parents or K-12 educators. Unfortunately, none of the participants credited these individuals for positively influencing or encouraging their decisions to attend college.

Sub Question B

Sub question B: What facilitated the student’s successful transition into higher education?

Not one of the participants said that they felt prepared for college. They were ill-prepared because they lacked the confidence, financial resources, and academic skills necessary for success. Therefore, self-determination and a network of support systems were necessary to help them adjust to college life. As they described their experiences, it was apparent that student motivation, positive relationships with campus faculty and staff, and campus resources had played a critical role in assisting them to make their transitions into higher education.

Student motivation. Most of the participants believed their own motivation was essential to their successful transitions into higher education. They frequently referenced having a new determination and maturity that they lacked in high school. Participant 5 explained:

I learned real quick that college is different from high school because you’re more independent, and your instructor is not going to call your parents when you miss classes, but they put the responsibilities on you, and give you the consequences of not being a model student. So, I just found that determination to work hard. I did not miss classes
and always paid attention and took notes. Once I made the commitment, I didn’t have any troubles.

The other participants’ motivation also prompted a proactive commitment to regularly attending, studying, and earning good grades in their courses. These behaviors clearly contributed to their successful transitions into college.

**Positive relationships with faculty and staff.** Another commonality cited by participants was having positive relationships with their advisors, Career Pathways coaches, and instructors. They mentioned that their advisors and Career Pathways coaches helped them with course selection, acted as counselors, and provided ongoing encouragement. They also valued that these educators were available and willing to listen when personal or academic problems arose. One participant described talking with his Career Pathways coach when his son was hospitalized his first semester; he said, “These little talks just helped me get things out, and then I could focus on my work.” Several others simply needed someone to talk to during their transitions, and they felt their advisors or Career Pathway coaches were always understanding and insightful.

In addition, participants were grateful for instructors who were genuinely concerned about their welfare during their initial adjustments. They found that faculty members often had high expectations, but were willing to tutor and keep office hours to help them outside of class meetings. Students seemed both surprised and pleased when they had instructors who took an interest in the family and work responsibilities they were balancing outside of the classroom; they were most appreciative when faculty would listen and inquire about these situations. Participant 9’s previously mentioned sentiments captures the way many of the other participants regarded their instructors:
Out here you have instructors and advisors that show you concern. It’s like a mother daughter or father daughter communication. It’s a communication thing. You can communicate with your advisors and instructors here. They are understanding. Mrs. Harper, my instructor, will ask me if I need any help in her class. If I do, she will set up a time when I can come meet with her and ask questions. She tells me, ‘if something happens and you can’t make it to class, please notify me and inform me.’ She cares about us. So, it’s different from high school that way.

It was not uncommon for students to use the phrases “family,” “like a parent,” or “mother” when describing their relationships with faculty and staff members. They felt these positive relationships were essential in facilitating their transitions into higher education.

**Campus resources.** As pointed out in the earlier descriptions, inadequate financial resources coupled with limited academic skills could have easily prevented the students from successfully transitioning into higher education. However, a variety of campus resources were available that aided their transitions. Fifteen of the 18 participants enrolled in remedial coursework that assisted them in developing their basic math, reading, or writing skills prior to enrolling in subsequent, higher-level, credit-bearing courses.

While participants also mentioned that campus-tutoring labs, TRIO, and the Network were important support systems that eased their transition into higher education, the references to Career Pathways were especially noteworthy. Students praised the textbook, childcare, and gas vouchers they received from Career Pathways. Many of the participants explained that they could not have afforded to go to college if they had not had financial assistance with these additional costs. They also spoke about how Career Pathways coaches provided critical
encouragement and sound counseling when they were initially overwhelmed. One participant explained:

When I first started, I would get home from school and I had my work, and my kids work, and dinner, and baths, and bills. I was having a hard time, and Career Pathways told me about study skills and time management. They helped me get organized and learn how to set my priorities. They also just encourage me and tell me I can do it. It was hard at first, but with their help I saw a change in my grades, and I guess I just learned how to do college.

Finally, participants mentioned the value of Career Pathway workshops and Student Success courses where they learned important student skills such as note taking, budgeting, managing test anxiety, and study skills. Participants believed that without developing these important student skills in their first semesters they would not have been successful in their transitions into higher education.

Overall, the students expressed that they were very satisfied with the support systems that were in place when they arrived at their community colleges. As quoted earlier, one of the participants explained, “We have everything we need to be successful here. And, if we don’t use it, it is nobody’s fault but our own. This college really cares about students’ success.”

