Celebrating the “Invisible Middle”:

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CELEBRATING THE “INVISIBLE MIDDLE”:
SUCCESSFUL FIRST-GENERATION AND LOW-INCOME COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

There is increasing acknowledgement of and concern over the growing social stratification in our society. This bifurcation is demonstrated in the widening gap between the wealthy and impoverished. A college degree is an especially critical asset in helping to break multi-generational cycles of poverty. Unfortunately, low-income and first-generation college students face daunting obstacles on their paths to college graduation. First-generation status and low-income status are each negative predictors of college success.

This is a study focused on the success, as defined by persistence to graduation, of first-generation students from low-income backgrounds. It introduces faculty, college administrators, and policy makers to students from this background at a rural New England public college who were close to completing their college degrees. The research questions were (a) to what factors the students attributed their success, (b) what on-campus programs or services were helpful in leading to that success, and (c) how could factors identified as leading to success among these students be leveraged to assist the success of other students in this population?

Criterion sampling was used to determine an eligible cohort. The three criteria identified were (a) first-generation status, (b) low-income background, and (c) likelihood of graduation, based on accumulated credits. Through qualitative interviewing I learned from these students to what they attributed their success. This research approach enabled me to gain in-depth information on the personal backgrounds of the individual students interviewed. The participants’ narratives – their life stories – drove the study. Extended quotes from respondents were compiled. Narrative analysis was used to code the data.

Major themes that emerged included (a) the critical significance of faculty, (b) the value of support services, (c) the importance of flexibility in course requirements and delivery methods as well as program requirements, (d) the high value placed on positive reinforcement and feedback as a positive motivator, and (e) the ways in which the challenging aspects of their backgrounds, misunderstood as deficits (e.g., unvalued social and cultural capital), helped them to develop strengths instrumental to their success.

The resulting recommendations focus on areas where the data indicated that institutional interventions could increase the likelihood of college retention and success. These include (a) better utilizing pre-arrival materials and programs as anticipatory socialization opportunities, (b) maximizing first-year celebratory socialization initiatives, (c) providing targeted support based on student background traits, (d) instituting faculty training and development focused on how their role and teaching styles affect student success, (e) reviewing strategies for informing students of services, and (f) leveraging the desire of students to assist their peers who have not yet realized their level of success. The hope is that the resulting knowledge gained will inform future practice as well as assist higher education faculty and staff to work toward the success of this student population.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Rationale for the Study

This study introduces faculty, college administrators, and policy makers to students at a rural New England public college who are close to completing their college degree despite being first-generation students from low income backgrounds. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors identified by a sample of first-generation, low-income college students that contributed to their success to graduation. Success in this study was defined as persistence to graduation. My hope was that the resulting knowledge gained from this study will inform future practice as well as assist higher education faculty and staff in working with this student population.

The importance of a college degree. There is increasing acknowledgement of and concern over the growing social stratification in our society. In his book, One Nation, Underprivileged (2005), Rank succinctly described this problem:

Perhaps one of the most serious consequences of poverty, along with a disproportionate growth of wealth at the top, is the bifurcation of our society. We are increasingly becoming a society of have and have-nots (p. 158).

Because it reduces one’s vulnerability to falling into and/or remaining in poverty, a college degree is an especially critical asset in helping to break multi-generational cycles of poverty. Rank identified education as one of three key attributes (race and gender being the other two) with an impact on the long-term (i.e., over the course of a lifetime) risk of poverty. A college degree ameliorates the effects of these attributes because it
increases the earning potential of degree recipients. The average annual earnings of an individual with a college degree are nearly double those of someone who does not have a degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Unfortunately, low-income students and students whose parents did not graduate from college (i.e., first-generation students) face daunting obstacles on their paths to college graduation. “First-generation” and “low-income” denote separate student populations, albeit ones with significant overlap. These categories will be formally defined below in a review of key terms.

Why should we care? It is almost counterintuitive to ask why we should be concerned about growing economic disparity in our country. One might assume that moral reasons alone are enough to find these differences in standards of living and opportunities unconscionable. Still, some might ask how they are personally affected by growing socioeconomic stratification. Rank (2005) identified three categories of reasons that address why we should be concerned about poverty and growing inequity. The first category is self-interest, and encompasses the ways in which the costs of poverty affect us all: societal costs in crime, health care, education, and social services. This category includes the desire to have an adequate safety net in place should any of us fall into poverty. The second category entails values. Specifically, Rank argues that American core values, be they civic or Judeo-Christian, are incompatible with a society in which poverty is allowed to exist, let alone expand. The third category of reasons for fighting growing poverty is the democratic citizenship we enjoy. This category addresses our place as individuals in a larger society, and the shared responsibility we have for each other. Here Rank argued that “the existence of poverty seriously undermines our social
environment and hence undercuts our ability to practice wise stewardship over our communities” (p. 158). By appealing to our self-interest, values, and beliefs, a compelling case is made that all of us should be concerned about the gap between the haves and have-nots. This study focuses on a specific aspect of this larger problem: how we can help reduce this gap through the increased retention of low-income, first-generation college students.

*Retention of low-income, first-generation college students.* Public colleges have long embraced the mission of admitting students from challenging backgrounds and offering them educational opportunities. Fitzgerald (2004) wrote about recent changes in higher education policy that decrease the chances of low-income students advancing to college. He noted that “public institutions bear a particular responsibility for ensuring that their citizens can gain access” (p. 19).

High Peaks State [a pseudonym], the college attended by the study participants, is such an institution – a small, rural New England college in a state system in which the majority of the students are in-state. Approximately two-thirds of these in-state students are the first in their family to attend college. Public access is a vigorous aspect of the institutional mission. But a singular focus on access, though important, is inadequate to meet the societal needs discussed above. Persistence to graduation and degree attainment, not merely enrolling in college, is necessary to realize the economic benefits of higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The possession of a college degree nearly doubles one’s annual earnings (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), conceivably meaning the difference between living in poverty and living comfortably and contributing
meaningfully to society. So, while access to higher education is a critical concern, so too is the retention of these at-risk students.

*Disparity in graduation rates for first-generation and low-income students.* Both first-generation and low-income status are negative predictors of college success. While this study was focused on students who met both of these criteria, it is important to note that each category has negative implications on the likelihood of college success.

First-generation college students are less likely to graduate from college than non-first-generation students. Data show that this is true even controlling for a number of factors that differentiate these students from their classmates as well as potentially affect persistence, including socioeconomic status and institution type (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, 2001b).

Socioeconomic status is related to persistence to graduation among college students. Not surprisingly, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to complete a degree (Tinto, 1987; 1993). Lower income students are roughly 30% less likely than higher income students to enroll in college. This so called “income gap” widens further when looking at degree attainment as opposed to enrollment (Perna & Swail, 2002).

In other words, once enrolled, first-generation college students and low-income college students are less likely to graduate from college than their peers whose parents graduated from college or who come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. College students who are both first-generation and low-income have two strikes against them as they pursue their degrees.
Retention as an issue of efficiency and values. Students leaving college without graduating represent lost opportunities for the individual and society. Public higher education institutions have played a long standing exceptional role in providing access and opportunity to underrepresented and at-risk populations. The failure to graduate members of these groups represents a lack of efficiency in meeting a major institutional and societal goal. From the perspective of Stone’s Policy Paradox (2002), the problem of retention can be viewed as an efficiency issue. Stone reminded us that efficiency “is not a goal in itself. It is something we want…because it helps us attain more of the things we value” (p. 61). In this case, what we want and value is as many students as possible persisting to graduation. Public colleges, which often explicitly state their intention to serve underserved and/or traditionally disenfranchised populations as part of their missions have a responsibility to do everything they can to assist students to persist to graduation. I liken this responsibility to a sacred trust. When we fail to offer a student necessary support to succeed, that trust has been broken.

Overview of the Study

This study focused on success, as defined as persistence to graduation. Using qualitative research techniques, I interviewed college students who have been successful despite the many barriers they encountered within and from outside the institution. These students were both first-generation and low-income (these terms will be reviewed in the next section of this chapter). At the time the interviews were conducted they were, based on their accumulated credits, likely to graduate within the year. A number of them subsequently graduated since the interviews were conducted.
I sought to learn from these students what, from their perspective, aided their success. It was crucial that this information come from the students themselves, in their own voices, as this provided genuine and authentic information about their experiences. A byproduct of this study could be information geared toward students similar to the respondents (e.g., first-generation from middle or low incomes, other traditionally disenfranchised student populations) who can also relate to what is shared. I believe that the data revealed some translatable factors that could be incorporated into retention and persistence programs. In Chapter Five I use the findings to propose initiatives and programs designed to assist students in making successful transitions to and persistence through college.

Significance of the study. There are three main ways this study contributes to the literature. First, most programs designed to assist first-generation college students’ success focus on racial and ethnic minority groups (often from urban areas). The population studied here was exclusively white and predominately from rural backgrounds. Second, most existing data about college students in general, let alone first-generation and low-income students, has not been collected in the students’ voices (with some notable exceptions that I review in Chapter Three). Third, this study contributes to the knowledge base in this area of higher education because it explicitly focuses on student achievement to overcome barriers to success. Past studies detail the barriers and ways in which these pose challenges to students but do not propose programs, services, and policies suggested and voiced by the students.
Research questions. Because the researcher cannot adequately anticipate the nature of the data to be obtained, the research questions for this study were intentionally broad. They included the following:

1. To what factors do the students attribute their success?
2. What on-campus programs or services were helpful in leading to that success?
3. How could factors identified as leading to success among these students be leveraged to assist other students in this population to succeed in college?

The initial questions posed to respondents to answer these broad research questions were adopted from an earlier pilot study I conducted (this earlier study will be reviewed in Chapter Three). These initial questions used in the dissertation study are included in Appendix A.

Definition and Clarification of Key Terms

There are a number of key terms to be clarified and defined in the context of the dissertation study.

TRIO. TRIO is not an acronym. It is a term used to refer to a series of federal programs designed to increase college access and success for economically disadvantaged students. The term TRIO emerged from the fact that it originally encompassed three programs: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services. “First-generation” and “low-income” are two categories of students, with specific definitions to be reviewed below, that are eligible to receive TRIO sponsored services.
First-generation and low-income. I described first-generation students and low income students separately above when describing data specific to those two categories of students. I used the terms “first-generation” and “low-income” to denote separate student populations because these terms are not interchangeable. Despite this, there is significant overlap between these demographic characteristics. In a review of characteristics of lower-income students, Lee (2002) noted:

Low income is often associated with other factors that influence enrollment of college-age youth, such as parents who have not gone to college and inadequate high school preparation. It is difficult to disentangle these background factors from income (p.26).

Indeed, first-generation college students are more likely to come from low-income families than non-first generation students (Chen, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2001a). In this study I deliberately examined the intersection of low-income and first-generation by selecting a sample of students who had both demographic characteristics. While these two populations, by necessity in the way scholars write about each of them, are described separately in the literature review, this is done only for ease of synthesizing and summarizing the literature. This approach provides the reader with insight into the myriad of issues faced by low-income, first-generation students.

For the purposes of this study, I am using the current TRIO definitions for the categories of low income and first-generation. In the case of low-income, this means coming from a family not above 150% of the federal poverty level (in 2006 numbers, for example, a family of four earning less than $30,000 per year). TRIO defines first-
generation as meaning that neither of the student’s parents completed a baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). This is an important clarification, as some studies use other definitions of first-generation, such as neither parent attending college at all.

“**Invisible middle.**” Student affairs educators tend to see students at two ends of a spectrum. On the one end are active student leaders who serve as student government representatives, residence assistants, club leaders, service project coordinators, or in other on-campus student leadership positions. On the other end are the students who regularly violate code of conduct rules and find themselves referred to the judicial process. The first-generation, low-income students I interviewed in my earlier pilot study did not fit into either of these categories.

First-generation students are less likely than other students to be involved in on-campus activities and organizations (Nichols, 2004; Pike & Kuh 2005). This characteristic was certainly the case with most of the students I interviewed both in the pilot and dissertation study. Because of this characteristic, it was notable that they did not talk about certain topics. For the most part the students did not mention extracurricular events or involvements, beyond activities in Academic Support Services. At the same time, none of them had ever experienced any serious disciplinary trouble. Overall they did not participate in extracurricular activities and they did not get in trouble. They were too busy working (with school work and part- and full-time jobs that enabled them to pay for college) toward their goal of graduation. These students were driven by their goals and vision of a better future. Because of this, in addition to other
factors such as limited resources, they sought to complete their degree program as quickly and efficiently as possible. As a result, these students normally progress through their four-year college experience without finding themselves introduced to student affairs staff for either positive or negative reasons. This led me to dub this cohort the “invisible middle,” which, rather than alluding to social class, denoted their place on the campus involvement scale, from the perspective of student affairs.

Success. There are many ways to define success, with achievement in important life and personal development areas difficult to quantify. An individual breaking out of a cycle of poverty is seen by most as successful. A “successful college career” is often informally measured by evaluating a combination of factors including academic achievement and co-curricular participation and involvement. Given the focus of this study, I defined success by the achievement of a single, tangible goal: graduation from college. Thus, the measure of success for these students was defined as likelihood of graduating. Accordingly, the students interviewed in this study were within a year of graduating as measured by accumulated credits. Students who were classified as seniors, having completed at least 90 credits toward the 120 credits required for graduation, were eligible for participation in this study.

Diversity. Diversity does not simply refer to racial and ethnic differences, though this approach has predominately defined research efforts regarding college students. The literature on first-generation student challenges and success is no exception to the predominate use of race and ethnicity in higher education. Much of the research resulting in models and policies about first-generation or low-income students’ college success has
focused on racial and ethnic minority students. This is consistent with a documented tendency on the part of colleges and universities to focus more on racial than economic differences when increasing the diversity of their campus populations.

While colleges and universities have cultivated diversity within the student and faculty ranks, its focus has largely been to foster inclusion based on ethnic and racial criteria...This pursuit of multiplicity runs aground, however, in its failure to acknowledge socioeconomic cultural diversity (Collins, 2000, pp. 200-201).

It is notable that the focus on racial and ethnic diversity has had the desired result of leading to a more diverse college student population, when defined in terms of these criteria.

Thirty years of affirmative action have changed the complexion of mostly white universities; now about 13 percent of all undergraduates are black or Latino. But most come from middle- and upper-middle-class families. Poor kids of all ethnicities remain scarce (Tyre, 2003, p. 50).

This study focuses on an underserved population, albeit one not as commonly acknowledged in discussions of diversity in higher education. I used class as an underlying characteristic of diverse student bodies. Oldfield (2007) advocated this approach when he suggested that social class be considered in efforts to diversify higher education faculty and students. He noted 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 challenges the participants in this study faced were as real and ingrained as those faced by students from other underserved backgrounds. Assisting students who are first-generation and low-income to overcome barriers to success may require giving socioeconomic status attention and resources similar to those that have been devoted to assisting racial and ethnic minority students. It is a hopeful sign that the prior interventions appear to have been successful.
CHAPTER 2
Literature Review

The chapter reviews three literature streams that inform this project. These streams are the following:

1. The characteristics and experiences of poverty, which typified the backgrounds of the students participating in this study. Generational and situational poverty and the challenges faced by low-income college students are also reviewed.

2. The particular challenges faced by first-generation college students, including discussions of cultural capital and social reproduction theory.

3. Models which have been used to successfully assist and socialize first-generation students into college life. This review includes the strengths and limitations of these models.

Poverty

Students from low-income families cannot be assumed to have similar background characteristics. One of the most important factors concerning these characteristics is how entrenched and long-term the poverty experienced by the individual and her/his family is. Generational poverty is defined by Payne, DeVol, and Dreussi Smith (2001) as at least two generations duration in this condition. Situational poverty, on the other hand, occurs as a result of a specific incident or event, such as a
divorce, significant illness, or death in the family. In either case, coming from a background of limited income poses significant challenges in accessing and succeeding in college. At the same time, this background of limited resources can serve as a powerful motivator for going to college.

**Generational poverty.** While either generational or situational poverty results in similar hardships, individuals coming from a background of the first type have a culture to transcend and expectations to overcome in addition to the challenges associated with limited resources. Generational poverty characteristics include an importance on personality (including a sense of humor) and relationships (as opposed to money) as assets, the use of the “casual register” (informal language and communication), survival orientation that prizes the practical over the abstract, a resigned belief in fate in one’s circumstances, fear of leaving the culture and “getting above your raisings,” lack of organization, and focus on the present moment that prevents long term planning and the consideration of the future ramifications of one’s actions (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi Smith, 2001). The multi-generational nature of this form of poverty implies that students from this background will be first-generation college attendees. Therefore, faculty and administrators must be aware of these characteristics. They describe the culture in which many low-income and first-generation college students were raised as well as reflect the traits they exhibit in college and elsewhere. It is a significantly different culture from that of middle or upper class college students, administrators and faculty.

**Situational poverty.** Payne, DeVol, and Dreussi Smith (2001) described how an individual’s “prevailing attitude” is a sign of whether the person is experiencing
generational or situational poverty. They note that it is common for individuals from generational poverty to feel that they are entitled to societal support. Those from situational poverty often hold a different perspective.

