

The Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences of First-Generation College Students
that Impact Persistence

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ABSTRACT

Pre-college characteristics and attributes coupled with collegiate academic and social experiences are believed to have considerable impact on student persistence (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). First-generation college students enter higher education with background challenges that could lead them to leave college before completing their degree (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001), and students who are first in their family to attend college are less likely than other students to persist and complete a degree (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). This basic qualitative study explored the out-of-classroom engagement experiences and the perceived impact of these experiences on the persistence of twelve first-generation college students at a 4-year comprehensive university in the Southeastern United States. Through individual and a focus group interviews, this study focused on out-of-classroom engagement experiences that included work, residence, athletics, clubs and organizations, and volunteer work. Astin's (1991) I-E-O Model, a conceptual guide for analyzing college student development, was adapted as the conceptual framework for this study. Findings of this study indicate that out-of-classroom experiences such as living and working on campus, involvement in clubs and student organizations, and volunteer work, can have positive impact on first-generation student persistence. This research can inform practice of student affairs practitioners in engaging first-generation students in out-of-classroom experiences that were perceived by the participants as having positive impact on their persistence, and in identifying ways to increase persistence for a population that is historically disadvantaged and less likely to complete their degree.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

College attendance and completion are critical issues facing first-generation college students today. While higher levels of education can elevate career and income status, improve the standard of living, and can mitigate the effects of family background for first-generation students, many are less likely than other students to attend or complete college (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). It was estimated that 33% of the students beginning college in 2015 have parents who did not attend college and could be categorized as first-generation (McFarland, Hussar, de Brey, & Snyder, 2017). In general, first-generation students are more likely to be Black or Hispanic, come from low-income families, and are less likely than students whose parents attended college to be academically prepared for college, attend college, and persist to attain a college degree (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora 1996).

Collegiate academic and social experiences coupled with pre-college characteristics and attributes are believed to have considerable impact on student persistence (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). A common presumption in higher education practice is that student engagement outside of the classroom results in greater levels of academic achievement and persistence (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). It has been said that out-of-classroom experiences such as

living and working on campus and involvement in extracurricular activities heighten academic performance and persistence for all students, even those with background and other hardship challenges such as first-generation status (Astin, 1999; Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993). However, because of pre-college characteristics such as family education and income status, and academic aspirations and preparation, first-generation students may have college experiences, including out-of-classroom engagement experiences that are different from those of other students and may persist at lower rates than students whose parents attended college (Astin, 1993; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

In the past, first-generation students were considered to be those that neither parent had attended college (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). More recently, researchers have begun to re-categorize first-generation students as those that have parents who may have attended college, but are first in their family to complete college and earn a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

First-generation students are more likely than their peers whose parents have a bachelor's degree to leave college before earning a degree. Among students who began college at a four-year institution in 2002, first-generation students were twice as likely as those students whose parents had a bachelor's degree to leave college during their first year or before beginning their second year (23% versus 10%). Three years after enrolling, more first-generation students who had begun postsecondary education in

2002, had left without earning a degree (33%), than those students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree (14%) (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018).

Student engagement was identified by Astin (1999) and Tinto (1993) as one of the most important conditions for college student success and persistence. Tinto claimed that the most important factor in student departure before degree attainment was the student's experiences, both academic and social, within the college. Tinto (1993) concluded that the more integrated, or engaged, a student is in the academic and social environments of the college, the more likely the student would persist. Although much has been written about the experiences of college students and the impact that engagement has on persistence, Astin, (1993, 1999), Kuh et al. (2005), Pascarella & Terenzini (2005), Tinto (1993), and Upcraft & Gardner (1989) to name a few, there are few research studies specific to first-generation students and the impact that their engagement experiences have on persistence.

The disparity in defining first-generation students, even within colleges and universities, and the lack of knowledge specific to first-generation student engagement experiences, creates a problem in identifying these students and the engagement experiences that might assist them in overcoming background challenges and persisting to earn a degree.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on a synthesis of Astin's (1991) input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model of college effects and is guided by existing student engagement and development theories (Astin, 1993, 1999; Tinto, 1993). Astin

(1991) described his input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model as a conceptual guide for analyzing college student growth or development. In Astin's model, inputs are the pre-determined characteristics at the time a student enters into college. Such inputs could be age, sex, race, socioeconomic status, educational level of parents, or academic preparedness. Environment, according to Astin, refers to various programs, policies, people, places or experiences that a student is exposed to or experiences during their time in college. These could be academic experiences, social experiences, institutional or cultural experiences, or a combination of the three (Astin, 1991). The outcome in Astin's model involves student characteristics after exposure to the environment or a particular experience. Change, or growth in the case of student development, is determined by comparing the outcome characteristics with the input characteristics.

Figure 1 depicts the concept map for this study. The arrows show connections between input, environment, and outcome. Input (pre-college characteristics) can impact environment (out-of-classroom engagement experiences), and both input and environment can impact the outcome (persistence) (Astin, 1991; Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1993). The impact can be either positive or negative (Astin, 1999).

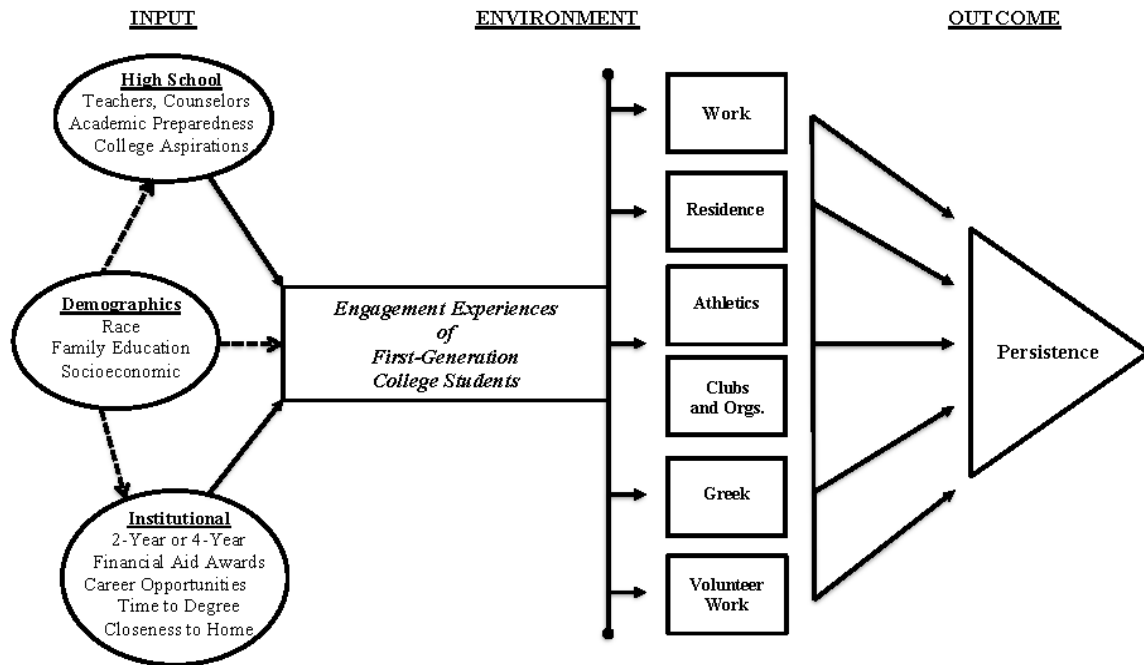


Figure 1. Concept map based on Astin's (1991) input-environment-outcome model showing pre-college characteristics and out-of-classroom engagement experiences of first-generation college students that may impact persistence.