**Sub question C**

**Sub question C: Did financial concerns affect the student’s college experiences, and if so, how?**

Financial limitations unanimously affected the participants’ college experiences. As described in Chapter 4, costs were the predominant consideration in the students’ college
selection process. A good illustration of this concern is Participant 4 who explained, “I came here because of the cost and the location,” all of the participants had very few options about where they could attend college. These students had to select an institution with affordable tuition that was within a financially feasible commuting distance from where they lived.

Enrollment at a private institution or living on campus was not financially viable option. Unlike their more affluent peers who might consider a variety of institutions, in or out of the state, public or private, low-income students could only consider applying to their local community colleges. Their socioeconomic status prevented them from engaging in a “true” college search, and it prohibited them from having any institutional choices. Participant 10 said, “I didn’t really have options or choices. My kids and job is here. There was never any decision about where to go.”

Once students selected an affordable institution, their financial limitations continued to affect their daily college experiences. The students in the study consistently mentioned feeling overwhelmed, embarrassed, depressed, marginalized, or stressed due to their poverty. Participants shared common worries; All 18 participants complained about the daunting expenses of textbooks. Many of these students had to borrow books, rely on textbook vouchers, or go to class ill-prepared without a textbook. Sixteen of the participants mentioned inadequate housing or a lack of money for food. When these basic needs were unmet, it was difficult, and at times impossible, for the students to remain focused on their education. As Participant 13 explained:

As a student, if you are going to be in college all day, you are going to want to eat at some time in that day. You can eat here or drive somewhere for food, which is more gas
money. You have to think about that. It’s not cool to sit out here hungry all day. That has happened a few times.

Sixteen of the participants were also worried about reliable transportation or money for gasoline. A lack of transportation often interfered with regularly attending class, or students worked additional hours outside of class in an effort to pay for transportation.

Finally, 10 of the participants described not having enough money for fashionable clothes, campus activities, and entertainment. While these limitations may not appear to be essential to survival, the inability to afford these items or activities often embarrassed the participants, and it made them feel like outsiders within the higher education culture.

Due to a lack of financial resources, many of the participants had no choice but to apply for student loans; this debt also had a negative impact on their student experiences. One participant explained:

Student loans are where all my nervousness comes from, right there. The truth is I can’t do this [school] and work full time. I tried to for the first three semesters. It was just too much, so I took out loans. Yeah, it gives you money to get by, but it also gives you something to constantly worry about. The expense and the loans actually terrify me. I know it is crazy, but I stay up so many nights worrying about my loans and how to pay for them. Then I go to class without any sleep. I know without school things can’t get better, but I also know things can’t get better as long as I have all that debt. How will I pay that back? Its just hard to stay positive and focus on school with those loans out there.
Many of the other students also expressed great anxiety about their ability to find work and pay back their student loans after college graduation. The loans were a source of stress while the students were enrolled in coursework, and they will continue to be a worry after the students graduate until they are paid in full.

**Sub question D**

Sub question D: Which individual motivations, strengths, skills or abilities did low SES students credit for their own success and persistence?

When students responded to the interview questions that targeted research sub question “D.,” saturation occurred early, and there was great commonality between the participants’ motivations, self-identified strengths, and skills.

As pointed out, students emphasized their children and the desire for career opportunities motivated their decision to enroll in college. Likewise, setting a positive example for their children and creating job opportunities emerged as the most common motivators for ongoing college success and persistence. Four of the participants mentioned the desire to be a positive role model for their children, and 16 participants indicated that the desire to improve job skills, become more marketable, and obtain stable employment was prompting their college successes and persistence. Twelve of them hoped to acquire relevant, job specific skills by earning an associate’s degree, but some of the students planned to transfer to a four-year institution.

In addition, students credited their personal strengths for contributing to their successes and persistence. There was consistent overlap when the participants described their strengths. In fact, 13 of the responses shared the phrases, “hard work,” “dedication,” and “determination.” For example, when Participant 16 discussed her strengths that lead to her successes, she said:
Determination. You have to set your goals and put your mind to it. And set out to complete things. There are obstacles and things that go on in your life, but you can’t let that tie you down. I look through the tunnel and see the light at the end. You don’t get any rewards without hard work. Do the work you need to do. My teachers know me and know I will do the work.

Students often reflected on the combined pressures of exam schedules, due dates, bills, family, and work obligations; without hard work, dedication, and determination, it would have been easy to have “stopped out” or underperformed academically. However, their commitment and work ethic enabled their perseverance.