In situational poverty the attitude is often one of pride and a refusal to accept charity. Individuals in situational poverty often bring more resources with them to the situation than those in generational poverty (p. 47)

For college students from situational poverty, this belief structure can manifest itself as reluctance to access and utilize the support services for which they are eligible. Students from situational poverty may perceive a stigma attached to using these services and thus attempt to “make it on their own.” This refusal to use services can be a self-imposed barrier to their success as well as offset or negate cultural capital and/or other resources they bring with them to college.

Challenges faced by college students from low-income backgrounds. A logical starting point in discussing the challenges faced by low-income students is their lack of financial resources to access college. While perhaps obvious, the importance of this lack of resources cannot be overstated. “Much of the inequity in participation, persistence, and degree completion throughout the educational pipeline can be explained in financial terms alone” (Spencer, 2002, p. 193). As a result of their economic circumstances, the receipt of sufficient financial aid is critical to enable these students to attend and graduate college. Such aid is as important concerning retention as it is in access.

Whether the researchers look at enrollment or persistence effects of financial aid, the general conclusion is clear: Financial aid programs enable lower-income
students to complete the educational pipeline and graduate from college (Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002, p. 13).

Despite the importance of this aid, the vast majority of low-income students do not receive it at an adequate level. In 1995-96, 87% of low-income college students had unmet need, defined as the student’s budget minus a combination of expected family contribution and financial aid (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). This inadequate level of funding precipitated a political shift from low to middle class college affordability. Federal policy changed from an emphasis on the use of financial aid as a means of access for low income students to its use by middle class students in making their education more affordable. The income gap in both participation and persistence in higher education thereby widened (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001).

Finances are a real and perceived barrier for low-income students. They are real in that without substantial aid, these students cannot afford to attend college. Perceptions of the availability of financial aid also wield a negative impact. Low-income students have less information and knowledge about college and they and their parents overestimate the cost of college attendance, a further reason for their lack of attendance and persistence in higher education (Perna & Swail, 2002). Finances continue to play a large role for students even after successfully making it into college. Low-income students are more sensitive to changes in college costs than higher income students, thereby making them more prone to drop out when even seemingly minor financial barriers emerge (Heller, 2002; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996).
College administrators, policy makers, faculty, and other stakeholders appear to not yet fully appreciate the challenges faced by low-income students.

It is evident that higher education, as a policy system or as a universe of individual campuses, lacks a consistent, effective focus on those coming from low-income backgrounds – one that acknowledges, anticipates, and addresses the range of challenges that face them (Timpane & Hauptman, 2004, p. 100).

In the end, low-income status is the factor that places students at the greatest risk of not completing college. A multi-year study conducted in the late 1990s found that three years after the initial study, low income students were less likely than non-low income students to have earned a degree/certificate or still be enrolled. This was true even after controlling for “student background (gender, race/ethnicity, and parents’ education) and other factors likely to affect persistence (dependency status, institution type, enrollment delay after high school, enrollment status, amount worked, borrowing, and assistance from parents)” (U.S. Department of Education, 2000, p. vi). The cruel irony is that while low-income status is the factor most associated with not completing college it is also what often drives these students to pursue higher education in the first place.

Lack of resources as a motivator. Not surprisingly, their lack of financial resources serves as a primary motivator for low-income students to pursue higher education in the first place. A desire to improve their economic standing is a more significant reason for attending college than for their higher income peers. Lee (2002) noted that this was reflected in a U.S. Department of Education study:
Nearly twice as many lower-income students said they were going to school because they needed the education to enter the workforce than for the personal satisfaction of earning a degree. Middle- and higher-income students were nearly evenly split between these two reasons (p.35).

*A belief in the power of education.* Despite having less information and more misconceptions about college, low-income students who actually make it to college often understand and embrace the notion of a college degree being a step to a brighter future. This belief in the power of education often came from influential people in the students’ lives. In their study of low-income college students who successfully enrolled in college, Levine and Nidiffer (1996) interviewed individuals identified by respondents as being significant mentors (e.g., relatives, teachers, neighbors). These mentors embraced the importance of hard work and believed that perseverance and good choices would lead to a better future for the students with whom they worked. Central to their belief system about a brighter future was education. “They believed that education was the key to social mobility and that the American Dream was alive and well” (pp. 136-137). These mentors played a vital role in helping the students they worked with envision and realize college as a possibility. The mentors reinforced the message that education was the key to improving their life circumstances. As a result, low-income students who attend college often highly value the power of a degree and believe it can help them escape their low income background. In essence, they have high expectations regarding the ability of the degree to transform their lives.
Challenges Faced by First-Generation Students

The challenges first-generation college students face are well documented. They often have trouble adjusting to college life and the culture of academe, are uncertain of their ability to succeed academically and lack strong familial and other support networks. Added to their internal struggles, external societal structures and systems can make it difficult to break out of the multi-generational patterns which drove non-college degree attainment for others in their families.

*Cultural capital.* Upon arriving at college, first-generation students often find themselves in a strange and unfamiliar setting where the knowledge and experience they bring is not perceived as valuable. Bourdieu (1977) established the term “cultural capital” to define the cultural dispositions, language, knowledge, and abilities passed from generation to generation. In the case of the dominant social groups (usually defined by economic status), the capital possessed by its members is deemed more valuable than that of more marginalized (e.g., lower class, racially underrepresented) groups. The possession of this more highly valued cultural capital ensures their continued position at the top of the social hierarchy. Higher education mirrors the values of the middle and upper classes. When they arrive on campus, first generation college students are in an environment where their values, language, and material possessions often inhibit their ability to adjust and succeed. “For first-generation poor and working-class college students, surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade point average” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 3).
Lack of support systems. At the same time that first-generation college students are struggling to find their place in the college community, they often lose their place in their home environment. By virtue of attending college, they often find their relationships with family members and old friends changing or ending. Being in college distinguishes and differentiates them from their family and former social and support networks. The resulting strain on students results from feelings that family and friends do not understand the issues they are facing. These people may feel that the students are trying to be “above” them by breaking from traditional patterns and attending college. These feelings of students toward their families and vice versa can result in the disintegration of past relationships that provided support. As a result, these students struggle to fit in both at college and home. They are living, as London (1992) noted, “on the margin of two cultures” (p. 7).

Social reproduction theory. The unfamiliarity with the culture of higher education characteristic of first-generation students arguably stems from a secondary school experience that reproduces class structure. Bowles, in his landmark Unequal Education and the Reproduction of the Social Division of Labor (1971), detailed many educational practices that reinforced social and economic inequality including tracking, “objective” testing, differences in expectations based on class, and financing through local revenues. These practices still exist today in our public schools and were experienced by the respondents in the dissertation and pilot studies.

That such a system occasionally allows members of the lower classes to succeed is offered as “proof” by supporters that the educational system is fair and promotes equity.
through equality of opportunity. Taken together with other factors such as school financing through local revenues (e.g., property taxes), the public education system maintains class status which can be passed on for generations while appearing to promote equity. At the same time, by claiming to be based on the principles of equal opportunity and fairness, the current class-based K-12 school structure appeals to the traditional American value of individual achievement (i.e., the notion that anyone can succeed if they simply work hard enough).

MacLeod (1995) wrote that “the United States has a remarkably stable class structure, albeit one that is obscured by the rhetoric of classlessness” (p. 240). He argued that the cause of inequality in our society is structural. The system, not the individual, is primarily responsible for the perpetuation of the class system. The fact that there are occasional (and rare) cases of social mobility serve to strengthen, as stated above, the belief in equal opportunity and often cause those who do not "make it" to blame themselves for their failure.

MacLeod (1995) also argued, as have previous social reproduction theorists (Willis, 1977), that the school is a significant factor in social reproduction. Schools, he asserted, compel students to accept their place in society as a legitimate one because the hidden mechanisms of reproduction (including the curriculum) are cloaked by an achievement ideology. This ideology tells students that they can succeed if they work hard enough. This belief structure thereby perpetuates the myth of equal opportunity, and, again, leaves only the student to blame if s/he does not succeed. "The education
system, by sorting students according to ostensibly meritocratic criteria, plays a crucial role in the legitimization of inequality" (MacLeod, p. 113).

**Additional challenges faced.** First-generation students are less likely than non-first-generation students to be academically prepared for college. They take less rigorous high school courses and are among the lower scoring students on college entrance exams (Chen, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2001a). As previously noted, they are more likely to come from low-income families. Related to this, they are more prone to work significant hours while attending college (including often holding down full-time jobs) than their peers whose parents have a college degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a). First-generation students are more likely to have delayed their entrance into postsecondary education and, once there, to attend part-time; more likely to be non-traditional (older) and have dependents; and less likely to live on campus or to be engaged in campus activities than other students (Chen, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 1998, 2001a). Each of these characteristics of first-generation college students contributes to the fact that they leave college at disproportionately high rates (Choy 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). In the end, first-generation college students are more than twice as likely as students whose parents completed college of leaving college before graduating (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2007).

**Models for Working with and Socializing First-Generation Students**

The research on first-generation student success is predominately focused on racial and ethnic minority students. This is also the case with the models devised to advise, socialize, and teach first-generation students (see below for a discussion of these
models). The research summarized in this dissertation is on rural, poor, predominately white, first-generation students. Some themes within the models previously developed and used successfully with first-generation students of color could be adapted and applied to all first-generation students. There is the opportunity to use the information gleaned from these initiatives to inform other programs, such as student services or academic support initiatives that support first-generation students.

*Anticipatory socialization.* Making a connection, be it with a faculty member, student organization, or field of study, is crucial to the success of college students, first-generation and otherwise (Astin, 1984). The more connected the student feels to the college community, the more likely s/he is to stay. Orientation programs and first-year seminars are designed with this as a major goal. Making connections can be especially critical for first-generation students given their comparative lack of familiarity with the culture of higher education. In working with first-generation students, Rodriguez (2003) recommended that educators “promote a sense of belonging among students” (p. 21). Students need not be on campus to start this process.

Working with students in advance of their arrival on campus is a concept known as anticipatory socialization (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991), an approach that can be especially beneficial for first-generation students. “Anticipatory socialization is a process or set of experiences through which individuals come to anticipate correctly the values, norms, and behaviors they will encounter in a new social setting” (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986, p. 156). Given that social adjustment to a new culture is as much of a challenge for first-generation students as being successful academically, the
goal of anticipatory socialization programs is to reduce the learning or adjustment curve while also assisting students to be better prepared academically. Its use can lead to success in college (Attinasi, 1989).

Anticipatory socialization can encompass any number of programs and initiatives that colleges could use to increase students’ knowledge, familiarity, and comfort with the college experience. Forms of anticipatory socialization include school representatives meeting with students and their families to talk about the transition to college and faculty and staff pre-arrival mentoring relationships. Existing opportunities such as campus visits can be better used to increase their role in socialization. Attinasi (1989) established categories for anticipatory socialization activities with various levels of “intentionality.” On the lower end of intentionality were standard campus visits; activities with higher intentionality included attending a class during a campus visit. The higher the level of “direct simulation” or “quasi-college-going experience,” the more anticipatory socialization the prospective student experienced. The more that can be done to ease the transition to college, the better the odds of later success including persistence to graduation. As faculty and administrators attend to anticipatory socialization, the culture shock and anxiety of first-generation students are reduced.

Celebratory socialization. Especially vital to the success of first-generation students is the ability to overcome internally generated barriers related to one’s perceived ability to succeed academically. More specifically, “confidence in one’s relevant abilities (i.e., self-efficacy) and optimism play a major role in an individual’s successful negotiation of challenging life transitions” (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001, p. 55). This
self-confidence can be damaged early in the academic experience when a student finds that her/his background is not relevant and cultural capital is not valued on campus.

One particularly successful solution for the reduced self-confidence and devalued cultural capital is celebratory socialization. This term, coined by Van Maanen, refers to “a welcoming and confirming approach that eases the transition of newcomers to the new setting and builds on preserving their heterogeneity” (Laden, 1999, p. 60). Laden noted that this approach is based on

the pedagogical assumption that if students are provided with an academic environment that is engaging and respectful of their culture and an integrative program that is supported by the local community, the students will succeed in an academically accelerated environment (p. 62).

Using this model, coursework is designed in a way that celebrates rather than excludes the unique cultural backgrounds of students. This can be done, for example, by giving writing assignments that call on students to address their experiences. Faculty and/or administrators further use celebratory socialization by asking students to engage in discussions on topics relevant to their backgrounds. This approach has the secondary advantage of creating opportunities for students to explore and expose their heretofore devalued cultural capital.

In her collection of oral histories of first-generation students of Mexican origin, Benmayor (2002) described celebratory socialization by summarizing the experience of a class in which the cultural capital and backgrounds of the students were made an integral part of the curriculum.
They listened to each other’s life stories with enormous respect, and in their discussion demonstrated a great sensitivity to their multiple standpoints. Everyone learned from each other, but particularly from the first-generation Mexican-origin students in the class…They knew when the readings rang true and when they didn’t…Class conversations were emotional, didactic, and culturally affirming. Mexican-origin students were not in the minority and they were not rendered invisible. Their experiences were at the center of the investigation (p. 110).

Celebratory socialization programs aim to ensure that first-generation college students have the opportunity to “spend” some of their cultural capital by developing a relevant curriculum. These activities give students from underrepresented populations the opportunity to voice their stories. This affirmation of their backgrounds has the potential to provide them with a sense of belonging as well as greatly assist their assimilation into an unfamiliar, even foreign, culture.

Mentoring. First-generation, low income students have a better chance of succeeding if they are involved in a supportive relationship with a key faculty or staff member. The importance and centrality of this connection cannot be overstated.

Generally, in order to successfully move from one [social] class to the next, it is important to have a spouse or mentor from the class to which you wish to move to model and teach you the hidden rules (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2001, p. 11). While Payne et al.’s comments are focused on the transition out of poverty, their work translates well to the experience of low-income, first-generation college students. These
students, like individuals moving out of poverty, are moving into a new culture and environment.

Mentors can be essential to the success of low-income, first-generation college students. The importance of these mentors is often evident before these students arrive at college. Levine and Nidiffer (1996) conducted an extensive study on low-income students who went to college. Though the students in the study had the similarity of being low-income, like the participants in the pilot and dissertation studies, they were, in terms of other criteria, a very diverse group. In fact, they wrote that “it is difficult to imagine a more heterogeneous group of people” (p. 65). Given this, perhaps the most significant and powerful paragraph in their book is one that speaks to a common feature that made the difference in the students’ respective decisions to attend college:

The story, simply put, was of an individual who touched or changed the students’ lives. What mattered most was not carefully constructed educational policy but rather the intervention by one person at a critical point in the life of each student. Sometimes the mentor was a loving relative; other times it was someone paid to offer expert advice. In either case, it was the human contact that made the difference (p. 65).

Proactive mentorship. Interestingly, Levine and Nidiffer (1996) found that most of the students had not sought out the key mentors who ultimately made the difference. Rather, the mentors identified and proactively reached out to the students. Vincent Tinto warned of the danger of leaving opportunities for connections with students to chance (V. Tinto, personal communication, 2006). In other words, it is important that mentoring
relationships with college students be arranged and encouraged, particularly when they are not naturally occurring. In advising circles, such proactive outreach is known as “intrusive advising.” This simple concept means that faculty and advising staff actively seek out students who could benefit from a mentoring relationship. It is not left to the students to seek help. In this way, they are welcomed into a community that is invested in their success.

**Mentors from similar backgrounds.** Salome Thomas-EL elaborated on the notable credibility of mentors who overcome challenging backgrounds. There is power in the ability to say “you can be me because I was once you” (S. Thomas-EL, personal communication, November 17, 2006). Powerful mentorship occurs when the mentor can relate to or has directly experienced the students’ struggles. In the case of first-generation, low-income students this would mean having them work with faculty or staff members from similar backgrounds. Unfortunately, the number of such professionals in higher education is limited. Oldfield (2007), himself a former first-generation working class college student who became a faculty member, recommended increasing the diversity of the faculty in terms of economic class to support and serve as a resource for low-income, first-generation college students.

Tales told by former poor and working-class first-generation college students can help today’s newcomers survive and prosper in the academy. For one, these accounts can encourage other students and help them see that they are not the first to feel alone and intimidated in the land of higher education. Second, such stories can help poor and working-class first-generation college students recognize that
they can surmount the challenges they face, especially if they avail themselves of services designed to smooth their path (p. 3).

*Peer mentoring.* Faculty and staff are not the only people available for mentoring relationships with low-income, first-generation college students. Colleges increasingly use current students to deliver programs to and answer questions from prospective students. Students’ drive to help others, particularly those who overcame similar challenges, can be leveraged as a means of delivering support to struggling students. Rodriguez (2003) studied low-income, first-generation college students who became activists or chose careers working with underrepresented populations, noting the significant number of these students who, after by becoming the first in their families to graduate from college, became “catalysts for similar transformation in others’ lives” (p. 18).

One can posit that established and successful current first-generation, low-income college students would be interested in working with their peers who have yet to experience the same level of success. The use of peer tutoring services by the Academic Support Services department at the college where this study took place is an example of this type of service. Students connect with like-minded peers and find high credibility with their common experiences and background traits.