First-Generation Students

In this study the inputs are pre-college characteristics and attributes that are common among first-generation students and are shown in the ovals to the left in the diagram (see Figure 1). First-generation students are those that are first in their family to complete college and earn a bachelor's degree, and tend to come from lower-income families (Pike & Kuh, 2005). First-generation students are also less likely than students whose parents have earned a degree to be academically prepared for college, attend college, and persist to attain a college degree (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). Students have a better chance of earning a bachelor's degree if they start their postsecondary education at a four-year institution rather than a two-year institution;

however, high school graduates whose parents did not go to college were more likely than those whose parents earned a bachelor's degree, to start college at a two-year institution (Chen, 2005). First-generation students' choice of college is often influenced by the availability of financial aid, career opportunities that are available to them upon completion, and the time it takes to obtain a degree. Many first-generation students choose to attend a college based on proximity to their home rather than a college that offers a desired academic degree (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf & Yeung, 2007).

Student Engagement

Astin (1993) and Pascarella et al. (2004) suggested that non-academic or out-of-classroom experiences have as much impact on students' college experiences as do their academic experiences. Out-of-classroom experiences that were identified by Astin (1993) and Pascarella et al. (2004) as having impact on students' college experiences include work (on and off campus), residence (on or off campus), participation in intercollegiate athletics, Greek affiliation, extracurricular involvement in clubs and organizations, and participation in volunteer work. Because of their pre-college characteristics such as family education and income status, and academic aspirations and preparation, first-generation students may have college experiences, including out-of-classroom engagement experiences, that are different from those of other students (Astin, 1993; Padgett et al., 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005). In this study, the out-of-classroom experiences of first-generation students were explored as environmental influences on persistence. These environments or experiences included work, residence, involvement

in clubs or organizations, and participation in athletics and volunteer work, and are represented in the rectangles in the middle of the diagram (see Figure 1).

Persistence

The outcome for this study was student persistence as shown in the triangle to the right side of the diagram (see Figure 1). Tinto (2012) defined persistence as the rate at which students continue to be enrolled and complete their degree, and identified first-generation and low-income status as factors that influence persistence. Choy (2001) reported that persistence was affected by such factors as academic preparedness, family income, race and ethnicity, delayed entry, financial aid accessibility, enrolling full-time versus part-time, and working full-time versus part-time, all of which can be pre-college characteristics of first-generation students.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, first-generation college students' out-of-classroom engagement experiences were explored to gain an understanding of the impact that out-of-classroom engagement experiences may have on the persistence of first-generation college students. Furthermore, I wanted to better understand how first-generation students chose their out-of-classroom experiences to inform practice for student affairs professionals in providing opportunities for engagement that are meaningful for first-generation students, and that may have an impact on their persistence.

Research Design

A qualitative design was chosen for this study because qualitative research is most often used to understand the how and why of a phenomenon and adds humanistic value to

the findings of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewing participants both individually and in a focus group, I gathered qualitative data that lead to a better understanding of how the participants made meaning of their life experiences, specifically, the first-generation students' perceptions of how out-of-classroom engagement experiences impacted their persistence. A basic interpretive approach was used to gather data from 5 participants through semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group of 7 first-generation students. The individual interview participants were respondents from a cohort of first-generation students who volunteered to participate in the study. The focus group participants were self-identified first-generation students who were first to respond to a participant recruitment email that was sent to a list of students acquired from the registrar's office of the research site institution and who met the research criteria. The face-to-face individual and group interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed and coded to identify common themes and patterns that surfaced from the data and addressed the research questions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

RQ1. How do first-generation college students choose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences?

RQ2. How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on their persistence?

Significance of the Study

Out-of-classroom experiences such as living and working on campus and involvement in extracurricular activities are thought to heighten academic performance and persistence for most students, even those with background and other hardship challenges such as first-generation status (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1993). The differences in pre-college characteristics and out-of-classroom experiences of first-generation students in comparison to students whose parents have a college degree validates the need for this research. The findings of this study will address the gap between past research and current practice as it relates specifically to the experiences and persistence of first-generation college students.

Limitations of the Study

Qualitative research findings are context and case specific (Patton, 2002). Although this study made efforts to employ best practices to reduce bias and make informed methodological decisions, the nature of qualitative research methods inevitably results in some degree of ambiguity. Relying on data collected through interviews is subject to recall error (Patton, 2002), and relying on self-reported gains or impact may call into question the validity of those responses. Interviewees may not correctly recall an event or activity, or may exaggerate or diminish the importance of an event.

Although the findings of this study contribute to the knowledge of the first-generation student experience, they are not generalizable to all first-generation students. This study was limited to first-generation college students who, at the time of the study, were registered undergraduate students and classified as junior status by having completed at least 60 semester hours or a minimum of four semesters of coursework at

one four-year institution in the Southeastern United States, and may not be typical of all first-generation students attending 4-year institutions. The participants were students who had persisted, and their experiences may not be reflective of other first-generation students at the research site institution who did not meet the criteria of this study but who may have out-of-classroom engagement experiences that impacted their persistence in one way or another. Through interviews, data was collected from students who self-selected into the study by responding to an invitation e-mail. These participants may have had different characteristics and college experiences than other first-generation students who chose not to participate in the study. The out-of-classroom engagement experiences explored were limited to the experiences that were available to the participants at one institution. While the findings of this study were limited to first-generation students who self-identified at one institution, readers may be able to adapt the findings to first-generation students at other institutions.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms will be used and are defined for the purpose of this study.

First-generation students. There are several ways to define first-generation students. First-generation refers to the educational level of the students' parents. In some research, first-generation students are defined as those who are first in their family to attend college or those students whose parents did not attend college (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). However, the research site institution for this study refers to students whose parents may have some college experience but have not earned a bachelor's degree as first-generation. This definition is also used by Engle and Tinto (2008) and

Pike and Kuh (2005), and will be used to define first-generation students for reference in this study.

Out-of-classroom engagement experiences. Engagement refers to the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to an activity or task (Astin, 1999). Engagement includes both time and energy, and experiences can be academic, social, and personal or cultural (Astin, 1999, Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Out-of-classroom experiences refers to activities that are not directly part of an institution's formal course-related instructional process (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999). This study will focus on out-of-classroom engagement experiences that include work, residence, athletics, involvement in clubs and organizations, and volunteer work (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Persistence. In some instances, retention, attrition, and persistence are used interchangeably and are often confused. There is a difference however. Retention is a term used to describe the process for keeping students enrolled at an institution. Attrition is a calculation of the number of students who leave an institution over a specified time frame. This study focuses on persistence and is defined by Tinto (2012) as the rate at which students continue to be enrolled in post-secondary education and eventually complete their degree. Similarly, Chen (2005) wrote that persistence is the likelihood of earning a postsecondary degree or still being enrolled after a selected period of time.