Finally, the participants’ emotional intelligence and self-management contributed to their successes and persistence. None of the participants credited a specific academic skill set for facilitating their accomplishments. Rather, four participants mentioned the importance of their evolving social skills, and they believed their ability to work well with their peers and teachers had contributed to their successes. One participant explained:

Before I got here, I was quiet and kept to myself. Shy I guess. I hated the idea of talking in front of others. But this experience has been good for me. I’ve learned to ask questions and work in groups. That has really helped me. My teachers and my study groups help me answer my homework questions and get prepared for tests. I've learned that friendships and good work relationships can be really helpful and important. It also made school more fun. I think talking up, and asking questions, and not being shy will help me when I am out in the real world on the job too.
In addition, every participant involved in the study identified the importance of being able to self-manage and having good student skills. Each response consistently combined the recommendations of “don’t procrastinate,” “study,” “attend regularly,” “utilize available resources,” “take notes,” and “stay focused on your goals.” Their responses were rooted in commonsense, practicality, and focused almost exclusively on soft-skills and strong emotional intelligence.

**Sub question E**

**Sub question E: Were there any college programs or interventions that contributed to the students’ success?**

A combination of college programs and interventions supported their abilities to participate and succeed in higher education. First, they unanimously indicated that they could not have even enrolled in higher education without the financial support they received from their Pell Grants. Students also mentioned the importance of a variety of scholarships that helped supplement their Pell Grants and made college participation a possibility. For example, six students said they received support from TRIO and SSS. Of particular note were the numerous references to the Career Pathways program that permeated the study. Students praised this program because it targeted financial needs that were not met by other programs; this financial support included textbook, childcare, and transportation vouchers. Through its voucher system, Career Pathways removed educational barriers for low SES students by addressing needs that were specific to this population. One of the participants remarked:

Some kids out of high school might be able to do this with just Pell, especially if they are still at home. But, it’s different for those of us that have kids and families. I get 30 hours
a week at work, Pell, and loans, and I still couldn’t do this without Career Pathways. They understand us, and they know we have to have help with things like books and gas. I would not be here today if it wasn’t for that program. Those are the things [expenses] above and beyond that some people just don’t think about.

In addition to financial support, many of the students often required academic support. Almost every student identified remedial education programs, Student Success courses, and campus tutoring labs as being fundamental contributors to their successes. Career Pathway coaches were an often-mentioned source of sound academic advising, and they played a critical role in advocating for the academic needs of low-income students on their campuses. Finally, the participants who were enrolled in the Career Pathways program viewed the coaches as friends, role models, and mentors. The coaches provided on-going academic support and encouragement that the participants deemed as essential to their successes.

Sub question F

Sub question F: Were there people who encouraged or supported their academic achievements, and if so, who were they, and is what ways did they assist?

Responses to the first interview question revealed that earlier in their lives the participants did not feel encouraged or supported by their parents or K-12 educators; however, as adult students, most of the participants had finally formed a relationship with someone who encouraged or supported their educational goals. There were three participants who described themselves as “loners” who simply preferred to work independently; yet, the other 15 participants identified a variety of people who supported their academic efforts.
To begin with, many of the participants credited their spouses or children for providing ongoing encouragement. For example, three participants mentioned their wives had walked them through the Pell Grant and registration processes. This support had alleviated stress earlier in their academic careers. Participant 14 explained, “I didn’t have any friends or anything, but I had my wife. Thank goodness she had been here and could help me with my Pell, courses, finding classes, and everything.” Another participant’s children had created a countdown to graduation calendar. Each morning they would mark through the previous day, and discuss the rapidly approaching graduation. As this single mother was nearing the completion of her coursework, this was a great source of encouragement. The participants explained that this support from their spouses or children validated their efforts and helped them remain focused.

A second source of encouragement and support came from friendships that the participants had formed on campus with other students. The participants frequently mentioned that they did not have time for social activities outside of the classroom due to family and work obligations. However, they credited group projects, study groups, and social network sites for helping them to develop important friendships with their peers. They felt that having a strong peer network was beneficial because they could all relate to one another’s struggles, and they could help each other problem solve. They often met outside of class, talked on the phone, or communicated electronically in an effort to encourage and support each other. Prior to their enrollment in community college, several students reported feeling alienated and alone; having positive relationships with their peers created a sense of belonging and community, and these friendships were important to their successes and persistence.
Finally, campus faculty, staff, and the administration were valuable sources of encouragement and support. Participant 9 smiled as she talked at length about her advisor and instructor, Mrs. Harper:

Mrs. Harper is the type of teacher that comes to class upbeat and positive. A good example is when she had to have surgery on her knee. Here she came to class, hopping around on crutches, her knee swollen. She determined to teach anyway. She has a positive outlook on everything. If she is that determined to teach us, we should be that determined to learn….Again, it’s just like a mother daughter thing. All girls look up to their mothers, and that’s how it is with her. We all look up to her. She talks to us if we seem down, or when she sees us on campus. She helps us with our future and always tells us we can do it.