*Summary of current models.* Though models used to assist first-generation, low-income students have generally been designed with ethnic or racial minority students in mind, their features, characteristics, and contribution to success are such that they can be adapted for use with a broader student population. The successful programs and models
that have been reviewed have common ingredients which would constitute the foundation of any program that seeks to help students from at-risk backgrounds succeed. These include facilitating early interactions with the college community, proactively reaching out to these students, connecting them with support early on in their college experience, and explicitly valuing and appreciating the cultural capital of these students.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This study explored the factors identified by a sample of first-generation, low-income college students that contributed to their success to graduation. Like all first-generation, low-income college students, the participants in this study overcame significant barriers to enroll in college as well as continued to face obstacles to their success after enrolling. Given the significance of the barriers to success faced by students from this population, their achievement to graduation is impressive. This notable achievement and the paucity of literature concerning this group piqued my interest in studying students who had nearly achieved graduation.

I used qualitative research techniques, specifically interviewing, to collect data directly from the students. This approach fulfilled the first goal of this study: generate recommendations that other students from similar backgrounds might find valuable and reassuring. A second goal of the study was to suggest ways to incorporate the participants’ recommendations and insights into programs, services, and policies to improve the odds of persistence for this student demographic. The act of directly relaying the struggles, joys, and triumphs of these students in their own words gives their recommendations, and those that emerged from their stories, a credibility and resonance that would otherwise not be possible.

As noted in Chapter 1, the overall research questions explored in this study were:

1. To what factors do the students attribute their success?
2. What on-campus programs or services were helpful in leading to that success?
3. How could factors identified as leading to success among these students be leveraged to assist other students in this population to succeed in college?

These questions and the study methodology were tested in a pilot conducted prior to the full dissertation study.

*A Pilot Study – The Notion of the “Invisible Middle”*

The pilot study, conducted in 2004, involved interviews with five students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds. The pilot study research questions were similar to as well as formed the core of the initial interview questions used in the dissertation study. The purpose of the pilot study was to explore how these students developed the resiliency necessary to succeed in college. The overall research question for the study was “what experiences do successful first-generation in-state students feel have supported their academic achievement?” Specific research questions were:

1. What led the participants to attend college?
2. What were the details of their backgrounds?
3. What kind of support networks did they employ?
4. To what did they ascribe their success in college?
5. What kind of challenges had they faced during college enrollment?
6. What was helpful as they proceeded through college?
7. How did they feel their experience differed from non-first-generation students?

The pilot study interviews reinforced and supported a number of known traits associated with this population: (a) their emphasis on practical, economic reasons for going to college; (b) the mixed messages they receive from their families regarding
college attendance and lack of strong support networks; and (c) the balancing act that these students perform in juggling school, work, and family responsibilities.

A concept, the “invisible middle,” emerged from the pilot study. In other words, when viewed from a student affairs perspective, the students interviewed did not fit into existing high achieving or discipline prone student categories. They did not register on the radar of student affairs educators, as they were neither involved in campus activities nor in the judicial process. The concept of the invisible middle was fully discussed and defined in Chapter One.

The naming of this “invisible middle” increased my awareness of this student population. I better understood the need to proactively reach out as well as increase their retention rate. I envisioned a college experience, particularly in the first year, in which these students spoke with their own voices, shared their experiences, “spent” their cultural capital, and celebrated their successes. I foresaw a time when their backgrounds and experiences could be valued by college faculty and staff as pertinent and integral to their educational experience and an aid to their success to graduation.

The pilot study helped me understand the role and value of qualitative research. Qualitative interviewing enabled me to gain the insights that I did (e.g., “invisible middle”) with a depth that would not otherwise have been possible. The qualitative research of the pilot study enabled me to “walk the talk” by offering the chance to model what I hoped to see in our academic and co-curricular programs: the opportunity for participants to speak their stories in the context of their background and histories.
Rationale for Qualitative Study

Qualitative techniques were employed in the pilot and dissertation studies because they enabled me to gain in-depth information on the personal backgrounds of the individual students interviewed. The students were the only possible respondents who had the data that answered the research questions of both studies.

For the dissertation study I focused intensely on a relatively small number of successful low-income first-generation college students at a rural public college. While a larger sample using quantitative methods could yield a broader range of insights, qualitative interviewing results in a more in-depth treatment of the topic. “Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). The participants’ narratives drove the study.

Narratives are important units of discourse for research because they allow for the construction and expression of meaning, an essential activity of human existence. Probably the primary way we make sense of our experience is by casting it in a narrative form (Riessman, 1994, p. 68).

To explore the meaning participants made of their college experience, I used open ended questions in the interviewing process. This encouraged the expression of ideas and concepts not anticipated in advance of the data collection and analysis. This approach warranted a flexible approach during data collection.
Limitations

The in-depth focus on a relatively small number of respondents means that the results of this study cannot be generalized. As noted below in the overview of the research plan, the potential participant list was derived from a list of first-generation, low-income students eligible for TRIO services. This was done to insure that the participants met specific definitions of first-generation and low-income. The results of this study, therefore, cannot be generalized to students who may come from similar backgrounds to the participants but may not have applied for or filed out paperwork indicating their eligibility for TRIO services. This was not a study of TRIO students. TRIO was used only to identify first-generation and low-income students. Additionally, other factors affecting student persistence, such as campus residency status, are not considered in this study. The recommendations derived from this study, therefore, should be seen as a working hypothesis, rather than generalizable truth.

Letting the Voices Drive the Story

As indicated in Chapter One, few studies explored retention and success to graduation told in the voices of students. A notable exception is Richard Light’s *Making the Most of College: Students Speak their Minds* (2001). This work has received considerable attention because of its focus on enrollment management, retention, and persistence to graduation. Light and colleagues interviewed over 1,600 students over 10 years. The study and its findings are limited by the fact that the respondents were Harvard students. Still, it yielded numerous important findings that can inform higher
education practice. Its importance, as it relates to my study, was the use of extended student quotes that illuminated the findings.

Similar to Light (2001), Cushman (2005, 2006) used extended student quotes to describe the experience of first-generation college students. She employed this methodology in two works: one highlighted the experience of aspiring first-generation students in their high school years, and a second described their experience as college students. Her studies were used as a model for my study. This model lets the students’ voices relay the findings and interpretations by doing most of the “work.” Their words demonstrate the findings and interpretations in ways that a scholarly written summary cannot. Quotes from Cushman’s studies are offered here to demonstrate the power of this form of data analysis and reporting. In the first quote, a high school girl described how seeing her mother’s struggles and the pitfalls experienced by her siblings, pushed her toward college:

My mother works in the public school, in the food service department, she’s like a lunch lady. With a lot of kids to take care of, it was kind of hard for her. But she’s like, “I don’t want this for you, I want you to be somebody.” She didn’t want us to have the struggle she had. I saw how my sisters ended up, and all that they still are going through, with kids, married to somebody older. They weren’t happy with their life, and they didn’t have anything to show for it. So that got me thinking, I really don’t want to have to struggle like this. I don’t want to have to pick somebody just for financial reasons. I didn’t want to go to work at a low-paying, $5.15 an hour, regular job. I wanted something more. (2005, p. 12).
The use of unedited, extensive participant quotes provides a broader and richer context as well as conveys meaning and building understanding. This fuller context allows the reader to “see” the participant’s experience as well as personalize the situation described. One perspective can be gained from a review of statistics related to a social issue or concern. Quite another perspective is obtained from reading a description from someone directly impacted or involved with the issue. In the case of the quote below, “hearing” the student describe her self-doubt after arriving at college helps readers realize the depth of this concern in a way they could otherwise not appreciate:

It was really hard for me at first. I never cried because I was homesick in college—
the only reason I cried was because I felt dumb. One night I called my cousin and
I was like, “I feel so stupid, I shouldn’t be here.” (Cushman, 2006, p.10).

Cushman’s work was simple yet brilliant in its effectiveness in conveying vivid images that represent larger concepts.

The use of extended direct quotes has been effectively used in other arenas. Individual testimonies before governmental bodies have a direct impact on policy and decision making. If well documented and statistically sound studies were adequate to move policymakers to make decisions, such personal testimony would not be necessary. Often, however, it is the direct quotes, the passionate requests for action, and the real-life testimonials that are retained in the collective memory of legislators, the public, and college administrators. The words of those directly affected by the action under consideration often ultimately sway a decision. This study uses direct quotes from participants who were interviewed to construct a literature base that demonstrates the
needs of first-generation, low-income college students. The focus of this study is on the aspects of their college experience that provided them with the support to achieve success, defined as success to graduation.

**Research Plan**

The following section reviews sample selection procedures and provides a contextual description of the respondents and study’s setting. It also reviews data collection and analysis processes, quality assurances employed within the study, and data reporting strategies. I will also address how my role as the researcher may have impacted this study.

*Sample selection process.* Criterion sampling (a type of purposeful sampling) was used to determine an eligible cohort of student subjects. In criterion sampling one studies “all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). Three criteria were identified for the sample: (a) first-generation status, (b) low-income background, and (c) likelihood of graduation, based on a specific number (90) of credits completed. All students who met this criterion at the college in which the study was conducted were eligible as participants. Low-income and first-generation status was determined from a composite list of TRIO eligible students who were classified as both. In total, 22 students were identified as eligible to be included in the sample.

Of the 22 students who met the criteria for inclusion in the sample, three students had some professional relationship or interaction with me through my role as a student affairs administrator on the campus on which the study was conducted. They were removed from the list of potential sample participants. The remaining 19 potential
students were sent a letter (this means of contact was required by the Human Subjects Committee) from the director of the TRIO funded Academic Support Services office inviting them to participate in the study and letting them know I would contact them. This letter stated that they had been invited to participate in a study of TRIO eligible, first-generation college students who were successful in college as defined as retention to graduation. I followed up with a letter, followed by an email, to all invitees. Six students, nearly a third of those who were eligible and invited to participate agreed to be involved in the study. They met with the Director of the Academic Support Services office to review and sign a consent form before meeting with me. A sample consent form is attached as Appendix B.

*The sample.* The sample reflects the demographic characteristics of first-generation students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) as they pertain to gender (majority female) and age (significant percentage of non-traditional, or over the age of 22). The predominately white population of the state in which the study was conducted dictated an all white sample. The students were primarily in-state residents from rural backgrounds. In composite, of the 22 eligible study participants, 19 (86%) were female and three (14%) were male. Thirteen (59%) were non-traditionally aged students and nine (41%) were traditional age college students. Of the six participants in the final sample, five (83%) were female and one (17%) was male, and four (67%) were non-traditionally aged while two (33%) were traditional age.

All respondents had experienced some form of poverty. For some participants it was generational, in other words, long term and entrenched. For most, their poverty was
situational, attributable to specific changes in life circumstances (I term the causes of this poverty “triggering events” and discuss this concept further in Chapter Four). In either case, participants had overcome the negative characteristics associated with such poverty and/or leveraged the positive traits from their backgrounds in order to be successful college students.

Pseudonyms were used for all study participants in the data reporting and findings summarized in this dissertation. These students represented a gamut of backgrounds which, although distinct in their characteristics and narratives, represented many of the particular challenges faced by this student cohort. The traditionally aged students were Jennifer (aged 20) and Andrew (aged 22). Jennifer came from a military family and moved to the state in high school. Andrew’s parents had divorced and while growing up he lived with his mother, who struggled financially.

The non-traditionally aged students were all women. Diane (aged 45) is a single mother of three whose divorce and resulting lifestyle and financial changes led her back to college. Carol (aged 27) had dropped out of high school when she became pregnant. A mother at a young age, she completed her high school requirements and went to college. Gwen (aged 45) was also divorced, and contended with debilitating illnesses that prevented her from having consistent employment. Krista (aged 31) was a single mother and divorcee who overcame significant self-doubt in order to go to college. Collectively, these individuals conveyed the ideas and understandings that became the story of this study.
The setting. The study was conducted at a college I have dubbed High Peaks State College. Located within a rural state, the college is one of the four year colleges within the state system. Within this system, enrollment is 82% in-state with 66% of these in-state students the first in family to attend college. Reflecting the state’s higher education system, the majority of High Peaks’ students are in-state residents and first-generation college students. High Peaks State has a first to second year return rate of 61% and, more significantly, a six-year average persistence rate of 34%, which is the lowest rate in the state’s system.

Data collection. As described above, qualitative interviewing was the primary means of data collection for the study. The interview guide outlining the questions asked of participants is in Appendix A. While these initial questions were prescribed, further conversation (either after the initial questions or in a subsequent interview) was less structured. I used opportunities during the interviews to follow-up on concepts and ideas gleaned from the initial conversation. This allowed maximum latitude for students to share their stories as they wished as to determine their points of emphasis. Though my initial questions focused the conversation on the participants’ college experiences, their responses guided the substance of our conversation. Essentially I invited participants to offer a broader context – their life stories.

The interviews with respondents were recorded digitally. Data was written up in field notes. The field notes, including the interviews, were transcribed by me in summary form onto a computer. These field notes became the unit of analysis for the data.
Data analysis. Narrative analysis, which “combines a focus on people’s actual stories with some form of analysis of the social character of those stories” (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003, pp. 79-80), was used to code the data into themes and trends that emerged. Patton (2002) offered the following as the foundational questions of narrative analysis:

What does this narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came? How can this narrative be interpreted so that it provides an understanding of and illuminates the life and culture that created it? (p. 115)

The cumulative stories of the participants were compiled. The individual narratives were reviewed and sorted into themes to determine common elements across the respective participants’ stories. These thematic categories were the foundation for the findings as summarized in Chapter Four. While individual stories were unique and interesting, I was intent on discovering the themes of success that transcended their individual circumstances, personalities, and experiences with the college setting. Major themes that emerged included:

1. The critical significance of a helpful or supportive individual, particularly faculty, in their success.
2. The value of support services as a tool for their success (and the sense that more could be done to build awareness of these services).
3. The importance of flexibility in course requirements and delivery methods as well as in program requirements.
4. The high value placed on positive reinforcement and helpful feedback regarding their academic progress as a positive motivator.

5. The ways their difficult backgrounds helped them develop strengths and traits instrumental to their success.

The respondents’ stories were coded by these and other emergent themes. Extended quotes from respondents on these topics were compiled. They form the core of Chapter Four and provide the basis for the resulting recommendations reviewed in Chapter Five.

Quality assurance. Several measures were taken to insure the quality of the data collection. These measures involved two main approaches: (a) reviewing the findings with the respondents, which is a form of what Patton (2002) called “analytical triangulation” (p. 560) and (b) sharing the findings with professional and scholarly peers who were familiar with the dissertation study and the literature regarding first-generation, low-income students.

Member checking. To assure the quality of the data collected, I sent copies of the field notes of the interviews to each participant. I also included a summary of the themes and findings generated from the data. I asked the respondents to respond with any additions, corrections, or comments regarding the transcripts as well as any feedback they had on the overall findings.

Peer debriefing. I presented a summary of the findings in a meeting with the full staff of the Academic Support Services department that oversees TRIO services at High Peaks State. This hour long session gave me the opportunity to discuss my initial findings while fielding questions from staff members. This group of professionals works
with students who share the characteristics of the study participants. These administrators provided valuable feedback which ultimately informed my themes, findings, and recommendations.

I also sent a copy of my preliminary findings to two peer reviewers – members of my doctoral cohort who focused on higher education (one of whom did her dissertation on issues related to first-generation college students). I asked them to review my summary to see if it “rang true.” They were also asked to identify any areas needing clarification.

**Data reporting.** The findings and recommendations are reported by themes respectively in Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation. These themes, which emerged from the data, are further bundled chronologically based on the stages in the respondents’ college journeys in which they appeared. In other words, I used the metaphor of a journey as the framing mechanism for reporting the findings and making recommendations. Reporting the findings by themes allowed me take the individual stories that emerged and explore the larger issues they spoke to. Identifying the macro level issues from the cumulative stories of the respondents enabled me to make recommendations with implications for higher education practice.

**My place in the study.** As a researcher it is valuable to share some information about my beliefs and background. This information can assist the reader to be aware of how I approached this study, including the ways in which my background and beliefs may have affected the research process.
In terms of educational and cultural opportunities I was privileged in comparison to these students. Both my parents went to graduate school and college attendance was always assumed for me, as it was for most of my friends and relatives. In this respect, I have little in common with the students in this study. While my background may be different than that of the students I work with, I believe it is crucial to have an appreciation and understanding of their circumstances and backgrounds.