Organization of the Study

This chapter begins with the background and statement of the problem that supports the need for this research. Further sections include the purpose, research

questions, conceptual framework, and significance of the study. Chapter two is a review of relevant literature related to the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of first-generation students and persistence. The literature review is organized into three broad categories: a) characteristics of first-generation college students; b) student engagement theory; and, c) college student persistence. In chapter three, the methods used to gather information including the research questions that guided the study, a description of the research design, sampling and participant selection, and data collection and analysis techniques are described. Chapter four is a presentation of the results and findings from interviews with five individual participants and seven focus group participants. The final chapter is a detailed discussion of the findings that are related to the literature and address the research questions.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This research was undertaken to develop an understanding of the impact that out-of-classroom engagement experiences may have on first-generation college student persistence. A review of the literature and related research was necessary to understand first-generation college students, their college experience, and persistence. The literature review that follows is organized into three broad categories: a) pre-college characteristics of first-generation college students; b) student engagement theory; and, c) college student persistence. The first section explores characteristics such as demographics of first-generation students, first-generation student academic preparedness, and the impact of family education on college choice and experiences. The student engagement theory section is a review of literature related to the conceptual framework that informs this study, specifically, Astin's input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model, Astin's student involvement theory, and Tinto's theory of student departure. The last section covers college student persistence and the impact that out-of-classroom experiences may have on persistence.

First-Generation College Students

Historically, first-generation students were considered to be those who were first in their family to attend college (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996), and

according to the National Center for Education Statistics, a first-generation student is one that neither parent or only one parent has earned a college degree (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). However, many institutions are taking a second look at how they define first-generation students and are including those students whose parents may have some college experience, but have not earned a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

The Condition of Education is an annual U.S. Department of Education report that summarizes important developments and trends in education using available data. A special focus essay of the 2001 report included national measures on the access, persistence and attainment of first-generation students (Choy, 2001). The essay summarized the findings of a series of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) studies including the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), and the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B). The NELS studied a cohort of 1988 eighth graders every two years until 1994. The BPS included students who enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time in either 1989-90 or 1995-96. The B&B conducted follow-up surveys on 1992-93 bachelor's degree recipients in 1994 and 1997 (Choy, 2001). Choy's (2001) study is widely referenced in studies of first-generation students and serves as a foundation of measure for first-generation college students research. Choy (2001) reported that parents' education level, family income, educational expectations, academic preparation, parental involvement, and peer influence were linked to postsecondary enrollment. Students whose parents did not attend college were at a distinct disadvantage

when it came to postsecondary access, persistence, and degree attainment as compared to students whose parents had some college and those students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001).

A 2002 study by Bui studied a group of 64 first-generation college students who began their postsecondary education at a four-year institution. The study examined background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education, and first-year experiences of the first-generation students in comparison to 68 students whose parents had a bachelor's degree and 75 students whose parents had some college but no degree. Bui (2002) found that the first-generation students studied were more likely than the other students to be ethnic minority students, to come from a lower socioeconomic background, were more likely to score lower on the SAT than other students, more likely to report that they were pursuing higher education to help their family financially, and were more likely than other students to worry about financial aid for college.

In a 2007 study of data collected from the 1971 to 2005 Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Freshman Survey, Saenz et al. found that pre-college demographics, college-going motivations, and career-oriented values of first-generation college students at four-year institutions changed over time. "The CIRP Freshman Survey is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system. It is regarded as the most comprehensive source of information on college students" (Saenz et al., 2007, p. iv). The CIRP shows trends on issues such as the importance of parental encouragement, students' reasons and motivations for college attendance, students' financial concerns, the influence of family in college choice, students' pre-college

academic preparations, and students' goals at the time of entry to college (Saenz et al., 2007). Saenz et al. (2007) reported that first-generation students were at a disadvantage when it came to parental knowledge of educational systems, but had similar levels of encouragement from parents to attend and earn a degree. First-generation students, more than their peers, considered financial factors as very high importance to their choice of college and once they entered college, first-generation students were twice as likely than their peers to report major concerns about financing college (Saenz et al., 2007).

Family Education

Chen (2005) reported that among 1992 high school graduates, 27% were from families in which neither parent had any postsecondary education and were more likely to be Black or Hispanic and to be from families in the lowest income quartile (less than \$25,000). In comparison, 41% of 1992 high school graduates had parents who had some college and 33% had parents with a bachelor's degree or higher. Since 1990, the proportion of first-generation students within the overall population of first-time, full-time college freshman at four-year institutions has steadily declined, reflecting increasing levels of education among the U.S. population (Saenz et al., 2007). It was estimated that 47% of the students beginning college in 1995-96 had parents who did not attend college and could have been categorized as first-generation (Choy, 2001). However, as the percentage of the U.S. population that enrolled in college and earned a bachelor's degree increased from 21% in 1990 to 36% in 2015, the percentage of first-generation students has declined to an estimated 33% in 2015 (McFarland et al., 2017). Although the percentage of undergraduate first-generation students has declined, the group remains

sizeable. One-third of students enrolled in U. S. postsecondary institutions in 2011-2012 were believed to be first-generation (Cataldi et al., 2018).

Among first-generation students, African Americans have shown the greatest decline in representation as compared to the decline in other ethnic groups (62.9% in 1971 to 22.6% in 2005). Hispanics have remained the most likely group to be first-generation college students (38.2% in 2005) at four-year colleges. The percentage of 1992 high school graduates by race and ethnicity and family income for first-generation students was 30% Black or Hispanic and 51% from families in the lowest income quartile. Students who had parents with some college or a bachelor's degree were 74% and 83% White and 29% and 8% lowest income quartile respectively (Choy, 2001). In 2012, the highest percentage of first-generation college students were White (49%), followed by Hispanic (27%), Black (14%), Asian (5%), and students of other races (5%). Of students who were not first-generation, the majority were White (70%), followed by Black (11%), Hispanic (9%), and Asian (6%) (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

As family education increased, so did the likelihood of a student enrolling in postsecondary education (Chen, 2005). Among 1992 high school graduates whose parents did not go to college, 59% had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education two years later. The percentage increased to 75% for students with parents who had some college and 93% for students whose parents had a bachelor's degree. First-generation students lack knowledge and exposure to the college experience from their parents who did not attend college, and were more likely to make less informed decisions to attend college and in their choice of college than students whose parents have

experience with college (Chen, 2005). Among students who graduated high school in 2002, 72% of first-generation students had enrolled in postsecondary education by 2012 in comparison to 93% of their peers whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). Parental education level and family income were also found to be positive factors in degree completion (Astin & Oseguera, 2012).