Eight of the other participants specifically named their Career Pathways coach as someone who shared their problems, stresses, and successes. The students repeatedly described the educators they had formed relationships with as being “family,” “proud parents,” or “friends.” Participants felt encouraged when they received positive feedback on assignments or verbal recognition and praise. For example, one student described a day when he was walking across campus and the college’s president stopped, shook his hand, and spoke to him. He said this simple gesture “gave me heart. I mean even the president cares about me here, and that made me feel important.” Advisors, teachers, or coaches who helped the participants identify and apply for scholarships were also imperative to their persistence and success. Caring educators further supported the participants by listening, being available for tutoring, contacting them outside of class, reassuring them, and by being flexible on due dates when the students
were sick or had outside conflicts. These advisors, teachers, and coaches provided the encouragement and support that was noticeably missing in the participants’ stories about their parents and K-12 educators.

**Sub question G**

**Sub question G: What advice do students from poverty have for other students, policy makers, and educational practitioners?**

**Recommendations for students.** When offering advice to other students, there was little variation in the participants’ responses. They simply recommended that other students should develop and employ the same student survival skills that contributed to their own successes. These tips included attending class regularly, scheduling and managing your time wisely, developing effective study skills, using available campus resources, and remaining focused on and committed to your long-term goals. Participant 18’s advice summarizes the group’s recommendations; he suggested:

- Attend, don’t miss. You can pass college by showing up and doing your homework.
- Take good notes. I hate the excuse, ‘I am a bad test taker.’ Just study. If you think you are a bad test taker just study harder. That is really what a bad test taker is; it is just someone who doesn’t know the information on the test. So, study harder.

**Recommendations for policy makers.** Participants had strong convictions when making recommendations for policy makers. First, participants consistently believed that elected officials fail to “understand” or even “recognize” the implications of poverty. They felt ignored by policy makers, and they believed that policy makers needed to “spend more time in the community,” and “walk in our shoes.” The students felt that by being a presence in the
community, those in office could play a critical role in mentoring and recruiting low-income students. For example, Participant 8 said:

Come to the schools and see our kids. You need to meet the ones without good clothes or food or book bags. The ones that don’t have good parents. They need to see you too. Then talk to them. Tell them your story, and tell them they can have a better life if they go to college, if they put their minds to it. Then talk with the parents too. Show them the way. There is some parents that do want to help their kids, but they just don’t know what is out there.

Consistently, the participants believed that policy makers had an obligation to be more involved in low-income communities, and that they should take an active role in telling low SES children and their families about their higher education options.

In addition, they made recommendations about the funding of various higher education programs. First, those involved in Career Pathways pleaded for the program’s continued support; they were aware of budget cuts in other areas of academia, but deemed Career Pathways as being essential to the successes of those from poverty. There were also recommendations for greater Pell Grant funding. Students argued that elected officials needed to have an increased awareness of how other students abuse the existing Pell Grant system, and that policy makers should reconsider the availability of Pell Grant funding for summer courses. They pressed for greater accountability for those who receive Pell Grant funding and misuse the system by dropping out immediately after receiving their Pell checks. They also described their own need for Pell money for summer tuition; these students wanted to complete coursework as quickly as possible due to their dire financial status. However, recent cuts to Pell meant that they were not
eligible for money during the summer semesters. Participants believed that if policies were in place to prevent the current misuse of the Pell Grant system, then there would be increased funding available for more serious students throughout the school year.

Additional recommendations included the need for controlling the escalating costs of college tuition and fees. Further, five other participants repeated that their motivation for pursuing a degree was post-graduation employment. However, they were quite concerned about the current job market. These participants recommended that policy makers take a more active role in economic development to ensure job opportunities for college graduates.

**Recommendations for educational practitioners.** Finally, students also made a variety of suggestions to educational practitioners. They often mentioned that teachers should avoid “dumbing down” their courses. These participants wanted to be adequately prepared for the workforce or for college transfer. Therefore, they desired instruction that was real world relevant and challenging. In addition, they asked that practitioners be mindful of costs; the expenses of textbooks, technology, and activities fees created great stress and financial hardship.

The most consistent recommendation from participants was for improved relationships between students and faculty. Ten of the participants explained that teachers needed to be “more understanding,” and that they should “get to know” their students. The participants mentioned that they sometimes felt “invisible” or like a “number” to some of their instructors. They complained that their teachers could not relate to their situations, and that they were negatively stereotyped because of their poverty. The students were uncomfortable disclosing their work obligations, family responsibilities, and financial hardships to some of their instructors. In fact, many of the participants made a considerable effort to hide their poverty from their teachers.
Yet, as one participant explained, it would be “freeing to just feel comfortable explaining my reality because right now my teachers just don’t know.”

In the next section, the study’s findings are compared to the existing literature, and conclusions are drawn.