I support the practice of using economic status as an affirmative factor in college admissions process. Regarding academic support programs, I support the provision of special assistance and targeted programs for first-generation and low-income college students. I believe that it is appropriate to focus energy and resources on this group to compensate for the often under-developed nature of their support structures. Programs intended to benefit first-generation, low-income students should be designed with these students, rather than for them. In order to do so, it is vital to hear their stories and garner their input.
CHAPTER 4

Findings

Imagine you are embarking on a great journey. You have been allowed to take only a limited amount of luggage; much of what has been meaningful to you is being left behind. You’re also leaving behind many of the people on whom you’ve depended for love, support, and friendship. They cannot or do not want to go on this journey with you. You feel alone. You have heard that the “old ways” do not work as well in the place where you are going – and that you must learn new ways. In fact, you don’t even know the language of the New World! You’re not sure you can do this. You think you may be making a mistake by leaving what you know for something that is foreign. But this new place is said to be better (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi Smith, 2001, p. 77)

I chose this quote from the work of Ruby Payne and her colleagues because it succinctly captures the essence of the experience of a first-generation student from a low-income family going off to college. Though the quote is used to describe the journey out of poverty, the metaphor of a journey into a “foreign” culture where you do not know the rules and have limited support is consistent with the way these students often feel about going to college. The journey metaphor provides an effective means of describing the stages that the students in this study experienced as they navigated their way to and through college. In this dissertation I loosely employed this metaphor as a way of relaying and interpreting the stories of the students I interviewed.
Pre-journey: Factors that Led These Students to College

Before a journey can begin, participants must have sufficient motivation to undertake it. The respondents cited three main categories of factors in describing what drove them to go to college: (a) a practical focus on the perceived benefits of the degree, (b) a life circumstance or series of events that I will refer to as “triggering events,” and (c) a desire not to end up like others they knew from their backgrounds who did not graduate from college, something I will call “negative motivators.”

A practical focus. The students I interviewed cited a diverse list of reasons for going to college, but the common theme was calculated practicality. They saw college and a college degree as providing them with something they wanted, something they were lacking, or the opportunity to improve their lives in a significant way. Reasons given for going to college included the desire to make a career change or more money; earn credentials or respect; possess more life options; and better support their families.

Diane spoke of wanting to shift from a career in the restaurant business to educational administration or one that would allow her to spend more time with her children. When asked why she wanted to go to college, Jennifer’s quick response was “make money.” Andrew stated:

I didn’t want to just have a high school degree, I wanted to have a college degree, basically because I knew I needed to learn more than what I learned in high school. Also it gave me the opportunity to move out of my house to someplace that’s better, and I didn’t want to work at Wal-Mart [laughs].

Carol spoke of being motivated by her children:
For my kids – they were the biggest reason why. I want them to have every opportunity in the world and I just didn’t feel like that was going to be the case if we just stayed where we were at. And I just want them to know, I don’t want them to be like the first-generation college student…Already being in this life, they’re completely comfortable with what college is and are very aware of what college is and that means more to me than anything. They’re definitely the reason why I’m here.

Gwen had been struggling through difficult times and pinned a lot on the college degree and its rewards and benefits. She indicated that she had gone to college so that I could get a good job, so that I can make a living, so that I can increase my ability to find work…I want to get my degree so that I have more opportunity and more flexibility, so that I have the credentials to do what I want to do.

Krista articulated the multiple considerations that resulted in her pursuit of a college degree.

I wanted to work with children; I knew that from being a para-educator. I had worked with students with autism from preschool age to senior, and I knew that I really enjoyed the younger children. So I wanted to work with children, and I hadn’t known that previously. And I probably wouldn’t have originally gone to school for what I am now, because years ago I had no idea. You know, I had to have some life experience. So it worked, figuring out how I wanted to work with children, knowing that I could break down an entire senior level U.S. history course to a fourth grade level when needed, you know. I knew the work, my
work ethic was there, but I needed more. I wasn’t making enough financially, I needed to have a higher level of income to support my son. And I really wanted a higher respect level than what I was getting, you know, as a para-educator. It’s kind of like the low man on the totem pole [laughs] in the teaching world. And quite often you’re given the hardest students to deal with, you know. And you’re the person who doesn’t get the lunch breaks or the, you know, the extra pay or, you know, the real recognition.

Triggering events. Most participants cited a “triggering event” or series of circumstances that led them to attend or return to college. These “events,” which included divorce, poverty, pregnancy, illness, and parenthood (often indicators of a background of situational or generational poverty), pushed the respondents to consider the importance of going to school and improving their future prospects.

For Diane, her divorce resulted in full custody of her children including an 18 month old. She had been working in the restaurant business, which involved unpredictable hours at night, weekends, and holidays. As a single mother she realized “it just wasn’t feasible for me to go back into that type of career.” She wanted to work as an educational administrator or in a comparable field in which her work schedule would be similar to her children’s’ school schedule. Her return to college was driven by a desire to improve her employment prospects and “to be able to have my family as a strong focus in my life, which is important to me.”

Andrew was also affected by divorce, but in his case the divorce was of his parents. During his high school years he lived with his mother and did not have an active
relationship with his father. He did not have a healthy home life and had to work to buy himself food. Andrew described his home life as a “bad scene” and saw going to college as a way to get out of this environment.

Carol had had a troubled youth and dropped out of school and left home after 10th grade. Not supported as a student, she had been labeled “lazy.”

So I kind of just gave up at an early age, like 6th grade, and I just stopped trying because I knew, you know, like…OK, well if I’m trying and being told, like, I’m being lazy, why not just be lazy. So after that, you know, 7th, 8th, 9th grade was just a pretty, like, tough time with my family and stuff. And then in 10th grade I was just like “forget it” you know, this is not even worth doing anymore so that was that for a long time. And I kind of left home and just did my own thing and, you know, got into trouble.

Ultimately, Carol met the man who would become her husband and got pregnant at a young age. The realization of the responsibility associated with becoming a parent, her desire for her child to have better opportunities and to grow up in a more stable environment shaped her decision, while she was still pregnant, to complete her high school requirements and attend college.

Parenthood was also a major consideration in Krista’s decision to go to college. As a young single mother who had escaped an abusive relationship, she wanted to provide her son with a socially and economically stable life. Having worked in numerous jobs, including stints at McDonald’s and a credit investigation firm, she went to college
with the hope of finding meaningful work that would also allow her to better provide for her son.

In Gwen’s case, it was illness that led her back to college.

I’ve had multiple health problems over the last four years that have seriously impacted not only my ability to make a living, but my ability to function and take care of myself. In fact, that’s one of the reasons I decided to go back to college, not just to get my degree but I was kind of at my wit’s end. I couldn’t financially support myself, I don’t have any family, I don’t have a partner, and so I was getting sicker, and sicker, and sicker to the point where I just couldn’t physically work.

Given her physical condition, she was grateful to have school as an outlet, noting “I love school. I love it and it’s allowed me to distract myself and keep myself intellectually engaged and focus on something other than how miserably sick I’ve been feeling.” The initial motivation, however, for her to return to school, was economic as well as one associated with her health:

One of the reasons I went back to college was that I could obtain student loan money and be able to live on my student loan money and pay my bills that way, and go to college and get my degree. So it was a win-win. So my student loan money was another factor of my success. It allowed me to stop worrying about survival issues and be able to focus on my future and focus on my career path.

The role of these “triggering events” in steering respondents toward college appears significant, particularly in the case of students who had been away from school
for a period of years. In most cases it appeared as if the students would never have pursued higher education, absent these circumstances or events.

Negative motivators. A number of respondents noted how observing others in less than desirable life circumstances motivated them to attend college. Andrew offered a powerful example of this:

My parents got a divorce before ninth grade, so my father moved out and my mother just was, I don’t know, she was just angry. It wasn’t a very good place to be. So the whole time I just didn’t care. That was, I guess, that was my defense. I just didn’t care. And then by my junior year, my buddy, who was one of the smartest people I know, was going to [a private out of state university] and dropped out after a year and started working at Wal-Mart. And I looked at that and I said “uhhhh.” So I figured, well, I gotta get my grades up if I want to go to college. And then my mother announced to me my last year, she goes, “well, as soon as you graduate [high school], the day after, you gotta move out, and you can get a job at Wal-Mart.” And I was like “I don’t think so.” So two weeks after I graduated I was up here talking to [the director of academic support services].

Carol saw the dead end path that other young mothers had followed. She felt that furthering her education would enable her to have more and preferable alternatives. In her case, this meant earning her high school degree as a first step toward going to college.

I had known a lot of people that had kids and, you know, their lives just were not very nice. I just knew I was not going to be one of those moms, so I started the adult diploma program right after I found out I was pregnant. And it took me
pretty much my whole pregnancy to do this adult diploma program thing. And there was an extra part of it that was like college readiness and I decided to do that and I realized, like, I could do this, I probably could do this. And it went from like being a thing where I didn’t want my baby to have a mom that wasn’t a high school graduate to I want my baby to have a mom who’s in college. You know, I want to be a teacher, and I want to do this, and I want to do that and I can do that. That’s kind of where I feel like I’m unique. I had a 12 day old baby when I walked down the high school, you know, like when I graduated. And I felt like I had to do it for myself so I walked. At the time I was 22. I walked with a bunch of high schoolers as they graduated and it was kind of silly but I felt like it was something I had to do.

Carol went on to note that her decision to go to college and have aspirations for a type of life and career atypical of her family was not always understood or supported. She explained that her mother and step-father had worked hard over the years and had done reasonably well without college degrees. They did not know why she could not do the same.

They never supported us going to college because they just always assumed we would stay in our hometown and both work like 40 hours a week. And that’s not what I want. I don’t want to work at, you know, a grocery store and stuff like that. They never really understood the whole college thing.

Jennifer was also determined to break out of well established family patterns and expectations.
I am the only person in my family to go to college. My cousin came here; she dropped out after her first semester. My entire family has all been military; I was determined not to go in the military. I’m going to school.

The prospect of ending up, in a negative sense, like friends, family members, and other associates from their backgrounds certainly made a strong impression on a number of participants. These individuals served as real, tangible examples, showing these students what their lives might well look like should they not go to college.

**Upon Arriving – Challenges Faced**

All students interviewed for this study acknowledged that there had been points along their college journey when their self-confidence had been damaged or when they questioned their ability to succeed. These moments mainly occurred early in the participants’ college experience, as part of their transition to college or in early coursework. Factors causing these insecurities included age related concerns about changes in technology and fear of being inadequately prepared academically for college.

**Discomfort related to age.** Four of the six students in this study were non-traditionally aged students. At least two of them were in a program designed for students going back to finish their degrees after they had accumulated a significant number of college credits earlier in their educational experience. These non-traditional students credited a number of their positive attributes as students to their age (see below in this chapter). However, age was sometimes a challenge, something that made them feel out of place. This was so despite the high percentage of non-traditional and commuter students that characterized their college. Gwen gave voice to this feeling of being an
outsider looking in. “I often feel like [High Peaks] is just totally focused on the
traditional, on-campus students and [distance learning] students are left to their own
devices, left to fend for themselves. We’re left to figure things out on our own.”

In the case of the non-traditional students, the insecurity in their abilities was
exacerbated by their long absence from the classroom. Diane addressed this concern.

You kind of, you know, question yourself. Am I smart enough? I felt like I was,
but then again you go…well you know…You kinda been away from school for so
long that, you know…Are you going to be able to swing it? And is the English
and the way you write and all that…even though you do writing every day. But
when you’re writing research papers and stuff. Is all that going to come back to
you?

In addition to concerns over their absence from the classroom, the older students
spoke of some discomfort as college students due to their ages. Gwen indicated that she
was “a little intimidated, I felt very different. I’m a non-traditional student. I’m 45 years
old, I felt very strange sitting in a class of 20 year olds.” This concern over age came
through in Krista’s description of her first interaction with other students.

Oh my gosh, I was scared out of my wits [emphasis and laughter]. I came to
register for classes and there’s all these, you know, they’re kids. And here I was,
I was 28 when I started. And I’m going “Oh my god, what have I got myself
into?” Completely nervous, didn’t know my way around, didn’t know anyone, it
was crazy. If I’d gone on that first initial response I would have just run
[emphasis and laughter].
Carol offered a particularly vivid and humorous description (for those familiar with
1970s popular culture) of this conundrum.

I felt really out of place and I still do sometimes, you know. I think college is a
place where you go to find yourself, to be on your own for the first time. And for
me it was like I’m just going here strictly to learn. And at first I felt like, I felt
like, you know, Mrs. Brady going to like a reggae-fest or something [laughs].
You know, completely out of place.

Technological changes since they had last been in school were noted as a source
of concern. Diane effectively described this when she talked about the challenges faced
upon returning to the classroom.

I graduated in 1980 and computers and all that were just coming out so you’re
kind of removed from that. Whereas, you know, my children, I think, are able to
do more things than I can on computers and know a lot more so, you know,
dealing with email and things like that.

Insecurity in abilities. While the older students spoke of discomfort related to
their age, it is important to note that insecurity in one’s abilities was not limited to non-
traditional students. In fact, all respondents addressed, in some way, feelings of self-
doubt. The main fear was concern about being inadequately prepared academically or
not being smart enough to succeed. Jennifer spoke of experiencing a blow to her
confidence after receiving a D in biology. This caused her to temporarily question
whether she would make it as a college student. Carol acknowledged that “there’s been
times where I felt like I just wanted to pack up and leave.” But leaving and giving up
was not an option. She was determined to persevere. In being successful as a student, she has surprised herself.

I never, you know, 10 years ago I guess if I was told, you know, you’re going to do great in college, I wouldn’t have believed anybody that said that. Just never was an option to me or anything I was planning on doing, let alone being successful.

Krista said that she questioned her own abilities “from the beginning” and went on to explain:

I mean, I graduated high school in ’92 and I was a B/C student that doesn’t test well. And my history was I had gone to many different elementary schools and two different high schools. So I did not have confidence in my abilities. So even beginning, coming to college was a huge step for me. And going through, well there’s that test that you have to take before you can pass [a required writing course]. And I didn’t pass the first time, because I had never had that great grasp on grammar. And I’m just like “what am I doing?” But in the end, you know, I ended up getting an A for the class. I know I can write, I just can’t always “grammarly” write.

And my other fear was that the, all the tests would be beyond my ability, because when I look at a test oftentimes, I just blank. I will have studied and studied, but that test anxiety really gets me. And I only had one professor that just did those types of tests. Those tests were, you know, a lot of them were open
book or, you know, you can bring in a page of notes. I knew I could, I knew the information, so that was one of my fears as well and it really turned out well.

In Carol’s case, the challenges she experienced led her to reevaluate her plan of study and make a midstream adjustment. It did not, however, entail a setback that derailed her dreams of a degree.

After my first year, my brain was so tired [laughs] from soaking up all that material, and I was just like, “Ow, I don’t know if I can do this.” And then I had tried taking the Praxis [the teacher licensure test], and I’m not a good test taker. And failing that and then going, “OK, I want to work with children and I want to be effective, what are my other avenues?” And that’s when I switched to psychology.

All respondents expressed various levels of discomfort or doubt in their abilities. Yet all of them had successful college careers. The ways they managed to persist to graduation or the verge of it is discussed in the next sections and recommendations.

_Upon Arriving – The Tools they Brought_

When one considers at-risk students, there is a tendency to focus on deficiencies in preparation or obstacles to overcome. Identifying these areas of concern is a natural starting point to discover ways to assist students in overcoming these and being successful. However, it is equally important to realize that all students arrive at college with various strengths. Oftentimes, the personal assets they possess are offshoots of their background characteristics. In other words a low-income or first-generation background can be a source of strength, with positive traits directly derived as a result of this
particular background. Students from these backgrounds bring cultural and social capital that is useful and valuable, even if it is not outwardly appreciated or valued like the traditional capital of privileged students. These assets included self-reliance and resilience; age and experience; self-advocacy and the ability to seek help; and self-awareness and an appreciation of the opportunity to be in college.

*Self-reliance and resilience.* In Jennifer’s case, her background, which included being uprooted and moved during high school helped her develop self-reliance and resilience. These skills were of particular use when she experienced setbacks. As noted earlier, she had had some self-doubt after receiving a D in a course. Even in the wake of this disappointment she stated “I knew I was going to do it somehow, someway.” She demonstrated an ability not to let temporary setbacks detract from her ultimate goal of graduating.

Particular exams…if I don’t do well on them, just study harder for the next one. Overall in a class, I don’t know, kind of just get over it, move along to the next one. If I know I’m not doing well in a class and the class isn’t over yet, I usually see if there’s something else I can do to bring up my grade – usually there is.

This determination showed in her response to a gift from her family that came with conditions.

We [she and her siblings] were told the family would buy us a laptop when we got into college. And so my entire family pitched money in to get me a really nice laptop for my first birthday in college. If I didn’t graduate, and I dropped out,
they were taking the laptop back. I told my mom [when] she started saying that

“Like you just need to stop now, because I’m not going to drop out.”

Jennifer’s persistence was based on her strong desire to obtain her degree so that she could pursue career options beyond those experienced by her family. She stated that “when I want something, I go to get it” and her push toward graduating certainly showed this determination.

I’m graduating a year early, I figured out what I was going to do for the entire college thing. And I would bring it to my advisor and be like “these are the classes I’m taking,” instead of going in and asking them to help me figure out what classes to take. And I think that’s helped me get out early.

When she ran into problems in the classroom she used this same proactive approach, albeit it not until she had learned through experience the importance of doing so:

To not be afraid to ask for help, that’s the big thing. My first semester here, I was like completely blown away. I did not realize that classes were going to be that difficult. And I sat in class and was quiet and took notes and studied on my own. But I didn’t really go for help anywhere. And then after that I was like if I’m going to do this I’m going to have to get some help. So that’s when I started actually talking to the professors and that kind of stuff. It was my second semester.