Chen (2005) discovered that first-generation students had a better chance of earning a bachelor's degree if they started their postsecondary education at a four-year institution rather than a two-year institution. However, high school graduates whose parents did not go to college were more likely than those whose parents earned a bachelor's degree to start college at a two-year institution rather than a four-year institution. Among first-generation students who had enrolled in postsecondary education in 2012, 46% enrolled first in a public two-year institution while 26% of students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree enrolled in a public two-year institution (Cataldi et al., 2018). Lack of academic preparation to gain admission to a four-year institution, lower tuition costs at two-year institutions as compared to four-year institutions, and the flexibility of class schedules at two-year institutions that fit with work responsibilities were said to be factors (Choy, 2001).

Chen (2005) also noted that among students who began college at a four-year institution, first-generation students were twice as likely as those whose parents had a bachelor's degree to leave college during their first year or before beginning their second year (23% versus 10%). Comparatively, three years after enrolling, more first-generation students, 33%, who had begun postsecondary education in 2002 had left without earning

a degree than those students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree (14%) (Cataldi et al., 2018). Cataldi et al. (2018) also noted that among first-generation students who earned a bachelor's degree in 2007-2008, there was no statistically significant differences in full-time employment rates 4 years after they had finished their degree or in median annualized salaries as compared to students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree.

Socioeconomic Status

Redford and Hoyer (2017) reported that of first-generation students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in 2012, 50% came from families with income between \$20,001 and \$50,000 (considered low-income), more than any other income range, while 23% percent of students whose parents had a bachelor's degree were in this same income range. Coming from lower-income families, first-generation students were less likely to receive needed financial support from their parents and were more often expected to contribute to the family income and the financing of college by working full or part-time (Choy, 2001). In 2005, more than half of first-generation students expected to get a job to pay for college expenses and work 20+ hours per week as compared to about 37% of their peers (Saenz et al., 2007). Also, given their typically lower socioeconomic status, first-generation students more often reported attending college to make more money than their parents, and sited financial factors as very important in their choice of college (Saenz et al., 2007).

More first-generation students than their peers attended institutions within 50 miles of home and considered the proximity to home a very important reason for their

choice of college. The decision to attend a college close to home may be influenced by family socioeconomic status. Because of the proximity to home, first-generation students are less likely to live on campus in their freshman year, a factor that may predict differences in college academic and social integration and persistence (Saenz et al., 2007; Tinto, 1993).

Educational Aspirations

Degree aspirations at college entry may be indicators of eventual college success, but first-generation students tend to have lower educational aspirations than non-first-generation students (Saenz et al., 2007). This may be explained by students' lack of information about degree programs, the college process, availability of resources, parental support, and academic preparation. Educational aspirations of 1992 high school graduates were considerably less for students whose parents had no college experience as compared to students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree. Fifty-five percent of students whose parents had no postsecondary education expected to earn at least a bachelor's degree, while 77% of students whose parents had some college, and 91% of students whose parents had bachelor's degrees expected to earn at least a bachelor's degree (Terenzini et al., 1996). Redford and Hoyer (2017) found that 13% of first-generation high school sophomores in 2012 expected to graduate from high school and attend college. Of those first-generation high school students, 36% expected to obtain a bachelor's degree and 32% expected to earn a master's degree. Redford and Hoyer (2017) also found that 36% of 2012 non-first-generation high school sophomores expected to obtain a bachelor's degree, but 49% expected to earn a master's degree.

Contrary to earlier thoughts that parents of first-generation college students were sometimes a deterrent to college attendance, the number of first-generation students likely to go to college because their parents encouraged them to go more than doubled over the years, 20.9% in 1971 to 47.0% in 2005 (Saenz et al., 2007). In comparison, the decisions of the first-generation student's in Bui's study (2002) to attend college were found to be similar to the other students studied. The three groups studied responded that they decided to attend college because their friends were going, their parents expected them to go, their high school teacher or counselor encouraged them to go, or they wanted to earn their degree in order to provide a better life for their own children (Bui, 2002). Worrying about financial aid and knowing less about the social environment of the institution was a bigger concern for the first-generation students than the other students in Bui's study; however, the first-generation students had similar feelings of comfort about making friends, enjoyment of student life, and feeling accepted at their university as the other groups of students (Bui, 2002). Westbrook and Scott (2012) focused their study on the influence of parents on the persistence of first-generation students. The authors found that parents and family had a strong influence on how first-generation students faced challenges, coped with adversity, and made decisions on college attendance and persistence. First-generation students often lack cultural capital relative to a college-going experience from their families, and this may be detrimental to their persistence (Westbrook & Scott, 2012). Westbrook and Scott also reported that first-generation students often feel isolated or a separation from their families because they do not receive

needed parental support for pursuing a college degree or share similar educational aspirations.

College Preparedness

Choy (2001) reported that first-generation students, more than other students, make decisions to attend college later in their high school career which significantly hinders their academic preparation and limits their choice of college. This is important to note because taking the necessary courses in high school to prepare for college is an important step to postsecondary enrollment and persistence (ACT, 2016).

While almost one-third (28%) of all 2015 ACT test takers met college readiness benchmarks across all subjects, only 10% of first-generation 2015 ACT test takers did the same (ACT, 2016). On average, there was a 20-percentage-point difference for each subject area (English, reading, mathematics, and science) between first-generation test takers and all ACT test takers indicating that first-generation students may be less academically prepared for college than their peers whose parents have a bachelor's degree (ACT, 2016).

Student Engagement Theory

As described in the previous chapter, the conceptual framework for this study is based on student engagement theory as discussed in Alexander Astin's input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model, Astin's student involvement theory, and Vincent Tinto's theory of student departure. A detailed review of literature relevant to this framework follows.

Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome Model

Astin (1991) described his input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model as a conceptual guide for analyzing college student development. The I-E-O model is a method that can be used to assess the impact of experiences by determining whether students grow or change under various environmental conditions. In Astin's model, inputs are the pre-determined characteristics at the time a student enters into college. Such inputs could be age, sex, race, socioeconomic status, educational level of parents, or academic preparedness. Environment refers to various programs, policies, people, places or experiences that a student is exposed to or experiences during their time in college. These could be academic experiences, social experiences, or institutional or cultural experiences. The outcome involves student characteristics after exposure to the environment or a particular experience. Change or growth is determined by comparing the outcome characteristics with the input characteristics. Input (pre-college characteristics), according to Astin (1991), can impact environment (experiences), and both input and environment can impact outcome (post-environment characteristics). The impact can be either positive or negative (Astin, 1993).

Astin (1993) acknowledged that many predictive factors of student persistence in college exist, but he recognized two main predictive factors as personal and environmental. Personal factors that may be predictive of student persistence include pre-college characteristics such as academic background, family education status and income, educational aspirations, gender, ethnicity, and age. Environmental factors such as place of residence, work status, participation in extracurricular activities, and social

interactions with peers were identified as experiences that impact student persistence. Astin (1993) also noted that these environmental factors support his involvement theory, being that, the more directly involved a student is in the academic and social life of the college, the more likely the student would persist.