Conclusions

This study sought to gain information about the factors that contributed to the successes and persistence of low-income, community college students. According to Ben Franklin, “The only thing more expensive than education is ignorance.” America simply cannot afford to fail at educating its citizens who are in poverty. Educational practitioners and policy makers could use students’ feedback, like the responses from this study, to make more informed decisions about how to better serve this marginalized population. With this in mind, the following conclusions are offered:

1. **The personal demographics of the study participants were consistent with the national profile.** In this study, the only characteristics that I required for participation were income level, student success, and student persistence. Yet, the participants’ demographics were overwhelmingly similar to the national profile described by Engle and Tinto (2008). Eight participants were Caucasian/White, eight were African-American/Black, one was Native American, and one was Latino Hispanic. As referenced in Chapter 2, Engle and Tinto (2008) have indicated that low-income students “disproportionately come from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds” (p.3); in this research project, over half of the participants were from racial minority backgrounds.
Further, Engle and Tinto (2008) mentioned that college students from poverty tend to be older and are more likely to need academic remediation. This description was also true of the study’s participants. In fact, only one of the participants had enrolled in college immediately following high school graduation; the other 17 participants were older and had delayed college enrollment or were attempting college for a second time. Further, 15 of the 18 participants had to enroll in remedial coursework to improve their basic math, reading, or writing skills prior to enrolling in credit bearing courses.

Another dramatic consistency with the national profile was with the participants’ college selection process. Engle and Tinto (2008) explained that students from poverty are more likely to attend colleges closer to home and live off campus; this was true of every participant in the study; the participants unanimously indicated that location and cost were the two determining factors in their college selection process.

Finally, in their demographical overview of students from poverty, Engle and Tinto (2008) mentioned that low-income students are “more likely to have multiple obligations outside of college.” Every participant in the study referenced a combination of family and/or work obligations that they had to balance with their academic careers. Caring for dependents and working outside of class often interfered with the participants’ regular attendance; it limited their participation in student activities, and it competed with time available for studying. Each of these commonalities supports the conclusion that the participants’ demographics are consistent with the national profile.

2. **The educational barriers faced by the participants were comparable to those common barriers described in the deficit model studies.** The deficit model studies
that were reviewed in Chapter 2 pointed out that students from poverty face specific educational barriers that their more affluent peers may not encounter (Adair, 2005; Bergerson, 2007; Howard, 2001; London, 2006; Oldfield, 2007; Putten, 2001; Walpole, 2003). Students from poverty tend to have more limited access to higher education; they often lack the cultural capital, financial resources, academic preparedness for enrollment and persistence in higher education. References to these specific barriers permeated the student interviews. However, in the deficit model studies these barriers were used to explain why students from poverty fail in higher education. In this study, the barriers complicated the participants’ pursuit of higher education; yet, it is essential to note that the participants had remarkably defied the odds that were against them.

3. **The desire for improved career opportunities motivated college enrollment and persistence for low-income students.** Every participant had at least one response that included a vocational reference. As noted by Miller (2009), displaced workers and the poor have historically turned to two-year colleges for vocational opportunity. The study’s participants had all struggled with inadequate finances and/or their inability to obtain stable employment in a favorable work environment. The loss of a job or negative workplace experiences had prompted many of the participants to return to college. Further, the goal of acquiring job-specific skills motivated the persistence and successes of students while they were enrolled in college. The participants consistently commented on the instability of the economy, and they linked higher education with improved job opportunity, stability, income, and quality of life. Participants’ interview responses confirm the validity of this conclusion.
4. **Location and cost were the two most important variables in the college selection process of low-income students.** When asked to describe how they selected their current community colleges, there was no variation between participants’ responses. Every participant explained that location and costs were the two determining factors that guided their college selection process. These responses affirm Engle and Tinto (2008) claim’s that the path to a bachelor’s degree is indirect and less likely for low-income students, and that low-income students are more likely to be segregated into community colleges than students from more affluent backgrounds. While some of the participants indicated that they would like to have attended a four-year university, they deemed these institutions to be cost prohibitive, or they were not within a reasonable commuting distance. In addition, the participants’ decisions are consistent with Aronson’s (2008) findings which argued that the type of institution students from poverty “pursue is a class-based process” (p. 42). More affluent college students may consider an institution’s academic reputation, student activities, or athletic programs in their selection process. However, the absence of response variation demonstrates that location and cost are the two variables that dictate the college selection processes of low-income students.