The self-reliance that Andrew developed as a result of his difficult life circumstances in high school positioned him well for the adjustment to college.
What made it difficult for me was the whole living at home during high school – it was just a bad scene. I had to get a job so I could buy my own food. And it’s sort of like you have to grow up now, and it taught me a lot of things like how to take care of myself. So when I came to college, I mean I moved up here by myself, everybody else was moving in with their families and there’s me. And I was happy about it, it was kind my own now, so, a real opportunity.

Achieving the goal of going to college on his own was a point of pride and, in his estimation, an indicator of future success.

When I moved in, I moved in by myself. I’m looking at everybody else with their families and thinking, you know, I have a head start on them, because I was by myself. So I was happy to move in, I was ready to get it started.

_Benefits of age and experience._ The non-traditionally aged students ascribed some of their success to their background and age. These older respondents attributed their comfort in asking questions and speaking up for themselves to their age and accompanying wisdom. Diane, who described herself as outgoing and willing to take on leadership roles, explained how this was the case for her.

That probably comes more with age and experience. So I’m not afraid to ask, because I’ve always just had the motto, “all anybody can do is tell me no.” That’s the worst that they can say, so I’m not afraid to look into things that are offered and better myself in any way that I can with what’s being offered. Because, again, if you don’t ask and you don’t look, you’re not necessarily going to be told about something.
This willingness to ask for help was a recurring theme with Diane. At one point she succinctly described her strategy for succeeding in college: “I seek out help. I will go to the professor and say ‘what I am doing wrong?’ or ‘steer me in the right direction’ or try to get help from another student.” When she had a rare experience of interacting with a staff member who was not helpful she further attributed her ability to move beyond this setback to her age. She expressed concern over how a younger student might have responded:

So that really bothered me, because I just looked at it like, “this is your job.” And to look at a student and, yeah, I’m older and I’m tougher and I can kind of take it and go, “well yeah OK, then I’ll just find my own way” and I’ll go to the professor with this. But what if you did this to somebody 17? It just made me feel lousy. It was kind of intimidating, but I don’t really let things intimidate me, and probably because of my age and experience.

*Self-advocacy and seeking help.* Advocating for oneself and actively seeking help were traits shared by the respondents that they attributed to their success. Carol talked about her ability to address issues that arose without letting them fester. “As nice as I am, it’s hard for me if I don’t like something. It’s hard for me to not say when I don’t like something.” Gwen was willing to approach her classmates for assistance: “I’m not a shy person; I will ask people for their phone number or their email.” Krista stated “I haven’t gotten to this age without at least saying, if I need something I say it. But I think there are lots of people out there that don’t, you know, try to communicate.”
Though the older students saw their age as empowering and contributed to their willingness and ability to self-advocate, I was not able to determine the comparative importance of age relative to other similarly important background factors. In other words, their economic and/or family backgrounds were the reasons why they were unable to attend college at a traditional age. At the same time, these “toughened by life” skills learned from their background were the same skills that enabled them to succeed in college when they were older. Therefore, though the non-traditionally aged participants often attributed these self-enhancing skills to their age, it was not clear to what extent age could be separated out from the myriad of background traits that went into making these individuals the people they had become. Thus, while the non-traditional students often cited their age as a cause of specific positive traits such as self-advocacy, the traditionally aged students noted these same characteristics among their strengths. Ironically, age and its accompanying life skills and traits caused feelings of discomfort related to non-traditionally aged students’ preparation level and ability to succeed. As such, age was a double-edged sword for these students.

Self-awareness and appreciation for the opportunity. Sense of self was one area in which the differences in age of participants emerged as a consideration. The time gap between periods of formal education experienced by non-traditional students certainly inspired greater appreciation of their opportunity to be back in school. A few participants noted that the time away had enabled them to develop a focus and self-awareness that they may not have had if they had entered college at a traditional age. Diane saw how her age caused her to value her college experience:
I’m glad that I came back, you know, decided to come back. And I think I have a better appreciation than I would have if I had went [directly from high school] just because you were told by guidance counselors “if you don’t go to college from high school than you’ll never go.” That’s not true.

Carol spoke of the importance of having a true desire to be in college, to want to be learning and not attending simply based on the expectations of others:

I’m a non-traditional student, so I never had anybody saying “you’re going to go here and you’re going to study business and be like your Uncle Joe and your Grandpa.” And I think being older and knowing who I am as a person has helped me be successful because I came here already with like a lot of things I guess people are looking for when they go to college. So just being secure about who you are and wanting to learn I think are the two biggest factors in success in general.

*After Arriving – The Guides that Helped*

Throughout the interviews, the importance of supportive individuals, especially faculty, was cited as a reason for student success and perseverance. Supportive individuals were often noted as one of the most important factors to which participants ascribed their success. Especially appreciated were faculty members who demonstrated understanding of students’ life circumstances and who brought their own stories into the classroom. Further reflecting the importance of the faculty role was the fact that, on the downside, respondents had strong negative reactions to the comparatively few instructors with whom they had poor relationships.
The important positive role of faculty. In many cases, specific faculty members were mentioned by name and held up by the respondents as being especially instrumental in their college success. When asked what had made him successful in college, Andrew immediately responded:

I have to give a lot of credit to some of the professors that just have been motivating and helped me get through a lot of things. For instance Ted Nassau, Bar Naseem, Edward Stapelton, Tim Wooster [pseudonyms]. Just, when I take their classes, it’s just you could always do better: “come on, keep it going.” It’s good to have someone there trying to sort of push you along, because sometimes with everything that goes on, with all the studying, you kind of get lost.

These professors, so quick to be named, had a profound impact on his college experience.

And then also all of the professors I mentioned were always happy to see me show up at their office which is a great feeling too. Doesn’t matter, just if I walked by, they’d grab me, pull me in and see what’s going on and finding out how I’m doing, which is a big motivational factor too.

One of the professors Andrew mentioned helped him secure summer employment during his college years and continually encouraged him to think, consider what he wanted to do with his life, and how to get there. Jennifer also received practical advice and assistance from faculty members and spoke appreciatively of how her faculty advisor used his connections to help her find an internship.
Carol was another respondent who identified specific faculty members who played a major role in her development as a student. One was an art instructor who assisted her in developing a strong self-awareness.

She’d let me really explore who I am as person as well as an artist as well as mom, and in doing so the art that I’ve created over the years has just become so strong. And it’s been that way because she’s been there and helping. And she’s been like such a strong guide. But it’s never “you need to do it this way” or “you need to do this” or “here’s how I’d do it.” But if you ask she’s very honest in telling you those things. So she’s been my absolute, she’s like my girl, you know, I’ll always think about her forever.

The other key instructor she identified was in the education department.

He struck me in the heart, in a way, because he’s very honest with how his teaching has evolved and, you know, what he’s done over the years. And just very driven by students and kids and wants the very best for students – on the elementary level, the high school level, and the college level. It’s not like he’s doing it for himself, it’s for the students, and I’ve learned a lot from that. And I hope to bring a lot of his elements to my teaching when I am a teacher finally.

Diane noted the importance of faculty support of classes in which she struggled. She described having a hard time in microeconomics, but having an instructor who was never too busy to work with her and answer her questions. In the end, she ended up with a B+ in the class. When she was later inducted into an academic honor society, her microeconomics professor came up to her and shook her hand, a gesture that meant a
great deal to her. Diane explained, “People like that, professors like that, that just really care about your success is huge.” She then talked about a challenging course she took after returning to school that was delivered in an intensive format. She felt that the instructor recognized that she was working hard, despite the fact that she was not doing well. The instructor took the time to work with her, both assisting her with the coursework and giving her advice on her program of study (including advising her not to take an intensive for her next course). Diane was grateful to her.

She was great, and that’s what I mean about a teacher that could have really socked it to me. And just going back [to school] and that might have been very intimidating, whereas she was really helpful. And when I did the work and I did the tests I got the stuff done. But it was painful [laughs] – it was killing me actually, but I made it.

Two respondents each identified the same professor in the psychology department as someone who had been of great help to them. Krista said that this instructor “was just phenomenal in supporting me. She always had an open door. You know, if I was just even having a rough day she would take the time to listen and advise.” In describing the same instructor, Gwen noted

Not only does she give excellent feedback on your written work, and explains what you did good, where you were weak, and what you could have done better, but she also makes all of her classes very engaging. I mean, anybody that can make research methods fun…a lot of my fellow students didn’t really enjoy it, but enjoyed it because she made it fun. And she brings herself to it, she puts her own
personal stories in there, and I think that’s important for a teacher to do that. They share of themselves and their own lives, and I think that makes the class engaging and it makes the professor fun and interesting and I like that.

*The importance of flexibility.* The picture of her favorite instructor that Gwen offers is vivid and highlights another category of information concerning helpful instructors. Students were quick to discuss the traits and styles of instructors that benefited them: being approachable, giving support and advice, offering encouragement, giving constructive feedback, bringing their own stories and backgrounds into the classroom, providing freedom for creativity, and being engaging. More than any of these traits, however, there was one that stood out for its importance to participants: flexibility. Students noted professors’ willingness to be flexible and understanding around life circumstances as a major factor in their success. They appreciated instructors who recognized the many responsibilities they were juggling and, as a result, had reasonable expectations. This did not mean as students they were held to lower performance standards, but that their instructors understood school was but one of many important priorities in their students’ lives. The identified faculty were willing to work with the respondents to find a mutually agreeable means of meeting the course expectations.

“God bless my professors, who have been so accommodating” said Gwen when discussing this topic. She clearly valued the flexibility her faculty had demonstrated.

I’ve been amazed by their intelligence, their compassion, their willingness to work with me, their understanding that I do miss classes, and the recognition that even though I do miss classes that I’m keeping up with my studies. They
challenge me to think, they challenge me to perform, and they give me excellent feedback.

Andrew talked about the arrangements he made with faculty during times when he was particularly struggling to balance school work and other responsibilities.

I try to talk to the professor, maybe try to work something out. Which, a lot of times, I don’t pass in a lot of things when they’re due. I try to but I just don’t have enough time to do it because I have two jobs right now and I’m not getting a lot of support, financial support. So it’s tough and if you just tell the truth and talk to them about it usually they’re pretty understanding about it. And even if I have to take a lower grade in the course, it’s the best I can do.

Diane also spoke of her appreciation of an instructor who permitted students to take extra time to rework papers and showed latitude when it came to assignments.

I just think that’s a wonderful way to be, to give somebody that extra opportunity if they need it. Because you do get crunched with things and you get stretched out, and so it’s nice to know it’s not like “oh, OK, if you don’t pass it in then you fail.” What does that accomplish? Does anyone learn anything that way?

Krista reflected this opinion about faculty and flexibility, citing it as one of the most important traits of a good instructor. She gave this example.

My favorite instructor was open to others’ opinions, willing to research more when asked a question that they might not fully, you know, be brushed up on. Understanding when life issues arise and to be lenient in that aspect, not that it happened often, but sometimes, you know, something came up. Definite
flexibility, but it’s really just because of open-mindedness. You can tell that not only were you learning for her, but she was willing to learn from you and your views as well, you know. And that’s what really struck me as “that’s a good teacher.”

Given the responsibilities these students were juggling and the challenges they had to continually overcome to persist, it is not surprising that the need for flexibility arose as a major theme. It also emerged in the context of program requirements and course schedules and delivery methods, topics discussed later in this chapter.

*The downside: Poor faculty interactions.* The comparatively few negative experiences that these students had with instructors were memorable and made lasting impressions. These experiences further demonstrate the power of faculty and their impact upon the student experience. According the respondents, the negative experiences were in fact rare, often discussed as their “one bad experience.” The detail, precision, and, in some cases, fervor with which respondents described the individual instructors or traits of instructors they did not like or find helpful serves as a powerful cautionary tale for faculty.

Some of the participants offered broad descriptions of the types of instruction they did not like. Krista described, in general terms, a poor instructor she had experienced.

Someone who was just very set in their ways. There was only their way, you know, their understanding of the material and that it was a very black and white classroom, you know. There was right or wrong, there was no willingness to hear an argument out.
Andrew also identified the type of instruction he did not find helpful by noting
“The style I don’t like is basically straight out of the book. ‘Here’s the book, read it, I’ll test you on it.’ Well, I can do that on my own.” He explained that he did not like lectures and faculty who spoke with monotone voices. “I like a change of pace.” Andrew spoke of a lab based course in which the professor was very dry and mainly taught from the textbook: “It didn’t keep my attention and I don’t think it kept anyone else’s attention.”

The instructor traits that students did not like were predictable, like some of those noted by Krista and Andrew. Oftentimes respondents spoke of how a particular teaching style did not work well with their individual learning styles. More striking, perhaps, were the instances in which students spoke, often passionately, about individual instructors they did not like. They almost invariably described these instructors as exceptions, feeling the need to temper their descriptions of them by talking about their very positive overall experience.

Gwen followed up her story about a difficult professor by saying that this was the one bad example she had and that she did not want to dwell on it. “All of my other experiences with professors have been profoundly wonderful – wonderful opportunities, wonderful growing experiences, great support in the classroom, personal opportunities.” Despite this and similar caveats respondents offered, their stories of bad experiences with faculty members could be vivid, emotional, and intense.

Gwen’s story involved a professor she felt should be fired because of her pronounced elitism.
The first thing that I found offensive was her telling our class that we were disadvantaged and underprivileged students. OK, that might be true, but do we need to be told that? No. I think that’s very inappropriate and I think that’s an egregious mistake on her part. You know, do we need to be told that? No.

Gwen relayed that the instructor was also not helpful, stating up front that she was not going to teach her students the basics. This did not sit well with Gwen:

If Professor Leyland [pseudonym] wants to teach [her subject] at the grad level, go do it at the grad school, don’t do it at the undergrad level. My sense is that, you know she talks about her education at [a prestigious university]. Well fine, go teach to [students at that university]. “If you weren’t so underprivileged and disadvantaged.” You don’t want to be here teaching us, that’s clearly evident in her snotty attitude of supercilious superiority, then go teach at [the prestigious university].

In the end Gwen dropped the class because of the unsupportive attitude of the faculty member. She further claimed that a number of other students did as well.

Diane shared that, in her experience, some professors “make you feel like no matter what you do, you’re never going to be as smart as me or you’re not going to be as good as me.” She spoke of a professor who opened his first class by talking about how much red ink they would be seeing on their returned work. Diane was appalled.

How can you stand up there and make a judgment about 24-30 people in the classroom and you’ve never read anything that anyone has written? And you’re basically going to say you’re not going to write correctly, you’re never going to
be good enough for me. And I just went “I don’t even want to be interested in learning from someone like that.” And I don’t know, maybe he’s a terrific instructor, maybe that’s just his way of instilling fear on the first day of class. But being an older student, and I’m at the end – why am I going to subject myself to something like that?

Later in the interview she came back to this experience to describe a type of teaching inconsistent with her idea of a learning community.

Anybody that teaches with that type of instilling the fear, or whatever. Or “25% of you are going to only pass this class, three of you are going to end up with an A and the rest of you will get Cs and most of you are going to fail. I mean, what are you trying to represent?” So you stay in that class, are you really going to go to this teacher for help? When he’s already telling you you’re going to fail, or you’re basically never going to measure up. Or maybe, if you’re the lucky one that I kind of click with and you agree with what I say that you’re going to pass. Jennifer had her own tale of a professor who was, in her opinion, not helpful or supportive.

OK, I can go on about her [laughs]. She, when you ask her a question, if you don’t understand and you ask her to explain it, she’ll restate it. She does not explain it whatsoever. The entire class had an issue with her -- with not understanding her.

Jennifer described the same approach to written work in this class; the instructor would rip apart writing assignments without explaining how they could be improved: “She’s
like ‘this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong’ and we’re like ‘how do we fix it?’ she’s like ‘you do it right.’”

After Arriving – The Program Support (and Flexibility) Used Along the Way

In addition to having faculty members who helped guide and connect them, a common trait of participants was their use of support services and program flexibility. These students learned about and sought out the services they needed as well as explored and determined the most effective and efficient means of meeting their academic requirements in ways that worked well with their schedules and life styles. In other words, they learned as much as they could about “the system” and then found the ways to take maximum advantage of it.

TRIO services. All students I interviewed, by virtue of both their first-generation and low-income status, were eligible to use federally funded TRIO services. These services included skills advising, tutoring, personal counseling, mentoring, a transition year program, and career development. Some services were tailored specifically for non-traditionally aged students. As eligible students, they could borrow laptops, calculators and cameras. Notably, these successful students had familiarized themselves with these services as well as took advantage of them.