Similar to Astin's model, Martinez, Sher, Krull, and Wood (2009) suggest that student background characteristics, or college entry factors, are time-fixed, meaning they are measured at one point and time, and are factors that do not change. College experience factors such as place of residence, work, and involvement in campus activities are viewed by Martinez et al. (2009) as time-varying factors that can be measured over a period of time and can change over the course of a student's college career. Martinez et al. (2009) found that student characteristics can be mediated or replaced by college experience factors and therefore college experience factors may explain the association between particular student characteristics and a desired outcome.

Astin's Student Involvement Theory

Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement stems from a longitudinal study of college dropouts, and sought to identify factors in the college environment that significantly impact a student's persistence in college (Astin, 1993). The environmental factors that were identified as significant predictors of student persistence are residency, holding a part-time job on campus, participation in extracurricular activities such as social fraternities and sororities and clubs and organizations, and participation in intercollegiate sports.

There are five basic postulates in this theory, three of which directly relate to involvement and two that are more associated with student learning and personal development. The first postulate defines involvement as being the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student invests in an experience. An experience can be very general like the overall student experience, or highly specific like preparing for a biology exam. Further, Astin described student involvement as time-on-task that also involves a degree of effort. According to Astin (1999), in order for a student to achieve a desired outcome, the student must invest sufficient effort and energy and be an active participant in the experience. Astin characterized an involved student as one who devotes time and effort to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty and peers (Astin, 1999).

The second postulate of Astin's theory is that involvement occurs along a continuum. Levels of involvement vary from student to student and from experience to experience, and different students may be involved to a different degree in the same experience. The level of involvement in an experience may vary due to the pre-college characteristics of a student and the actual experience. For example, the pre-college characteristic of age may lessen a student's involvement in clubs and organizations, but that same student may be more involved in volunteer work. Also, students are involved at different levels from experience to experience and at different times. So, a student may be very involved in clubs and organizations during the fall semester but have little involvement in volunteer work, but that same student might be less involved in clubs and organizations and more involved in volunteer work around the holidays.

The assumption that involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features is postulate three. Involvement can be measured quantitatively by the amount of time (hours) spent on a task, and qualitatively by the achievement of the outcome at the completion of the task (Astin, 1999). For instance, a student's involvement in a student organization can be measured quantitatively by the amount of time spent attending meetings versus qualitatively by serving as an officer and organizing activities for the organization. Astin also notes that it is not just the quantity of involvement that matters, but also the quality of the involvement (Astin, 1999).

Postulates four and five of Astin's student involvement theory are related to student learning and personal development. Simply put,

The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quantity and quality of student involvement in that program and the effectiveness of any educational program is directly related to the capacity of that program to increase student involvement.

(Astin, 1999, p. 519)

With this, Astin suggested that students have a better chance of staying in college if they are more involved in their academic experience and in the social life of the institution, and institutions can contribute to student persistence by offering activities or programs that enhance student involvement (Astin, 1999). Kuh (2009) wrote,

The amount of time and energy students put forth, student engagement, is positively linked with the desired outcomes of undergraduate education. Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are

empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities. (Kuh, 2009, p. 683)

Kuh (2009) stated that students' pre-college disposition, expectations and student engagement, or a students' high school academic experience and extracurricular involvement and what they expected college to be like, showed to impact their college experience especially for students such as first-generation students who may not be academically prepared and who have parents who do not have experience with college.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Tinto (1993) identified involvement or engagement as one of the most important conditions for college student success and persistence. Like Astin (1999), Tinto (1993) theorized that collegiate academic and social experiences coupled with pre-college characteristics and attributes exert an overwhelming influence on persistence. Tinto claimed that the most important factor in student departure was the student's experiences within the college, which he referred to as integration. Tinto concluded that the more integrated a student was in the academic and social environments of the college, the more likely the student would persist, but integration does not necessarily ensure persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's conceptual model (1993) includes a detailed discussion of the interaction between behavior and perceptions of students as they move through three stages of integration. Tinto suggested that students needed to progress through these stages to become integrated into the college community, but cautioned that the stages were not

clearly defined or experienced sequentially, and that some students might experience the stages little by little, while others might experience the stages all at once.

The three stages, according to Tinto (1993), were separation, transition, and incorporation. Separation involves a student's ability to disassociate from the norms of past communities including families, high school friends, and accomplishments or failures. Tinto noted that students who attend a college away from their home town, live on campus, and become involved in their social environment move through the separation stage more quickly and would be more likely to persist than those that do not. The transition stage, described as the most difficult, occurs after students have successful separation from their past lives but have not yet integrated into the new college environment. Students who come from past communities similar to those of a college have a shorter transition period than those who did not. For example, students whose parents went to college are more likely to persist because their parents can guide them through the academic challenges and advise them on social dilemmas (Tinto, 1993). Incorporation, the third stage, happens when a student adapts to and adopts the norms and behaviors of their college environment. According to Tinto (1993), in order for incorporation to occur, the student needs to integrate into both the academic and social environments of the college. Rood (2009) found that first-generation students who possessed a shared belief system or common values with the institution or a group affiliated with the institution, were more likely to integrate into the social and academic environments of the college and were more likely to persist. Rood found this to be

especially true when considering faith, or involvement in faith-based activities or organizations (Rood, 2009).

Within the academic and social environments, Tinto (1993) identified two components: formal and informal. Formal academic integration refers to the relation between a student's abilities and skills and the academic demands of the college. Students who are underprepared academically or students who are under challenged were more likely to leave college. Informal academic integration refers to the relation between the values held by members of the college community and those held by the student. The more aligned these values are, the more likely the student will persist. Social integration is described by Tinto (1993) as the interactions between students and the social environment of the college. Formal social integration could be measured by students' involvement in residence hall activities, clubs and organizations, student government, intramural sports, and other extracurricular activities. Informal social integration is defined as peer-group interactions such as socializing with friends. Tinto (1993) pointed out, that it is not involvement in itself that affects persistence, but the quality of the involvement and how a student interprets and perceives the relevancy of the experiences that leads to a sense of belonging and in turn persistence.

College Student Persistence

To better understand the impact that first-generation status and out-of-classroom experiences may have on college student persistence requires that student persistence be defined. Tinto's work has been credited with expanding the field of research on college student persistence by bringing attention to factors that affect retention and attrition,

particularly the importance of academic and social integration in reducing dropout rates. These factors were discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Tinto (2012) defined student persistence as “the rate at which students who begin higher education at a given point in time continue in higher education and eventually complete their degree, regardless of where they do so” (p. 127). Student persistence is made more complex because students will sometimes temporarily stop out and may continue at another institution and it is difficult to determine whether the student has merely stopped out or has dropped out altogether (Tinto, 2012).

Tinto (1993) presented four caveats to keep in mind when interpreting data on student persistence. First, persistence and retention are different and the data that describe each is also different. Often, institutional data do not track or show student persistence as students may continue or complete their degree at an institution other than the one where they began. Second, not all students who begin higher education do so with the intent of earning a degree. For example, some students begin higher education with the intent of transferring to another institution to complete their degree. Third, factors including first-generation and low-income status should be taken into consideration when reporting and interpreting data as these factors alone make a difference in persistence and stop out rates. Finally, the average time to complete a degree at a 4-year institution is six years and three years for a 2-year institution (Tinto, 2012).