5. **Pell Grants alone did not meet the financial needs of low-income college students.** Again, there was great consistency in participants’ responses when they identified expenses beyond tuition that were not met by Pell Grants alone. As mentioned in Chapter 2, limited financial resources can be an on-going and distracting problem for college students from poverty (Aronson, 2008; Bergerson, 2007; Walpole, 2003). All of the participants referenced the overwhelming costs of textbooks; 16 participants
mentioned inadequate funding for transportation. There were also 16 responses that alluded to a lack of money for basic needs such as food and housing. Finally, 10 participants were unable to afford school related activities, new clothes, or entertainment. A lack of financial resources prevented the students from having essential supplies; they were unable to participate in campus organizations and activities, and many of the participants had to work outside of school. Consistent with Walpole’s (2003) findings, the participants were engaged in different activities than their more affluent peers. Instead of being involved in campus activities and studying for prolonged hours, they were focusing on family responsibilities and working part-time jobs. The lack of financial resources undermined their social integration and threatened their academic performance.

In addition, the absence of Pell Grant availability in the summer prolonged their ability to complete coursework, and it deferred much needed fulltime income until after the students were able to fulfill graduation requirements. Finally, the students’ unmet financial needs were a constant source of anxiety and pressure that detracted from their college experiences.

6. **K-12 education failed to adequately prepare low-income students for the rigors of college.** Every participant indicated that they were not academically prepared for college, and that they lacked the student skills necessary for college success. The participants’ reports are consistent with the findings of Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, and Swail (2004) who pointed out that low-income student are less likely to receive quality K-12 education, which consequently may limit their college choices and opportunities. In fact, 15 of the
participants required academic remediation in math, English, and/or reading prior to enrolling in subsequent, credit-bearing courses. Time spent on remedial education delayed degree completion and was costly; however, the students believed that it helped them develop essential skills that they had not mastered at the K-12 level.

Further, students indicated that high school was “easy,” and that the teachers “did not care” or “held your hand.” They found college to be more rigorous, and many of their college instructors had stricter accountability for course requirements. Students consistently referenced having to develop note taking, time management, and study skills. They credited self-determination, FYE courses, and Career Pathways coaches for assisting them in developing these student skills. Nonetheless, they believed that these were skills that they should have acquired at the K-12 level.

7. **Forming a positive relationship with a campus faculty or staff member was important for the college transition and persistence of students from poverty.** Prior to their enrollment in community college, the participants lacked meaningful, positive relationships with their teachers and counselors. The relationships they formed with their college advisors, Career Pathways coaches, and their teachers were vital to their academic successes. Through these relationships, students had a sense of belonging that contributed to their “academic integration,” “social integration,” (Tinto, 1975, 1993) and ultimately to their persistence and success.

    Most of these students were first generation students; therefore, the educational practitioners played a vital role in helping them to navigate their way through college processes and culture. The advisors, coaches, and teachers identified important campus
resources and scholarships, and they provided essential on-going reassurance and encouragement. This finding is consistent with Deil-Amen’s (2011) study of two-year college students in career-related programs. In her study, she emphasized the roles of positive relationships with and proactive guidance from faculty and counselors. She found that this support was essential for students’ “adjustment and information access in ways that counteract alienation that may precede dropout” (p. 75). Likewise, without these relationships with and guidance from campus faculty or staff, the transition and persistence of the low-income students in this study would have been in a state of jeopardy.

8. **Students from poverty overwhelmingly credited their self-motivation and determination for their successes.** Many of the participants mentioned that they lacked motivation and determination earlier in their academic careers. However, when asked to explain their recent successes or to coach other students on how to be successful, they repeatedly mentioned the phrases “determined,” “focused,” “driven,” and “motivated.” While student support programs and relationships with faculty and staff are important to the persistence of low-income student, this conclusion points to the role that internal motivation also plays in the successes of students from poverty.

9. **Financial limitations were an ever-present and daunting source of stress for low-income students.** Throughout the study participants explained that poverty distracted them from their educational goals. Consistent with the findings of Adair (2005), Bergerson (2007), Putten (2004), and Walpole (2003) that were referenced in Chapter 2, the lack of financial resources limited time available for campus activities and studying.
and it also created significant stress for the participants. Poverty was not something students could simply ignore or forget about while they were on campus. For example, several students mentioned being hungry during their school day; others described feeling insecure about their appearance or their inability to buy textbooks or participate in campus activities. When off campus, poverty continued to remain ever-present in their thought processes. Participants frequently discussed their inability to pay bills, afford groceries, or take care of their children’s needs. They also had to find work outside of school to supplement their Pell grants and scholarships. Even when trying to sleep at night, participants mentioned worrying about student loans, utility “shut-off” notices, and providing for their children. The participants were never free to focus exclusively on their education because of their poverty’s negative consequences. The students’ stories made it evident that an awareness of their financial limitations was always with them.