“To use different programs through the TRIO and the support services is huge,” noted Diane, and the others agreed, all citing different aspects or components of the services that they used. In discussing factors leading to her success, Jennifer noted “the things available for me to use” and went on to note a specific benefit: “The laptop lending program. The power point is a big thing because a lot of my classes require power point
presentations and my personal computer doesn’t have power point on it.” She also mentioned the helpfulness of a particular staff member in the support services office. “Anything you need to know, you ask her and she’ll find it for you.” Andrew spoke of the importance of taking advantage of the resources available on campus. He also indicated that he had benefited, at the beginning of his college career, from participating in the TRIO sponsored pre-arrival bridge program. “Instantly I had 40 people I knew rather than trying to figure it out with 1600.” Carol stated that “TRIO’s been a big help.” She talked about the staff’s availability and willingness to listen to her when she was having a bad day. “Even the littlest joy or stress – it was acknowledged.” Gwen concurred with this sentiment, describing the support services office and staff as “supportive, caring, warm, compassionate” and noting that she “always left feeling better” and feeling like “I can do this.” She spoke of a specific staff member who became a guide for her and who helped her learn more about the services she was entitled to: “She’s really empowered me and taught me about the process and what I can do for myself and what I can request. Because I have an advocate with TRIO now and the system has been explained to me, how that works, I can advocate for myself, because I know how it works now.”

Program flexibility. I previously reported findings about the importance that students place on professors’ willingness to be flexible concerning requirements. The same was true with programmatic requirements, as respondents pointedly learned of and maximized elements of flexibility within the curriculum. For a few of the students who were in the distance learning program, this emerged at the very beginning of their college
experience. A prerequisite course assessed prior learning and enabled participants to get college credit for pertinent life experiences. Diane explained the value of this program.

I really thought that the [assessment of learning course] was excellent, especially for someone my age who had business experience. And I got 28 credits from that, so I think that’s a wonderful program. It enables somebody who’s older like me to feel like, OK, you can come back to college and try to get some credits for what you already know. So you’re not retaking classes for maybe a concentration that you don’t need to, because I would have had to retake in business, you know, like, marketing and business management and all those different sorts of things, so that was a great piece.

Gwen also went through the assessment of prior learning process and described it as reaffirming. “It was wonderful and it was a great experience to go through.”

A number of student participants described their experience of simultaneously or serially taking courses with different delivery methods (e.g., on-campus, on-line). They reported favorably about having these options. Benefits of these various course formats reported by respondents included balance, opportunities for personal interaction and dialogue (particularly with on-campus courses), opportunity to fill requirements through on-line classes, and the option to arrange a more convenient schedule. Krista noted experiencing the respective benefits of in-class and on-line courses.

I did the combination. I took on-line when I could, because it’s nice if you’re up in the middle of the night, you can post…if it’s snowing out, doesn’t matter. So I
did as many on-line as I could, but I was missing the interaction, you know, the face to face interactions, so I tried to have the combination.

Diane also appreciated being able to take a variety of classes with different delivery methods and schedules. She said it was nice to have options, regardless of your differences from the traditional students: “it’s not ‘you’re a non-traditional student so you can’t be on campus, you have to do this piece.’” She described the importance of this flexibility when trying to balance significant responsibilities with schoolwork.

If I didn’t have the programs like child care after school I have for my kids so I have to do homework or whatever I wouldn’t be able, probably, to do this because it is very difficult. I have four children and I take care of my elderly mother who has dementia so I have a lot going on so being able to be a [distance learning] student [provides the flexibility to be in school]. But also having the opportunity to come on campus [in the daytime, with her children in school and mother at adult day care] whereas at nights or on weekends, that wouldn’t work for me.

This gratitude toward flexibility was not limited to non-traditional students. Jennifer spoke of how much she appreciated being part of a multi-campus system in which credits are transferred seamlessly from one institution to another. “I needed Physics II for grad school and Physics II offered here was at the same time as another course that I needed in order to graduate and so I’m taking it online through [the community college]”

Creating a better map: Doing more to inform. Interestingly, even these students who were familiar with and knowledgeable about the various services felt that more
should be done to make students aware of the full range of college academic and social support services. In some cases, participants related this to their learning curves. They noted that they had not used or been aware of services early in their student experience. Diane recommended talking to students when they initially come to campus with their family to register and “letting them know all the things that are available and not to wait until maybe they’re buried and really struggling and to seek advice and tutoring early on.” Gwen had become very familiar with the academic support services she was eligible to use, but was less familiar with other available campus services. “I just found out from another student, another TRIO student, this spring that there’s on-campus counseling. I didn’t know that. Again, that should have been another service that should have been brought to my attention.” Another example she cited was food service.

Meal plan [holds up a pamphlet] – this is the first semester, the first time I’ve ever seen this. This is something I received; it’s a flexible choice meal plan that frankly, if this is not the first time that this is being offered, I’m saddened. I’m sad, because this would have meant that I could have been having this money taken out of my student loan funds and I could have at least be getting a couple of decent meals a week when I’m on campus.

Carol spoke about students’ lack of knowledge about college finances. She indicated that she and her parents had been confused and intimidated by the financial aid process resulting in lack of knowledge about how to fund college. She ultimately found that, with some background knowledge, financial aid forms were surprisingly easy to fill out. Carol was concerned that a lack of understanding of finances was a significant
barrier to students from first-generation or low-income backgrounds who wanted to pursue college. “I just think every student needs to know they can go to college. That’s like the biggest thing.”

**Signposts Along the Way – Positive Reinforcement**

As previously noted, these students began their college journey with significant self-doubt as well as varying degrees of insecurity about their abilities. In the prior two sections, I wrote about the factors they noted as helpful to their success as they navigated their way through college: supportive faculty, support services and program flexibility. These external support features bolstered students’ confidence and provided them with valuable cultural capital as they became more familiar and comfortable with campus norms and expectations. Additionally, they experienced growing confidence in their own abilities. Since the primary way they measured their progress and development was through their academic achievements, positive feedback about their work, good grades, and/or academic awards bolstered their confidence, reenergizing and motivating them. In addition to building capital and increasing self-confidence, the support assured them they were on the right path.

Diane described doing well in a course as a “great” feeling, and noted “It boosts your self-confidence and makes you feel like you can take what you’ve learned and talk about it in a different context and apply it to other learning.” Jennifer summarized how she felt after doing well in a particularly difficult course: “Great. Oh my God. I got my first A on an exam for one of my professors that I’d had for like my entire college career,
and I was so happy I was jumping for joy [laughs].” She relayed a story of her father randomly running into her instructor.

He was like “I had your daughter in one of my classes – she was very quiet but really knowledgeable.” And that felt good, that he went out and said that to my Dad, not even ever meeting my Dad before.

Andrew had an interesting perspective on the feelings associated with doing well on a paper or exam.

It’s like winning [laughs]. Straight up – it makes you feel good. Anything else pretty much doesn’t matter that’s bringing you down at that point, that’s not too stressful. It sort of brings you up and gets you ready for the next challenge, because it just feels so good to win.

Carol spoke of how doing well academically became reinforcing, driving her to continually do better.

I love getting good grades. I love being like a positive force within…my classes and writing papers. I’m very much compelled to do that and I think that’s the biggest part of my personality is knowing that I can. It’s like, kind of like become addicting, you know, to do like the very best and drive to be the very best that I can be.

Regarding this “addiction,” she went on to explain:

You know, not in like a bad way. My priorities are always my children, so it’s like balancing that, my kids will always come out first. But I definitely love
learning. And I love getting those grades and the comments on the paper, you know, it’s exciting to read.

Carol summarized her feelings about getting positive feedback for her work with a compelling illustration of how these grades and comments related to her larger personal and family goals.

Feels really great. It feels like all of the hard work I’ve put into it, and all of the stress…because, you know, it is stressful at times. It is crazy at times. Sometimes toys will be piled to the ceiling, it feels like, because I haven’t had time to like clean the house. But it’s worth it because I know I’m doing…I’m bettering my life, my kids life, and my husband, you know, and we’re working towards this goal. So any sort of recognition, whether it’s a grade or, you know, like an award, it just, it’s reassuring to know that OK, we are in the right direction. And sure, it’s not perfect but we’re moving forward and being recognized for our hard work. So it just, it feels great [laughs].

Gwen talked about putting hard work into a paper and yet not being confident that it was good work until she got it back with a grade and comments from the instructor: “And yet, I’ll submit the paper and I’ll get it back and it’s an A! And I’ll reread and I’ll think ‘Damn, how did I write that? That’s good!’” The positive responses to her work that she received led her to feel good about her writing skills and therefore comfortable assisting other students with their writing. Being in school was a grounding force for Gwen. She responded forcefully when asked if she had ever considered dropping out:
No. Never even crossed my mind. I love school. This is the one thing over the last couple years that I can do, and I can do well, and as I complete each semester and I get my As, that I can feel that sense of accomplishment and achievement.

While Gwen repeatedly emphasized her love of learning and the associated satisfaction, it was clear that grades and instructor feedback were very important to her. She was very concerned about graduating with honors and asked for clarification of requirements for magna cum laude. Her own sense of accomplishment, while important, was not enough – she needed the recognition of others, feeling that, as an adult student, she has to work twice as hard as traditional students to be successful.

Krista had a similar take on the importance of grades and of doing well in a course.

Oh, it just feels wonderful, I mean, the emotional payoff is huge. I think I got two Cs my entire time here and those were like big blows to me. I was like “no, how could a get a C, I worked my, you know, my heart out” and so you know. But it just gave me that incentive to work all that much harder.

Further, she noted that there were practical considerations for doing well academically. “There’s also the monetary payoff – you keep your grades up, you get the scholarships and the grants. When you’re a single mom that’s pretty important.”

After Establishing a Foothold – Bringing Others Along

While difficult to pinpoint the stage in their college experiences when it occurred, each student interviewed eventually arrived at a point where they felt comfortable as a college student. There was confidence in the adequacy of the cultural capital they had
accumulated, between that which was built up throughout their college career and that they came with. Interestingly, upon achieving this summit, participants often “looked back,” to see how they could assist others from similar backgrounds in making it to and through college. As noted in Chapter Two, this commitment to the success of other students with similar background characteristics is not an uncommon phenomenon. I posit that the challenges these students faced made them more empathetic of others who struggle. Further, their obvious appreciation of and value on the support they received from others along their journeys would logically lead them to want to be able to offer similar assistance. On both of these fronts (their empathy for others and their appreciation of support) their experiences may differentiate them from students for whom going to college was a given. In short, the accrued experiences of low-income, first-generation students make them more likely to want to give back to others.

The desire to give back manifested itself in two primary ways. One was through helping other current students who were less far along in their college journey as well as struggling along the way. The other was in the current work or career aspirations that the participants had chosen.

*Helping other students.* Many participants noted that their very participation in this study was motivated to a large extent by their desire to share information that could benefit others. Gwen noted that she was participating in the study in hopes that resulting changes in practices might benefit students who came after her. She knew that she would not experience any such benefits directly.
I’d like to see a change for other people. This is not going to change or affect me.
That’s why I’m back here today, is to advocate for other people that are following behind me, because I know how I have struggled with this.

Several students noted that their assistance was sought after by their peers. Andrew indicated that his recommendations from professors have reflected the fact that he was often a leader among his classmates: “not in academics, but in getting things done, and trying hard.” He was known for his personal effort and motivational abilities, even when he sometimes still struggled with the work himself.

Diane, who wishes to pursue a career in education, noted that students would seek her out for help, something she attributed initially to the fact that she was older. After developing confidence in her own writing abilities, Gwen was comfortable assisting other students with their written work: “I’ve been able to help other students and that really makes me feel really good that I’m able to do that.”

*Helping through their life’s work.* Carol plans to become a teacher and through that work give back to students from backgrounds like hers. She hopes that she can add to the voices pushing for reforms in early education that will increase the odds of at-risk children and youth going to college.

I just think it’s really important for anybody, regardless of where they’re from, whether it’s rural, an urban setting, they just need to know they can go. Anybody who wants to go to college can go. So I would really like to see, you know, like safeguards set up at a middle school level, at a high school level, just so students can feel like they can go.
Gwen also sees her future work being directly tied to helping individuals who come from backgrounds similar to hers. She wants to work as coach or advisor, possibly in a TRIO-like setting. In particular, she would like to work with women contemplating going back to college or facing career transition. She hopes to get a masters in counseling and help students struggling with physical limitations.

I would love, actually, to be the advocate for disabled students because I know the challenges. I know the embarrassment, the not wanting to talk about it, and the needing to talk about it. And as a coach and a psychology student, I’m really sensitive to that. I can go there with people, I’ve experienced it, I’ve walked in their shoes. I am them. They are me.

Krista has also sought work directly related to helping individuals who have challenges related to her own. In her case, her job evolved from an internship she had as a college student.

I’m working at the [local family center] in the Learning Together program which is an alternative school for girls who are at-risk, pregnant, and/or parenting. So we teach life skills, academics, we have group counseling sessions, individual counseling sessions. I get them jobs, or, you know, internships. It’s a very wrap around program.

Summary of Findings

The findings provide summary answers to the first two research questions. These questions focused on to what the respondents credited their success and what on-campus programs or services they identified as contributing to their success. In general terms
students attributed their success to personal traits such as a practical focus, self-reliance, and determination; helpful and supportive individuals, especially faculty; the use of support services; program flexibility in terms of requirements and course delivery methods; and positive reinforcement they received along the way, particularly in the form of grades received and/or instructor feedback. Most of these factors have some element that was, or could be, influenced by the institution. Chapter Five will respond to the third research question by making recommendations as to how to further leverage these factors for use in helping a broader range of students from this population succeed.
CHAPTER 5

Recommendations

In order to be successful, interventions must address the obstacles often associated with low income and first generation background. These obstacles include lack of financial resources; lack of knowledge of the campus environment, its academic expectations, and bureaucratic operations; lack of adequate academic preparation; and lack of family support. In addition, interventions must ease the difficulties of the transition to college, mitigate to some degree the cultural conflict students encounter between home and college community, and help to create a more supportive, welcoming campus environment (Thayer, 2000, p. 4).

The quote above effectively summarizes the key areas to be tackled by programs and initiatives seeking to assist first-generation, low-income students. The recommendations offered in this chapter emerge from and respond to the student data summarized in Chapter Four. They seek to assist students in overcoming the barriers and obstacles described in the Thayer quote above. Chapter Four addressed the first two research questions of this study in the direct words of the respondents. The students interviewed indicated to what they attributed their success and what on-campus programs or services helped in leading to that success. This chapter seeks to respond to the third research question, which was how factors identified as leading to success among these students can be leveraged to assist other students in this population to succeed in college.

In this chapter I make recommendations associated with the various stages of the college experience, from pre-enrollment to graduation. In doing so, I continue with the
journey metaphor employed in Chapter Four. The recommendations are grouped by the periods and phases respondents experienced along their journeys. As a result they address leverage points for intervention at each stage to and through college. My hope is that they provide a framework for college administrators and faculty to better support first-generation, low-income students as they navigate their way through college.

Pre-arrival: Preparing for the Journey

Much of the groundwork for a successful college experience must be laid before the journey is begun. Recommendations in this section focus on what more can be done in working with first-generation, low-income students before their arrival at the beginning of their first year of college. Areas specifically targeted are the admissions process, the “pre-marketing” of TRIO services, and improved anticipatory socialization, particularly with parents and families.

Encouraging the journey: The admissions process. The respondents in this study, consistent with research on students from similar backgrounds (Lee, 2002), indicated practical reasons for going to college. Primary among these was that a degree would improve their economic bottom line through enhanced career and professional opportunities. Also noted in the interviews was the impact that “negative motivators” (e.g., going to college to avoid ending up like a specific negative role model) had in steering these students toward college. The question then is how colleges can leverage this knowledge to encourage students from at-risk backgrounds to attend college. While the primary focus of this study was on what the institution can do to support enrolled students, the recruitment and admissions process is obviously related to the students’
transition process in terms of encouraging their comfort level and setting reasonable expectations during this period.

It would be valuable, then, to back up a step and examine what could be done prior to a student’s acceptance to college. Admissions materials and events could highlight examples of student successes in overcoming barriers associated with challenging backgrounds. This would be a way of flipping the “negative motivators” factor on its head, providing students with positive role models to relate to. Providing examples of students who have achieved success in meeting personal goals concerning college and professional goals thereafter would also reinforce the already strong belief these students have in the practical benefits of a degree.

This last point is worth expanding. Students from at-risk backgrounds who make it through college have often bought into the notion that attaining the degree will guarantee the American Dream (however it is currently defined). At minimum a college degree will provide them with increased, and more attractive, options for their future. This was certainly the case for the participants in this study, who brought practical real-life reasons for going to college. At risk of promoting what might resemble a marketing strategy more than a means of encouraging broader college attendance, it is recommended that colleges that serve a significant number of first-generation and low-income students make explicit the links between a college degree and future possibilities. As an example, the college could highlight the career and post-college achievements of graduates who came from challenging backgrounds, using their stories to inspire prospective students. The hope is that by doing so in promotional materials and...
presentations, capable students who might otherwise not have considered college would apply. This emphasis on connecting a college degree and future options might not appeal to higher education traditionalists who espouse the value of education for its own sake. This realist approach, however, recognizes, builds on, and reinforces the practical considerations that often lead low-income, first-generation students to consider college in the first place.