A 2001 study examined first-generation students who were otherwise equally academically prepared in terms of their grade-point average, number of remedial courses

taken in postsecondary education, and rates of persistence, compared to students whose parents attended or graduated from college (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). The study focused on a subset of students who started their postsecondary education at 4-year institutions and who were represented in the 1995-1996 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study and the First Follow-up of 1998 (BPS:96/98). Persistence was measured by whether the students were retained at their first institution, had stayed on a persistence track toward a bachelor's degree or had attained a degree. The persistence track status was determined by three values: stayed in the same 4-year institution or made a lateral transfer to a different 4-year institution, stopped out for more than four months or made an immediate or delayed downward transfer, or left postsecondary education altogether (Warburton et al., 2001).

Warburton et al. (2001) found that first-generation status was negatively associated with persistence and attainment in postsecondary education. It was reported that persistence was affected by such factors as academic preparedness, family income, race and ethnicity, delayed entry, financial aid, enrolling full-time versus part-time, and working full-time versus part-time, all factors associated with first-generation status (Choy, 2001). First-generation students were less likely to enroll in 4-year institutions and were less likely to be enrolled continuously or to attain a degree at their initial postsecondary institution than students whose parents had completed college (60% versus 73%). They were also more than twice as likely to have stopped out or left their first institution of enrollment (19% versus 8%). The first-generation students studied were less likely than the students whose parents had completed a 4-year degree to stay on the

persistence track, and they were more likely to leave the persistence track through a stop out or downward transfer, and they were twice as likely to leave their first institution of enrollment without returning (Warburton et al., 2001).

A similar study used data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey of 1995-96 (NPSAS:96) to examine the impact of background, degree aspirations, achievement, financial aid, and college experiences on the persistence of first-generation college students as compared to continuing-generation college students at 4-year institutions (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004). Using this data set NPSAS:96, enabled Somers et al. (2004) to study first-generation, low-income students who may have stopped out, changed enrollment institutions, or taken longer to complete a degree, through student aid application and awards. Of the 24,262 students studied, 8,290 were first-generation, defined as students whose parents had an education level of high school diploma or less, and 15,972 were continuing-generation, defined as those students whose parents had some college experience or had completed a degree.

For first-generation students, Somers et al. (2004) discovered that minority race students (Black or Hispanic) were more likely to persist than white first-generation students, and low-income first-generation students were less likely to persist than their middle-income counterparts. In comparison, Hispanic continuing-generation students were less likely to persist than white students, and high-income continuing-generation students were more likely to persist than middle-income continuing-generation students (Somers et al., 2004). In general, students who had high degree aspirations were less likely to be discouraged by small setbacks in financial aid awards and achievement, but

interestingly, first-generation students who aspired to bachelor's degrees were twice as likely to persist as those first-generation students with advanced degree aspirations. Both first- and continuing-generation students who attended 4-year institutions were more likely to persist than those who attended 2-year institutions (Somers et al., 2004).

Several variables of the college experience were found to impact first-generation student persistence (Somers et al., 2004). Students living on-campus were more likely to persist than those who commuted from home or lived off-campus, especially in their first year. Those first-generation students who took a full-time course load were more likely to persist, while those who worked full-time were less likely to persist. Low grade point averages and taking remedial courses lowered persistence for first-generation students. Upon analyzing the NPSAS:96 data, Somers et al. found that first-generation students were less likely to persist due to tuition increases but more likely to persist if financial aid, loans, and work-study awards were available.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and Kuh and his associates (2005), wrote volumes about student success and the engagement experiences of college students. Pascarella et al., (2004) used a sample from the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL) to estimate and understand the impact of the college experience on first-generation student persistence. The NSSL was a 3-year longitudinal research project of the U.S. Department of Education that examined the influence of academic and nonacademic experiences on student learning and persistence. A first, second, and third follow-up was conducted to examine the participants first, second- and third-year college experiences. The Pascarella et al. (2004) sample from the NSSL included 3,331 students

from 18 four-year institutions located across the U.S. The sample participants completed a NSSL survey that gathered information on student demographic and pre-college characteristics, institutional characteristics, students' academic experiences, and students' nonacademic experiences. Demographic and pre-college characteristics that were included in the survey were sex, ethnicity, family education, socioeconomic status, high school achievement level, and pre-college volunteer work. The college nonacademic or out-of-class experiences that Pascarella et al. (2004) focused on were work responsibilities, on- or off-campus residence, participation in intercollegiate athletics, Greek affiliation, extracurricular involvement, and volunteer work. It was found that first-generation students had a different experience of college than their peers. Through their third year of college, first-generation students completed significantly fewer credit hours, had lower GPAs, and worked significantly more hours per week than their peers whose parents had some postsecondary education or who had completed a degree. They were also less likely to live on campus, be involved in extracurricular activities, participate in athletics, and volunteer as compared to students whose parents had college experience (Pascarella, et al., 2004). These tendencies toward part-time enrollment, work responsibilities, living off-campus and lower levels of extracurricular involvement negatively influenced persistence of first-generation students.

Pike and Kuh (2005) attributed lower persistence and graduation rates of first-generation students to differences in pre-college characteristics and college engagement experiences. Their study used a sample of 1,227 undergraduate students at 4-year institutions from across the nation who completed the College Student Experience

Questionnaire (CSEQ), Fourth Edition. Of the sample group, 439 were first-generation and 688 were second-generation. The CSEQ asked students to self-report the frequency with which they engaged in activities that represent good educational practices and that are related to positive learning outcomes (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Noted limitations of their study were first-generation students in the study may not have been typical of all first-generation students attending 4-year colleges due to the self-reporting of engagement; there was limited classification of ethnicity as white or minority; and the study did not take into consideration family socioeconomic status.

As compared to students whose parents had some college or who had a college degree, first-generation students surveyed were less likely to live on campus, more likely to work more hours off campus, less likely to develop relationships with faculty and other students, and less likely to become involved in clubs and organizations (Pike & Kuh, 2005). These findings suggested that low levels of engagement were an indirect result of being first-generation but were directly associated with lower persistence rates for first-generation students.

Summary

Pre-college demographic characteristics and collegiate academic and social experiences that impact student persistence and that are associated with first-generation status were explored through this concentrated literature review. This chapter presented a review of relevant literature to understand first-generation college students, their college experience, and the impact that first-generation status might have on their college experience and persistence. Specifically, this literature review covered three broad

categories: a) characteristics of first-generation college students; b) student engagement theory; and, c) college student persistence.