10. **Planning and decision-making in higher education often failed to consider and meet the unique needs of low-income students.** Students desired educators who were more understanding and aware of their volatile situations. For example, students from poverty have limited time and money, and they have additional obligations such as caring for dependents and working. Many aspects of college life exclude low-income students because they are cost or time prohibitive. The participants needed for classes and activities to be affordable and scheduled at times conducive to their outside work and family obligations. These students often felt undermined, embarrassed, or marginalized when they could not purchase supplies, afford fees, or participate in campus organizations and activities. Historically colleges and universities have made
accommodations for other marginalized groups. For example, handicap ramps and elevators provide access to college classrooms for students with disabilities. In order to serve low SES students, higher education must be mindful of the accommodations that are critical to the needs of this student population. Participants’ interview responses point to a need for an increased consideration of the barriers to education that jeopardize the persistence of low-income students.

Limitations

As the study progressed, a few weaknesses emerged. The limitations of this study are as follows:

1. When I created the interview questions, I inaccurately assumed that the participants followed a traditional educational pathway. Early in the interview process, I learned that many of the participants had dropped out of high school and completed GEDs, delayed college enrollment, or they were attempting college for a second time. After the first two interviews I was mindful of the potential for these nontraditional educational backgrounds, and I asked the interview questions accordingly.

2. While the study included community colleges in both rural and urban settings, the research project was limited to a single state study. It is unknown if the experiences of low-income students in other states are comparable.

3. Although I feel that I established a positive rapport with participants, because I am from a different socioeconomic background, participants may not have fully disclosed or described their experiences.
Recommendations for Improved Practice

In an effort to improve the enrollment and persistence of low SES students in higher education, the following observations and recommendations for institutions and policy makers are offered:

Recommendations for Institutions:

1. The higher education community needs to have a more involved partnership with K-12 systems so that low-income students receive better academic preparation for the rigors of higher education, and so that students from poverty are actively recruited for college.

2. Colleges must be mindful of low SES students’ career motivation. This vocational-orientation demands career relevant curriculums and support services that assist with post-graduation job placement.

3. Many of the study’s participants indicated their plans to transfer to a university following their community college graduation; yet, none of the students had actually applied to a university. They did not have an awareness of university deadlines or transfer processes, and they had not secured funding for their continued educational plans. Community colleges must review the effectiveness of their college transfer advising processes to determine if low-income students are in fact transferring, and to assess whether or not this is an appropriate and attainable goal for their students from poverty.

4. Courses, student support services, and campus activities must be cost conscious and scheduled at times that meet the unique needs of low-income students.
5. Educational practitioners and policy makers need to be aware of the effectiveness of the Career Pathways program. This program demands continued support in Arkansas, and its services could be augmented to fit the needs of low-income students in other states.

**Recommendations for Policy Makers:**

1. Policy makers need to target predominately low-income K-12 schools for early intervention programs that inform low SES students of their higher education options and that help them to develop the skills necessary for college success.

2. Stricter penalties must be established for those who abuse the existing Pell Grant system.

3. Policy makers need to review and reconsider Pell Grant availability in summer for low-income students who desire to be consistently enrolled.

4. The availability of needs-based scholarships which encourage the enrollment and persistence of low SES students must be increased.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Although this research begins to explore the experiences of low income students in community colleges, there are many aspects of the issues facing these students that require further examination. The following section outlines the recommendations for future research.

1. The research included a population of students from a single impoverished state; community college students in other states should be interviewed so that additional similarities and differences between low-income, successful college students can be identified.

2. Many of the students in this study frequently referenced feeling like an outsider or being different from their more affluent peers. A study is needed which focuses exclusively on
the self-concept and marginalization of low-income students in the higher education setting so that practices contributing to the negative self-concept of low SES students may be reformed.

3. This study was limited to the community college environment. Research that identifies and explores the experiences of low-income students in four-year institutions is essential.

4. Participants in this project mentioned that they often tried to hide their poverty from their instructors, or they did not feel comfortable disclosing their financial hardships to college personnel. Future work should inquire into faculty and staff’s awareness of and attitudes towards low SES students.

5. It is important to have additional research that focuses on the successes, not the deficiencies, of low-income students. Instructors must know classroom best practices that bolster student learning and persistence for this population. Further, there should be additional conversations with students from poverty so that campus activities and services may appropriately target and fit the needs that are specific to this group.

Closing

It has been a privilege to interview the 18 students who participated in this study. I was touched and inspired by their perseverance and hopeful spirits. I have been challenged to have a greater awareness of the barriers faced by my own students, and to reconsider ways that I can better serve low-income students in the classroom and on campus. Without question, low SES students are a marginalized group that require increased advocacy. I am adamant that this group deserves a greater presence in academic research so that methods which facilitate the successes of low income students are discovered and disseminated. I hope
that this study will bring awareness to the struggles faced by students from poverty, and that the higher education community will create a culture that begins to accept and serve these students.
References


Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2010). *The heart of student success: Teaching, learning, and college completion.* Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program.

Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). *A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success.* Austin, TX:


Seidman, I.E. *Interviewing as qualitative research.* New York, Teachers College Press.