In addition to the mission-life goal link that can be built through admissions, socialization and adaptation processes could be initiated with admissions activities. In his study on Mexican Americans’ perceptions of college and subsequent persistence, Attinasi (1989) noted the tendency of colleges to see admissions events such as campus tours as marketing rather than educational opportunities. “This is unfortunate, because the results of the present study suggest their potential for significant socialization to college-going; they represent opportunities for orienting the prematriculant to the university experience” (pp. 270-71). Using the example of campus tours, he indicated that these could be used to help students form a “cognitive map of the physical geography,” highlighting roles of the places toured, their relation to each other, and their connection to the student experience (p. 271). Attinasi’s study confirmed the importance of anticipatory socialization (see further discussion below). There are a number ways that the admissions process can assist students in building comfort and familiarity with the campus and its culture. These include overnight stays in the residence halls, campus visits to attend co-curricular activities, linking events or student performances and presentations to current admissions events, and class visits.
Paving the way: The advance marketing of TRIO services. The study participants clearly indicated that they felt more could be done to let students, particularly TRIO eligible students, know upfront about available support services. (I report on this finding later in this chapter when I review what more can be done to support students after their arrival.) The TRIO funded academic support services office staff at High Peaks State acknowledged that more can be done in this area, as many eligible students do not apply for services. A barrier in regard to this recommendation is the limitation on the extent to which TRIO staffers can promote services prior to students’ arrivals. Federal grant restrictions prevent the marketing services prior to both acceptance and deposit. The academic support services staff at the College attempted to compensate for this mandated late start in promoting services by pursuing a number of initiatives designed to increase familiarity with their services. Eligible students received, upon their deposit, a letter outlining the services and a TRIO application. Other avenues for getting this information out included recruitment tables at high profile events and locations, workshops on the program and its offerings given in first-year seminars and classes, emails to faculty and staff each semester that reviews services, and circulation of referral forms to faculty and staff. In short, the TRIO funded academic support services department actively recruited eligible students to make them aware of services. The initiatives cited, however, mainly took place at the beginning of the school year. Further they were geared toward the students, rather than toward the students and their families.
A recommendation emerging from this study is to increase the promotion of TRIO services to eligible students (a) before the academic year begins and (b) in a way that increases the awareness and knowledge of services by parents or guardians.

As staff seek to reach more eligible students prior to their arrival at college, institutions can make better use of outside agencies to inform eligible students of the available services once they choose a college. It would be especially helpful to work with agencies that work most directly with students who are most likely to have TRIO eligibility. Examples include organizations that assist students in developing plans to pay for college, such as state-wide student assistance organizations or federally funded TRIO programs that work with aspiring college students, such as Upward Bound or Talent Search. When these pre-enrollment programs promote the post-enrollment support services that students are eligible for, this can effectively spread the word about these services without violating TRIO grant restrictions. While these programs now coordinate their efforts to provide aspiring college students with information about available support, there is general acknowledgment that more can be done to better coordinate and streamline these efforts.

Easing the transition: Anticipatory socialization of students and families. Of critical importance in the pre-arrival stage is work that can be done with students and their families, when applicable, to help them prepare for college. Socialization issues include establishing reasonable expectations about academic work and study, becoming familiar with campus life and its social and co-curricular opportunities, exploring the physical campus, discovering where services are located, understanding the range of
academic and other support services available, and learning the requirements to access the services. Such anticipatory socialization is important for all students, but can be especially critical for first-generation, low-income students who may not have an existing frame of reference through which to understand the college experience. This knowledge could benefit them by building valued cultural capital.

The diverse ages of students in this study reflects larger trends in higher education and warrants consideration. While all students benefit from anticipatory socialization (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005), findings from this study point to a need for different approaches in its delivery depending on student age. The eligible cohort for this study was predominately non-traditionally aged (13 of 21). The relative success of non-traditionally aged first-generation, low-income students at High Peaks State compared to their traditionally aged counterparts appears to indicate that they are better prepared for college. This is likely a result of their acquired life experience. This is not to say that non-traditionally aged students do not need support in advance of enrollment. The support they need is different. The difference is in the extent to which pre-arrival support, anticipatory socialization, and admissions materials should be family tailored. In advance of their arrival, High Peaks State did a more effective job working with individuals than with families. This may be a contributing factor to why non-traditionally aged students, who are more independent and do not require as much familial support, have been more successful at High Peaks.

Data from this study supports the findings that traditionally aged first-generation, low-income students could particularly benefit from having parents or family members
on-board as supporters on their venture to college. Parental buy-in to the importance of going to college and value of the degree is particularly important. Additional areas of impact include helping parents understand and navigate the myriad forms, particularly in financial aid; demystifying the college entrance process; and building understanding of the college experience. In essence, this means guiding the parents’ socialization process so that they can better assist their students with theirs. These approaches can help parents assist their children. Knowledge in these areas can also lead to a better understanding of the journey their children are on. College orientation programs, admissions materials, and pre-enrollment materials can build understanding about these topics for parents.

Diane recommended that staff or faculty talk with students and their families as early as possible to inform them about available services. There are many opportunities to do this before the students arrive in the fall. In terms of TRIO services specifically, this could happen anytime after their deposit has been paid, and certainly can and should happen before matriculation.

A structured session to meet the goals outlined above can be tailored specifically for and with families and offered during summer registration days (or other pre-arrival events). Such registration days normally include a parent panel and/or parental information session. These often take place while students are meeting with their academic advisors or participating in an alternative orientation activity. Parent to parent or staff and parent panels provide excellent opportunities to outline the specific services available to TRIO eligible students. They can also encourage parents to urge their students to take advantage of these success enhancing services.
High Peaks State did a better job informing eligible students (as opposed to parents) of success enhancing services. This notification was achieved through individual sessions with academic support services staff members during registration day. TRIO offerings were reviewed in these sessions and students were encouraged to apply. This approach was helpful but should be bolstered. The meeting meets the socialization process goal of getting students to assume more personal responsibility. An additional session, after the individual advising meeting, that includes parents or family members could be an opportunity to bolster the socialization process, create ownership among family members, and engender home support structures for the student. The recommended two-pronged approach (i.e., actively seeking out both eligible students and their families) acknowledges the diverse demographic makeup of the student population, particularly in regard to age, and the different approaches required to reach them.

The college where this study was conducted was challenged to get eligible students to apply for and obtain services after their arrival. This challenge existed despite varied and ongoing efforts to do so. It would be especially beneficial to maximize the period between acceptance/deposit and matriculation as a stage to create opportunities to obtain a higher yield of first-generation, low-income students as well as begin their socialization.

Upon Arrival: Building on What They Brought with Them

These students possess a number of strengths and abilities when they arrive at college. At the same time, the difficult circumstances from their backgrounds can create deficiencies in their preparation and/or cause lingering challenges to be overcome in their
assimilation into college. This section contains recommendations on how to build on existing strengths and compensate for, and address, areas of difficulty that result from the students’ backgrounds.

“Spending” cultural capital: The use of celebratory socialization. Often the strengths these students possess resulted from or were direct offshoots of the challenges and difficulties they had faced in their lives. In other words, they had valuable cultural capital in hand as they began their college experience. The findings from this study support the idea that the social and cultural capital often touted as helpful in engendering college success (i.e., college preparatory high school education, parents with college degrees, financial means to access tutoring) is not the only capital leading to college success. As students with backgrounds not commonly associated with college attendance, the respondents’ traits and values are not always acknowledged within the educational environment. They are not recognized by U.S. culture as valuable in the same way as those of students from more privileged backgrounds. As a result, the question to be asked is how can the cultural capital of these students be recognized and respected? How can faculty and staff make the campus more welcoming for these students by enabling them to “spend” this cultural capital? Their cultural capital is not of value in the campus environment if there is no way to exchange it for services, programs, and other means to success. This is where the celebratory socialization model enters the picture.

First-year seminars as celebratory socialization vehicles. Based on the findings from this study, I recommend that faculty and staff explore how the content of first-year
seminars and courses could better socialize first-generation, low-income students. New first-year seminars have recently been established at High Peaks State. They seek to socialize students to campus and academic life. The seminars are interdisciplinary, connected to co-curricular activities, and composed of sections of no more than 15 students. Included among the desired learning outcomes for these courses is the development of familiarity and comfort with the High Peaks State community and the culture of academe. The concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and the different forms in which it can be expressed (and spent) can form a pedagogical foundation for the seminars.

While there were specific guidelines regarding how most of the desired learning outcomes would be achieved (e.g., appreciation of diversity through exposure to diverse perspectives and worldviews in the curriculum), no such guidelines were offered for the adjustment to college objective. This may have resulted in part from a desire to demonstrate that these new courses would have academic rigor and not be “just” an adjustment to college course. The latter approach has been derided by the faculty as not legitimate academic coursework. Thus, while learning is expected to occur in “soft” areas such as time management, interpersonal relations, and basic academic skill building, it is to be done in the larger context of the theme of the course. This approach gives the class legitimacy and makes it worthy of credit-bearing stature.

Regarding possible themes or topics for these courses, faculty and staff recommended that these be interdisciplinary, interesting, and/or relevant to students. The word “relevant,” can be built upon to create an explicit, proactive connection between the
curriculum and the experiences of the majority of students who are taking these classes (i.e., first-generation and/or low-income college students). In other words, the topics that are chosen should ideally be relevant to this particular group of students, who have the potential to benefit greatly from this experience. These courses should achieve several objectives: (a) provide students with the opportunity to incorporate learning (e.g., cultural and social capital) from their backgrounds, (b) have that capital valued, (c) validate students’ backgrounds as helpful in their new college context, and (d) instill confidence in students as they adjust to their new environment. An example of class content and process that would achieve these objectives includes using autobiography. This could allow students to learn how people, perhaps with similar backgrounds to their own, have written about and made sense of their experience. This activity, within a class context, provides a natural lead-in for students to do autobiographical work. While this is one of the most obvious ways to encourage students to bring their stories into a course and college campus, other models with similar goals could be used in virtually any subject area. An important part of the students’ autobiography could be the triggering events which precipitated their college attendance. As discussed below, these events were important turning points in the respondents’ lives.

*Responding to “triggering events”*: Demographic-specific support. Along with practical reasons and negative motivators, “triggering events” (e.g., changes in one’s personal situation related to a specific incident or series of circumstances) were commonly cited by participants as reasons for attending college. The triggering events encountered in this study included divorce, single parenting, illness, abusive
relationships, and poverty. It is worth exploring what could be done once students arrive to mitigate the stresses and strains associated with the particular “triggering events” that make up their identities.

The presence of student support groups based around common features and issues of students from at-risk backgrounds may be one way to address the pressures felt by this population of students. It became apparent in speaking with the students in this study that such groups are beneficial and sometimes naturally occurring. Because the students interviewed cited these as important it may not be enough to allow these groups to form on their own. In cases when such groups form spontaneously, they did not do so during the initial adjustment and assimilation period. In other words, they do not naturally occur in a student’s first semester, the time when they could most use support and validation. The College could be more proactive and deliberately encourage the formation of groups which address students’ needs. Krista provided an example of this phenomenon, speaking of an informal cohort of single mothers of which she had been a part, and to which she attributed much of her success.

I think the one thing the college is lacking a bit on is the support for the single parent and finding those connections, you know, that, I think, was the hardest. I wasn’t out here to party, I wasn’t out here to, you know, just go hang out. So finding that on my own, you know, it took me ‘til my second semester to really make those connections and it would have been helpful the first semester.

Krista suggests that the College establish vehicles for students to meet and communicate with others in similar circumstances.
You could do everything from putting it online…You know, having, like, some, you’ve got your online discussion boards, being able to have an online single parent discussion board and ways to connect that way because quite often that would take off and to “oh, let’s meet at this park and talk.”

Clearly, with this model, the onus would still be on the student to take advantage of this service. An alternative approach, proposed by Gwen, would be to use a more structured program. Whereas Krista had been interested in meeting with other single mothers, a subset of the population of students from first-generation and/or low income backgrounds, Gwen’s focus was on connecting with another subset of this population, students with physical difficulties. She brought up the POSSE program, which she seen featured on the news:

It’s for low income and minority students, but the way it’s structured, could equally be applied to students with disabilities. And I think the POSSE approach would be fabulous for students with disabilities, because it would give them group support, other individuals who are facing similar challenges, similar problems.

As had Krista, Gwen noted that such groups were already coming together informally:

I had formed my own little TRIO posse [of students with similar background challenges] with these two other individuals and we helped each other with study groups and resources and things like that, and I was thinking that the POSSE concept would really be a great way to help students with disabilities or even [distance learning] students who are falling through the cracks.
The salient triggering events cited by respondents did not represent a mere reminder of the importance of attending college or a nudge toward attending. They were life-changing, or at least life-shaking, and often represented a distinct place in time. This is why the support groups could be so valuable. They could provide support for students around the issue that led them to go to college in the first place.

Students want to talk to others about their backgrounds, challenges, and successes. Clearly participation in any demographic specific support group would not be mandatory and issues of confidentiality would need to be addressed. Some students would not want to be labeled or classified based on a single characteristic (especially if it is one that could be perceived negatively). These should not be reasons, however, not to explore how the College could do more to facilitate the establishment of the type of support groups that participants in this study found so helpful.

These support groups could serve as vehicles through which students can reconcile their old and new identities. As most identity development activities in college are designed for students from more traditional or privileged circumstances, students like those in this study do not have a natural context in which to identify and build their identities. These groups could serve this purpose for the students.

_After Arriving – Using Guides_

Gauging how they are doing and whether they are meeting expectations in their academic work is important for the students interviewed for this study. Knowing that they are on the right track and making progress toward their goal of graduating is essential. It is also critical that these students feel that they are successfully integrating
into the campus life and culture. Positive interactions with faculty members and positive reinforcement on their progress are two significant ways that students feel guided along their journey.

The important role of faculty as guides. This study revealed two striking themes about faculty. The first theme was how much weight students ascribed to faculty and the ways they made a positive difference in their college experience. In many cases specific faculty members’ names were offered in response to questions about what helped their success in college. Certainly one would expect faculty members to be an important part of a student’s college experience, but the extent to which faculty members were credited by students as critical was notable. The second striking aspect was the converse: the passion with which they spoke about the negative, though infrequent, experiences they had with faculty members. Perhaps the strong reaction was a result of the value they placed in obtaining a degree and because they had overcome so many barriers and continued to juggle so many responsibilities to remain in college. They reacted intensely when faculty members disappointed them or did not live up their expectations. The data suggested that these students were unable to dismiss, get through, or “ride out,” an experience with a poor instructor. Students from more privileged backgrounds, who had not invested so much in their college experience, and might arguably take it for granted, would perhaps be more willing to do so.

This study reinforces Astin’s theory of involvement (1984) in specific ways concerning faculty. According to the respondents, their success toward graduation was aided by establishing positive relationships with a faculty member. Perhaps classmates
from similar backgrounds who did not persist to graduation did not have this positive relationship or had more negative than positive experiences with faculty. This situation certainly could have contributed to an early departure.

Regardless of the cause of these strong feelings among the respondents, I speculate that faculty would be surprised by the importance attributed to their efforts, small and large. If faculty were aware of the value with which students held their interactions with faculty, they might reevaluate their delivery methods, expectations of students, and teaching styles. With increased awareness of the particular expectations, learning styles, fears, and aspirations of first-generation and low-income students who make up a significant percentage of the student body within the college under study, faculty have the potential to make a significant difference in both the success of this particular population of students and the retention rate of the institution.

The question then becomes how do we best inform faculty of student feedback in this area? I believe the most powerful way to convey the student sentiments is through their own words. The quotes from students, positive and negative, are compelling and would grab the attention of faculty members. These quotes could help reinforce and communicate the faculty-driven policies and practices cited as helpful by the respondents. These include course requirement flexibility, support and encouragement, sharing personal backgrounds and stories within the classroom, being engaging, encouraging creativity, and offering constructive feedback. The respondents' stories can be a means in which to present this information to faculty in ways that would grab their attention and, hopefully, cause them to reflect on their own teaching practices and approaches.
Strengthening the guides: Faculty training and development. To fully reap the benefits of the insights gained from the respondents and this study, several means of dissemination could be undertaken. A guide book (e.g., “What First-Generation, TRIO Eligible Students are Telling us About Teaching Styles”) could be produced. This book, circulated among faculty, could include the themes and supporting quotes from respondents. This information could also be delivered through a presentation to the faculty in their assembly or department chairs’ meetings. This information should also be provided to part-time faculty, especially important given the number of lower level (i.e., introductory or first-year) courses taught by this cohort of faculty. This information is critical enough to become a regular part of ongoing faculty development programs. Finally, these findings could be of particular importance to faculty designing and delivering the first-year seminars. A review of the student data in this study could be provided as feedback concerning these courses. The design workshops held annually for faculty proposing new first-year seminars could include insights gleaned from the respondents.

Relating to the guides: Faculty bringing “themselves” into the class. A number of students spoke of their appreciation for faculty members who brought their stories into the classroom. The sharing by faculty often described a challenge the instructor had had to overcome including difficulty mastering certain material, their evolution as instructors, or simply some challenging element they experienced. This practice was beneficial because it “humanized” the faculty for the students. The students were better able to relate to their instructors and see them as role models. They also became more
comfortable with these faculty members, making them more likely to approach them for help. The faculty member who becomes vulnerable also gains legitimacy with students. Faculty should be reminded that this level of sharing can increase the quality of their connections with students.