The need to understand first-generation student status as it relates to out-of-classroom experiences and persistence has never been greater. Colleges and universities are struggling with retention and graduating students, and first-generation students, who represent a significant population of today's college students, are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to postsecondary access, persistence, and degree attainment as compared to students whose parents have some college and those students whose parents have earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001). Pre-college demographic characteristics such as academic preparedness, family education, and socioeconomic status, may impact the college experience and contribute to lower rates of persistence of first-generation college students (Bui, 2002; Chen, 20015; Choy, 2001). First-generation students are the first in their families to earn a bachelor's degree, and are more likely to be Hispanic and to be from lower-income families. First-generation students are less likely to be prepared academically, less likely to be enrolled full-time, and have lower degree aspirations as compared to other students (Saenz et al., 2007). Out-of-classroom experiences such as living and working on campus and involvement in extracurricular activities heighten academic performance and persistence for most students, even those with background and other hardship challenges such as first-generation status (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1993). However, first-generation students are less likely to live on campus, more likely to work full time and off campus, and are less likely to be involved in clubs and organizations, as compared to students whose parents have earned a bachelor's

degree (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). The differences in pre-college characteristics and out-of-classroom experiences of first-generation students in comparison to students whose parents have college experience or a college degree, validates the need for this research to understand first-generation college students, their college experience, and the impact that first-generation status has on their college experience and persistence. The following chapter will outline the methods used to gather and analyze the research data including the research questions that guided the study, a description of the research design, and sampling and participant selection.

Chapter III
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this study, first-generation college students' out-of-classroom engagement experiences were explored. The primary purpose was to gain an understanding of the impact that out-of-classroom engagement experiences may have had on the persistence of first-generation college students. First-generation students are the first in their families to finish college and are more likely to be from lower-income families. First-generation students are less likely to be prepared academically, less likely to be enrolled full-time, and have lower degree aspirations as compared to other students (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Saenz et al., 2007). Out-of-classroom experiences such as living and working on campus and involvement in extracurricular activities are said to heighten academic performance and persistence for most students, even those with background and other hardship challenges such as first-generation status (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). The conceptual framework for this study was based on student engagement theory as discussed in Alexander Astin's input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model, Astin's student involvement theory, and Vincent Tinto's theory of student departure (Astin, 1991, 1999; Tinto, 1993).

Although much has been written about the experiences of college students and the impact that academic and social engagement has on persistence (Astin, 1993, 1999; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 2012; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989), few studies are specific to first-generation students' and the impact that out-of-classroom experiences have on persistence (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). The differences in pre-college characteristics and college experiences of first-generation students in comparison to students whose parents have college experience or a college degree, validates the need for this research to better understand first-generation college students and the impact that first-generation status has on out-of-classroom engagement experiences and persistence. This chapter details the methods used to gather information including the research questions that guided the study, a description of the research design, sampling and participant selection, and data collection and analysis techniques.

Research Questions

These research questions guided this study.

1. How do first-generation college students choose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences?
2. How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on their persistence?

Research Design

A basic qualitative design was chosen for this study because qualitative research is most often used to understand the how and why of an experience and adds humanistic value to a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). In this study, I was the

primary data collector and performed the analysis as I sought to understand first-generation students' out-of-classroom engagement experiences, and to explain how they perceived that their experiences impacted their persistence. This was a complex process that could not be seen from examination of quantitative data or by simply surveying participants, but was captured by interacting directly with the participants through individual and focus group interviews. A basic approach which, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), is the most common form of qualitative research and most frequently used in education, directs that meaning is constructed by the participants interacting with others based upon the concepts or theories that frame the study. By interviewing participants, both individually and in a focus group, I gathered qualitative data that lead to a better understanding of how the participants made meaning of their life experiences, specifically, the first-generation student participants' perceptions of their out-of-classroom engagement experiences that impacted their own persistence.

Sampling and Participants

This study utilized purposeful sampling in order to gather data that would address the research questions but was also broad enough to capture the relevant phenomena of the study (Maxwell, 2013). The purpose of this study was to explore the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of first-generation college students to gain a better understanding of the impact that out-of-classroom experiences may have on persistence. Qualitative data was collected from face-to-face individual and focus group interviews. Participants for this study met the following criteria at the time of interview: 1) self-identified as first generation; 2) registered undergraduate students at the research site

institution, and, 3) students who were classified as junior status by having completed at least 60 semester hours, or a minimum of four semesters of coursework at the research site institution. By purposefully selecting participants who met these criteria, I sought to explore and understand the perspectives of students who were currently registered, indicating some level of persistence, and participants who were classified as junior status by having completed 60 semester hours, or a minimum of four semesters of coursework, were able to provide responses that answered the research questions as they related to out-of-classroom engagement and persistence. The participants self-identified as first-generation students, defined as students whose parents did not attend college or who do not have a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The participants for the individual interviews were recruited from each of three Perspectives 1101 course sections. The university offers interdisciplinary Perspectives courses that are designed to expose students to two or more independent disciplinary perspectives on a problem or area of study. Perspectives courses carry two semester hours of credit, and students self-select a section based on interest in the course topic. In the summer of 2013, a Perspectives course was created specifically for first-generation students. The purpose of this course section was to offer support and connections within a cohort of first-generation students in their first semester of college. The first-generation Perspectives course section was introduced in the fall of 2013, and was offered in the spring of 2014, and fall of 2014. Twenty-five first-generation undergraduate students participated in each of the three cohorts (F2013, S2014, F2014).

In the spring of 2019, after IRB approval (see Appendix A), the class roster of each of the three Perspectives 1101 course sections was requested and obtained from the registrar of the research site institution. At that time, the students on the class rosters met the criteria of the study of being classified as junior status by having completed at least 60 semester hours, or a minimum of four semesters of coursework at the research site. A recruitment email (see Appendix B), was sent to all students on each of the three class rosters, a total of 72 students. By the spring of 2019, some of the students who had participated in the Perspectives 1101 course sections had graduated or left the university. Participants for the individual interviews were selected from those who were first to respond to the recruitment email. Six students responded to the recruitment email indicating their interest in participating in an individual interview.

Also, in the spring of 2019, a list of email addresses of currently registered undergraduate students at the research site institution, classified as junior status by having completed 60 semester hours or a minimum of four semesters of coursework, was requested and obtained from the registrar. The list included approximately 3,500 student email addresses. The list was randomized using EXCEL, and a recruitment email (see Appendix B) was sent to the first 1,750 students on the list of prospective participants. Participants self-identified as first-generation students as outlined in the recruitment email, and responded indicating their interest in participating in a focus group interview. Eight students responded to the recruitment email and were chosen as participants.

Both recruitment emails also provided the participants with an explanation of the purpose of the study, a description of the activities that they would be involved in, the

possible risks or discomforts in participation, and the potential benefits from participating in the study. My intent in conducting this study was to inform practice by gaining a better understanding of the out-of-classroom experiences of first-generation students that impact persistence. These participant recruitment strategies ensured an ample sample size while narrowing recruitment to students from which the most could be learned. Allowing participants to self-identify as first-generation minimized the discomfort of being classified as first-generation.

Research Setting

The research site for this study was a four-year comprehensive university in the Southeastern United States, which will be referred to as the university. At the time of this research, the university did not have designed support programs that addressed the specific needs or challenges of first-generation students, but did have a Talent Search program that works closely with local high schools to increase graduation rates and assist first-generation students in their application to colleges within the state. The university is also served by an early college academy (ECA) with a target population that includes first-generation high school students who are struggling upon entering the ECA, but are more likely to go to college because of their participation in the academy. Because of its geographic location and low-cost degree programs, the university has a significant and diverse population of first-generation students. The university also offers a wide range of out-of-classroom engagement experiences for students, presenting sufficient opportunity to connect with participants for the purpose of this study.