Appendix A

IRB Protocol Approval
November 4, 2011

MEMORANDUM

TO: Heather Hollifield-Hoyle
Jim Hammons

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 11-10-204

Protocol Title: *Enriching Higher Education's Notion of Student Success: Interviews with Persistent Students from Poverty*

Review Type: ☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 11/04/2011 Expiration Date: 11/03/2012

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

**This protocol has been approved for 19 participants.** If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.
Appendix B

Participant Consent Form
The Neglected Minority: Interviews with Successful, Community College Students from Poverty

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Heather Hollifield-Hoyle
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Hammons

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE
You are invited to participate in a research study about successful college students from poverty. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a Pell Grant recipient that is making successful progress towards graduation.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?
Heather Hollifield-Hoyle, Developmental English Instructor

Who is the Faculty Advisor?
Dr Hammons

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of students from poverty that have successfully enrolled and persisted in higher education.

Who will participate in this study?
16 Pell Grant recipients at four Achieving the Dream community colleges in AR.

What am I being asked to do?
Your participation will require the following:
   Responding to a demographics survey and participating in a 1-hour face-to-face interview.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?
There are no anticipated risks of participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
You will receive a gift-card as monetary compensation. In addition, your participation will help inform educators and policy makers of ways to help other students like yourself to be successful in college.

How long will the study last?
You will need to complete a brief demographics survey, participate in a one-hour interview, and you will be asked to read the researcher’s interpretations of your responses to confirm for
accuracy. The initial survey and interview will take place in the fall of 2011. The follow-email will be sent in spring of 2012.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?
You will receive a $30.00 gift card.

Will I have to pay for anything?
No. There is no cost for participating in the study.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?
If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. Your status as a student will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law.
To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms will be assigned and utilized in all reporting of data.

Will I know the results of the study?
At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Hammons (jhammons@uark.edu) or Principal Researcher, Heather Hollifield-Hoyle h.hollifieldhoyle@gmail.com. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?
You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Heather Hollifield-Hoyle

Dr. Hammons

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
120 Ozark Hall
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201
479-575-2208
I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Participant Signature____________________________________________________
Appendix C

Interview Protocol with Interview Questions

**Project:** Students from Economically-Challenged Backgrounds

**Time of Interview:**

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Participant:

**Study Overview:** Each participant will be provided with the purpose of the study, and will be given the opportunity to ask questions. Participants will be informed that data are being collected via a brief survey and one-on-one interviews. The interviewees will be notified that the focus group is being audio and video recorded. The participants will also be informed about the use of pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Finally, the participants will be made aware that the interview will last no longer than two hours. The participants will be asked to read and sign a consent form.

**Questions:**

When the students have had the opportunity to respond to and discuss each question, they will be thanked for their participation in the study. I will assure them that I will protect their anonymity.

1. What are the factors that influenced you to continue your education after high school? (If necessary follow-up with questions about parental attitudes, parental expectations, and individual goals that are higher education specific).
2. Once you recognized that you wanted to attend college, how did you go about deciding where to go? (Probe into factors that the student considered. Cost? Location? Schedule?).

3. As a college student you are eligible to receive a Pell-Grant. How did you learn about the Pell-Grant? Tell me about the application process. What enabled you to successfully complete and receive the Pell-Grant?

4. Talk to me about expenses other than your tuition. Does your Pell-Grant cover those costs? (Follow-up to determine if and how much they are working outside of school. Are they experiencing stress as a result of inadequate finances? Were they surprised by costs other than tuition?)

5. How is college different from high school? Was there anything about the first semester in college that you found surprising or difficult? How did you cope with the changes? (Probe for details about advising, orientation courses, or student-support services)

6. When you started attending your college courses did you find you were academically prepared? If yes, what helped you the most in your precollege preparation? If no, were there programs/services on campus that helped you get caught up?

7. How did you do your first semester? (Follow-up with “Why did you do so well?” or “Explain what went wrong, and how did you correct the situation?”).

8. Is there someone on campus (an instructor, employee, or peer) who you have been able to form a positive relationship with? Tell me about that process and relationship.

9. In spite of financial limitations, you have successfully enrolled in college and are making progress towards graduation. How do you explain your successes?
10. How would you coach new students who are also Pell Grant recipients? What advice could you give them to help them be successful in college?

11. What is a moment in your college experience that you are proud of? Please explain the significance of that experience.

12. What does the higher education experience mean to you? What do you hope to gain from this experience?

13. Have there been any other ways that a lack of financial resources has affected your education that we haven’t discussed? (If yes) How? Would you elaborate on that?

14. Are there any other thoughts or feelings you might share with educators or policy makers to help them work more effectively with other students who have limited financial resources?