Credible guides: Hiring faculty from first-generation, low-income backgrounds.

TRIO funded programs, such as Upward Bound, are explicitly encouraged to hire staff members who come from the same background, as defined by their criteria, as the students with whom they work. In fact, such hiring is viewed favorably during the periodic grant reauthorization reviews of these programs. It is posited that, extending this logic, a college that serves a significant first-generation, low-income population should actively seek faculty and staff members who also come from this background. This class-based affirmation action could help students see positive role models as well as relate to people who share their background and the social and cultural capital which ensues from that. Faculty members who have come from working class backgrounds often describe the conflicts and discomfort with their role and status within the academy (Linkon, 1999; Ryan & Sackrey, 1987; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). These faculty could potentially have a better understanding than most in higher education of the obstacles and frustrations these students must navigate. Since social class often gets lost in campus discussions of diversity, the affirmative approach to hiring faculty and staff from diverse classes could advance issues of equity on campus. Hiring faculty who reflect the class composition of the student body could be a positive step toward creating a campus culture in which first-generation, low-income students feel welcome and comfortable.
Maximizing the signposts: The use of positive reinforcement. A particular point for faculty to attend to is the value that these students placed on their grades and feedback from instructors. This finding is not surprising, as prompt feedback is one of the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education established by Chickering and Gamson (1987). The importance of feedback is generally accepted as a vital component of effective instruction, particularly early in the college experience. Reinforcing this point with faculty could be achieved through the faculty training discussed above. Providing faculty with quotes from respondents on the importance of feedback would be a powerful way to demonstrate how much the students’ emphasized this topic.

While any type of feedback is important, respondents indicated that positive feedback had an enormous impact on them. A good grade or encouraging comment from an instructor was often enough to retain them in school. Students placed so much weight on their performance, as indicated by grades and instructor responses, that the reverse was also true: poor grades or negative feedback could lead them to question their abilities. When Jennifer, who prided herself on her drive and self-confidence, was asked if she had doubts about her ability to succeed in college, she responded “After seeing my D in biology, yes, I did.” This response was notable because Jennifer spoke at length of her determination and academic achievements. Yet this one poor grade was enough to cause her to experience doubts regarding her ability to succeed. In her case these doubts were short lived, as they were more than offset by her resiliency, drive, and success in other courses. We can surmise, however, that if a poor grade can have such an impact, temporary though it was, on a successful and grounded student, the effect on a less
confident or socialized student would be amplified. It could, in some cases, discourage the student from continuing in school.

Faculty can be made aware of the importance of feedback and achievement measures to students. One would hope it would be self-evident to faculty that providing quick, useful, constructive, and encouraging feedback to students is a vital part of their role, but a reminder would not hurt. Some faculty may be surprised to learn of the make or break quality this feedback can have for students. Knowing the impact that constructive and encouraging feedback can have on the success and retention of first-generation, low-income students may lead faculty members to approach this component of their teaching with increased thoughtfulness and attention. The means of delivering this message could be similar to, if not incorporated into, the faculty training delivery methods proposed earlier.

After Arriving – Using Support

The use of available support services is a significant contributor to the success of the students in this study. In this section recommendations are generated regarding how to make students aware of these services and how to work with them in designing and determining the appropriate range of services.

Providing the roadmap: Making students aware of services. As expressed in the findings, the successful first-generation, low-income students in this study used support services yet felt that more could be done to publicize these. Several students spoke of being unaware of specific services or not learning of them until later in their college experience. The participants interviewed in this study recommended that students be
made more aware of the range and nature of services available to them. A second related recommendation was to add or improve services in certain areas.

The first issue of making students more aware of available services is, on its face, the simpler task to achieve. That being said, those who work in higher education can attest to the challenge inherent in finding the best way of getting information out to students, particularly in ways that capture their attention. As previously noted, the students in this study did, in fact, take advantage of support services, many to a significant extent. Their desire to make more students aware of these services indicates the shortcomings of current efforts to alert students to them. It also shows that regardless of what is done to promote services, a significant number of students will remain unaware of them and recommend that more be done. In reality, both are probably true.

There was a disconnect between the academic support services staff who believed that students were adequately informed of these services and the students who felt that this information was not readily available. One place where this disconnect was apparent was in the use of technology. While describing the impressive number of approaches utilized to get information to students, the academic support services staff acknowledged that the department had been slow to embrace new technologies, including communication tools such as Facebook. The relatively limited number of times that staff had used on-line communication tools other than email generated higher than typical student response rates. This points to the need to explore increased use of such tools.

Co-piloting down the road: Co-constructing programs with students. An ancillary question to what can be done to make students more aware of available supports
is what services, and at what levels, can students reasonably expect a college to provide? Earlier, Gwen noted her disappointment with not being aware of on-campus counseling services and dining options. It appears that she has identified a current deficiency and area needing attention. Non-traditional or non-campus based students need to be made aware of the full range of on-campus services, not just academic support services. Other areas in which she felt the college should do more bear discussion. At one point she stated:

Social services resources. I’m saddened that it took me, really, four years of college before this piece of paper was provided to me, and it wasn’t provided through TRIO, it was provided through the career counseling services. And this is a list of the [local county] Community Resources Guide, it lists things like food resources, medical resources, transportation resources, social security disability. I’ve now just filed for social security disability because I know about it now. This should have been provided to me, through TRIO, or through someone, three years ago.

A fair response would be to ask if, in fact, that should be so. Should the college be acting as a middle agent between students and outside resources and agencies, actively seeking to keep them informed of such services? Perhaps. The College did take on this role recently went it agreed to find a way to inform graduating students of a new statewide health insurance program available for new graduates. Students are also regularly informed, through the student handbook and other means, of select outside services such as an area shelter for battered women. It would appear that in some cases it would be
appropriate for colleges to inform students of area services, particularly when those services are not available on campus. The recommendation is that this should be a topic of ongoing discussion between service providing departments and the students they serve. The hope is that consensus could be reached as to the breadth and depth of off-campus services that the College could reasonably be expected to inform students of and which services would be most helpful to highlight.

*After Arriving – Learning to Use the Map (Maximizing Program Flexibility)*

There is, of course, a role for advising in the student journey toward graduation. Students in this study spoke of their appreciation for flexibility in many contexts such as courses taken at other schools within the state system that were automatically transferred and the ability to take some classes on-line as well as in the traditional classroom. The apparently disappearing boundaries between the on-campus and distance learning programs which further facilitated this ability to choose from a variety of courses offered at various times and with different delivery methods was also cited. The students in this study were savvy and often learned of these opportunities through their own diligent pursuit of the most efficient path toward a degree. However, whether they learned of this program flexibility through their personal research or with the assistance and advice of others, they usually learned about it later in their college experience than could be most helpful. Knowing the practical focus that characterizes this student population, we can expect that students would appreciate knowing about some of these expediencies that could help more efficiently pursue their degree. It is recommended that advisors explore such options with their students early in the college experience. As with many of the
factors examined in this study, the knowledge of viable options and flexibilities to
obtaining a degree more could make the difference between a student persisting or
becoming overwhelmed and stopping out.

*After Achieving Success – Giving Back*

One of the especially hopeful and inspiring findings of this study was the extent to
which the students spoke of their desire to help others. This was particularly true in the
case of those who came from challenging backgrounds or were dealing with
circumstances similar to those they had experienced. They felt that they had insights to
share. There are some practical ways to leverage the desire of successful first-generation,
low-income students to assist their peers. A significantly strengthened student advisory
board for the TRIO funded academic support services department is one approach.
Increased student involvement could be invaluable to improving services in areas with
gaps, including determining effective communication strategies. Who better than
students to advise about what works and what does not in this area? Programs could be
improved if students have more input in their design and in the determination of the types
and range of services to be offered.

Payne, DeVol, and Dreussi Smith (2001) reminded us of the absurdity of having middle class administrators determine programs for people living in poverty without
getting their input. In essence, they are attempting to solve problems for which they do
not have an intimate understanding. The more effective approach is the co-creation of
goals. This approach and philosophy is utilized by asking first-generation and low-
income students to assist with the design of programs relevant to their needs. (Certainly
this must be done in a way that does not put an undue burden on the students.) Without regular input from students as to their changing needs, it is unlikely that administrators (even those with similar backgrounds) will be adequately attuned to those current needs. A student advisory board made up of successful students who have used, and are familiar with, the services offered would be a good start in ensuring that the needs of students are understood and responded to.

Similar to faculty influence, it would be helpful if more students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds served as role models for others. Successful student involvement as leaders in early socialization programs, as peer mentors, orientation leaders, or the like is recommended. These students could participate in peer to peer panels with prospective or first-year students, providing recommendations and insights gained through their experiences in college (“if I had known then what I know now”). This approach gives new students another opportunity to see someone they can relate to show what it takes to succeed in college. In this circumstance the college can be proactive and act with intentionality in identifying successful students from at-risk backgrounds and encourage them to serve in visible leadership positions. Such diversity (again, as defined by class) does not happen naturally when it comes to the makeup of student leadership positions. An element working against the involvement of first-generation, low-income students is the fact that students self-select into these positions. Students in the “invisible middle” avoid such extracurricular involvements in favor of an efficient and quick path toward graduation. Therefore, they are not well represented or involved, even in programs where their experience and knowledge is essential.
The high profile of student leaders (e.g., resident assistants, student government officers) often results in this same group of students being recommended for roles where faculty or staff members have discretion in the selection process. The selection of orientation leaders, then, is an excellent example of where administrators could be thoughtful about including successful students with challenging backgrounds who might not have naturally risen to their attention. In doing so, they would provide new students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds with immediate peer support and legitimate role models.

Implications for Further Research

As discussed in Chapter 3, the study was limited because all respondents were TRIO students, it was a homogenous sample by race, and did not collect data regarding on-campus residential status. Therefore the following recommendations are made for future study:

1. Increase the sample size of this study and expand the number of variables considered. For example, it would be interesting to explore how campus residency status plays a role in the success of students from this population. There likely are some tie-ins particularly as it relates to the success of traditionally aged students from this cohort.

2. Exam more closely the comparative, or relative, success of students who are first-generation and low-income but do not self-identify as such and therefore are not eligible for associated services (e.g., TRIO).
3. Study the role of gender, race, and other demographic characteristics for low-income, first-generation students.

4. Explore the value that this student population may derive from co-curricular and other student involvement. This study could include the exploration of strategies to encourage their involvement.

While the nature and format of this study prevent its findings from being generalized, considering these recommendations for further research would provide a broader base of understanding of the experiences of these students.

Conclusion

At every stage in the college journey there are opportunities for interventions that could benefit first-generation, low-income students and increase their likelihood of success toward graduation. College faculty and administrators should consider implementing such interventions at each of these junctures. More intentional admissions programming, the pre-marketing of services, and anticipatory socialization opportunities with students and their families can help build a feeling of comfort and belonging for students before their arrival on campus. After the students have arrived on campus, colleges can help them build on the skills and abilities they brought by enabling them to develop, expand and spend their cultural capital through celebratory socialization initiatives. At the same time, particular challenges in the students’ backgrounds can be addressed through targeted support.

Training and development programs should emphasize to faculty how important their role and their encouragement and feedback to students is to the success of this
population. College administrators and staff should constantly be reviewing and improving their strategies for making students aware of the wide range of support services and opportunities for flexibility available. In doing so, they should enlist student input as to the best way to share this information. Students should also have regular input into the design and range of services to be provided. Finally, colleges should look carefully at how to maximize the desire of students from this population to help their peers who are not as far along on their college journeys. Their desire to do so is a powerful indicator of how transcending low expectations and a challenging background can have a positive impact on an individual – one that s/he wants to share with others.


Appendix A

Interview Questions

What has helped you be successful in college?
Has anyone been of particular help to you during your college experience? (How so?)
What about your personality do you think helps you succeed?
What do you think it takes to be successful in college?
Describe how it feels when you feel you have done well on something academically.
How do you think your instructors would describe you as a student?
Tell me about your favorite instructor.
Tell me about your least favorite instructor.
What are some especially difficult challenges you have faced?
Have you ever wanted to quit or drop out? (If so, describe why and how this felt)
What do you do when things don’t go well in a class?
Did you ever have doubts about your ability to succeed in college? What caused these?
How do you feel the challenges you have faced have been different than those faced by other students?
Can you tell me about your personal and family background?
What did your family think about you attending college?
What were these conversations with your family like?
In what ways was your family supportive of the idea of your attending college?
Why did you want to go to college?
How did you feel upon arriving at college for the first-time?

Is there anything else you would like to add?
Appendix B

Informed Consent

Title of Research Project: Celebrating the “Invisible Middle”: Successful First-Generation and Low Income College Students

Principal Investigator: David Bergh

Faculty Sponsor: Kathleen Manning, Ph.D. Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs, University of Vermont

You are being invited to take part in this research study because you have been identified as a first-generation, TRIO eligible college student within a year of graduating from college. This study is being conducted by David Bergh, who is a doctoral student at the University of Vermont. He is also the Dean of Students at [High Peaks State College] but during this study he is acting only as a doctoral student.

If you need information to make your decision about whether to participate in the study, you are encouraged to ask questions and take the opportunity to discuss the study with anybody you think can help you make this decision, including myself, instructors, the principal investigator and/or his advisor Kathleen Manning, Associate Professor, University of Vermont.

Why is This Research Study Being Conducted?

First-generation and lower income college graduate from college at lower rates than non-first generation students. This study seeks to learn from first-generation students who are close to graduating to what they attribute their success, with the hope the information and lessons learned could inform projects and initiatives designed to improve the graduation rates of this population.

Please note that Mr. Bergh is undertaking this study as a doctoral student as part of his dissertation research. He is not interviewing you in his role as Dean of Students at [High Peaks State]. Information shared as part of this study will be used for the dissertation and to inform retention and persistence programs. Your involvement in the study will have no institutional consequences, disciplinary or otherwise, for you, the participant. Further, you will suffer no consequences should you decline participation or should you decide, at any point, to withdraw from the study.

How Many People Will Take Part In The Study?

Six students will be interviewed for this study.
What Is Involved In The Study?

You will be asked to take part in up to three interviews, each lasting approximately sixty minutes. Interviews will take place on the [HPS] campus, in a private office or conference room. Each interview will be tape recorded. You will be asked questions aimed at discovering what factors, programs, or traits have helped you succeed in college and how you have overcome obstacles you may have experienced along the way. If you do not want to participate in the interviews, you are welcome to submit information in writing or other expressive forms.

What Are The Risks and Discomforts Of The Study?

There are no significant foreseeable risks associated with this study, but it is possible that discussing your personal story and background may cause emotional distress. Should this occur the interview will be stopped in order to assess whether you are comfortable continuing. Should you require counseling or other professional assistance, the counseling center or appropriate campus department or local agency will be contacted.

What Are The Benefits of Participating In The Study?

There may be no direct benefit to you for participating. Data gained from your interview will become the findings for Mr. Bergh’s dissertation. These findings can help increase the body of knowledge related to helping first-generation and lower income students succeed. This information will be particularly helpful because it will come in the students’ own voices.

Are There Any Costs?

The only cost is your time to participate in this study.

What Is the Compensation?

You will not receive payment for participation in this study.

Can You Withdraw From This Study?

You may withdraw from the study at any time. Should you choose to withdraw any information you have provided will not be used in the study. Further, any written or recorded documentation will be returned to you or destroyed. There are no consequences resulting from withdrawing from the study.
What About Confidentiality?

Interviews will be tape-recorded. Once tapes are transcribed they will be destroyed. All information will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in any public write-up or presentation. All transcriptions and associated information will be kept in a secure and locked cabinet.

Contact Information

You may contact David Bergh, as the Principal Investigator, at anytime with any questions you have regarding this study. He can be reached at [phone number] or [e-mail address]

You may also contact Dr. Kathleen Manning, Mr. Bergh’s advisor in his doctoral program, at [phone number] or [e-mail address] for more information about this dissertation study. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project or for more information on how to proceed should you believe that you have been injured as a result of your participation in this study you should contact Nancy Stalnaker, the Institutional Review Board Administrator at the University of Vermont at [phone number].
Statement of Consent

You have been given and have read or have had read to you a summary of this research study. Should you have any further questions about the research, you may contact the person conducting the study at the address and telephone number given below. Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice.

You agree to participate in this study and you understand that you will receive a signed copy of this form.

________________________________________________________________
Signature of Subject                 Date
________________________________________________________________
This form is valid only if the Committees on Human Research’s current stamp of approval is shown below.

________________________________________________________________
Name of Subject Printed

________________________________________________________________
Signature of Witness              Date
________________________________________________________________
Name of Witness Printed

Name of Principal Investigator: David Bergh
Address: [campus address]
Telephone Number: [phone number]

Name of Faculty Sponsor: Kathleen Manning, Ph.D.
Address: [campus office], University of Vermont
Telephone Number: [phone number]
Email: [e-mail address]