Data Collection

Qualitative data was collected from face-to-face semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. The individual interviews were scheduled on a first-response basis from the recruitment email, and the focus group interview was scheduled after the individual interviews were completed. The individual interviews took place in a pre-arranged private study room in the library at the research site institution. The focus group interview took place in a meeting room in the student union at the research site institution. Each interview was digitally recorded and later transcribed for data analysis. The interview recordings and transcriptions, which included verbal introductory and consent statements, and all recruitment email responses were stored in a secure, password protected cloud-based database, and on a password protected computer and data stick, and were maintained by the researcher until the completion of the research study, at which time they were deleted. Participants had the opportunity to review the interview transcripts after the interviews to add anything that was missed or to modify any responses as a form of member checking and validation.

The identity of the participants was kept confidential to the extent allowed by law, and were not revealed as part of the study. The responses and identity of the participants were protected by assigning a pseudo-name in place of participant names at the conclusion of each interview. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants could have chosen not to participate or to stop out or not answer any questions at any time without penalty. There was no cost to participants, and the only compensation for

participation in this study was a \$10.00 gift card given to each of the participants of the individual and focus group interviews.

There were no known risks associated with this research, and no controversial material associated with the topic of this study that would damage the reputation of the participants or the reputation of the university was present. The potential discomfort associated with participating in this research came from being identified as first-generation, however the participants self-identified as first-generation, so that potential discomfort was minimized. Although the participants may not have benefited directly, knowledge gained from this research study will inform practice and may contribute to the persistence of future first-generation students.

Individual Interviews

As stated earlier, participants for the individual interviews were selected from those who were first to respond to a recruitment email that was sent to the class rosters of each of three Perspectives 1101 courses. The email was sent in the spring of 2019, to all students on each of the three class rosters, a total of 72 students. Six students responded to the recruitment email indicating their interest in participating in an individual interview. Five students were interviewed. One student who responded to the recruitment email, did not respond to a follow-up interview scheduling email, and was not interviewed as part of this study.

Interviews with participants took place in March of 2019 in a pre-arranged private library study room at the research site institution. The individual interviews, including introductory and consent statements, were audio recorded and the transcribed data was

later analyzed to identify common themes of information that surfaced from the data. A combined introductory and consent statement was read to each participant as the interview began. Utilizing the interview guide in Appendix C, a 30-to-45-minute interview was conducted with five individual participants to gather data about their pre-college background characteristics, their college out-of-classroom engagement experiences, and their perceptions on the impact of their experiences on persistence. The interview guide method provided consistency in data collection and increased the credibility of the study (Patton, 2002). The interview questions were guided by the research literature and reflected common themes related to first-generation students, engagement, and persistence. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their perceptions of their campus engagement experiences. A second interview with the first participant was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of that participant's experiences and to modify the interview guide questions for the remaining participant interviews.

Focus Group Interview

As discussed previously, in the spring of 2019 a list of email addresses of currently registered undergraduate students at the research site institution, classified as junior status by having completed 60 semester hours or a minimum of four semesters of coursework, was requested and obtained from the registrar, with the purpose of recruiting participants for a focus group interview. The purpose of this focus group interview was to gather information from a larger sample size representing a broader range of ideas in a more manageable approach than that of interviews with individual participants. The

focus group interview also provided a socially interactive environment that was different from that of the individual interviews, as participants interacted with, and were influenced by other participants, and therefore may have more openly shared their perceptions of their personal experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The acquired list included approximately 3,500 student email addresses. The list was randomized using EXCEL, and a recruitment email (see Appendix B) was sent to the first 1,750 students on the list of prospective participants. Participants self-identified as first-generation students as outlined in the recruitment email, and responded indicating their interest in participating in a focus group interview. Eight students responded to the recruitment email and were chosen as participants.

In early April of 2019, and following the completion of the individual interviews, a 75-minute focus group interview, with seven respondents from the eight that responded to the participant recruitment email, was conducted. One respondent did not come to the scheduled focus group interview, and therefore was not included in the research study. The focus group interview took place in a meeting room in the student union of the research site institution (Billups, 2012). The seven participants of the focus group interview met the research sample criteria and had not participated in one of the individual interviews. As with the individual interviews, an interview guide (see Appendix D) was used to guide the focus group interview for consistency in data collection (Billups, 2012). Also, similar to the individual interviews, the interview questions were formulated to gather data about participants' pre-college background characteristics, their college out-of-classroom engagement experiences, and their

perceptions on the impact of their experiences on persistence, but the guide was different than the guide used for the individual interviews (Patton, 2002). A follow-up interview with one of the focus group participants was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of that participants' unique experience.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research involves identifying recurring patterns or themes that emerge from data, usually in the form of words, that describe the participants' experiences, and that address the study's research questions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In this study, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, so that the collection could continue, change, or end, depending on if more data was needed, new themes or questions arose, or if there was a saturation of data (Patton, 2002). There were individual interviews with five participants, and a focus group interview with seven participants. These steps were followed to analyze the data that was collected from each of the interviews.

Step 1. Organized and prepared data by transcribing the interview recordings.

Step 2. Each interview transcript was reviewed several times, to become familiar with the data. A researcher's journal was kept throughout the data collection and analysis process that included memo's about participant recruitment, data collection strategies, coding techniques, and emerging ideas and themes.

Step 3. Transcripts were coded and then categorized into themes or patterns, and common themes were identified among and across the categories.

Step 4. A matrix was created to present the findings as common themes and categories related to the literature and that answered the research questions.

Explanation of Analysis

Shortly after each interview, the audio recordings of each individual interview and the focus group interview were transcribed verbatim using an online transcription service. Once transcribed, the interview transcripts were reviewed carefully several times to become familiar with the contents. Researcher memos were written and kept in a researcher journal to capture analytic thinking, to develop tentative ideas about relationships, to reflect on the purpose of the research, and to identify further questions that could have come from the collected and transcribed data (Maxwell, 2013). A copy of the interview transcript was sent electronically to each corresponding participant to review and make revisions or additions as a form of member checking and validation.

The transcripts were then hand coded line-by-line using open coding techniques that identified any word, short phrase, or segment of the data that symbolically represented or captured the essence of the elements of the conceptual framework or a concept from the literature, and that were relevant or important in addressing the research questions (Saldaña, 2016). First, each transcript was color-coded line-by-line. Yellow highlighter represented inputs of the conceptual framework, green represented environments, and outcomes were highlighted in blue. Each transcript was then color-coded pink and purple representing data that corresponded to each of the two research questions. In some instances, the color-codes overlapped, demonstrating the impact that each element can have on the others (Astin, 1991).

Next, a code tree was developed from the input and environment elements of the conceptual framework to aide in first-cycle coding (Miles, et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016). Some examples of codes included in the code tree were family (FAM), socioeconomic status (SES), academic preparedness (AP), clubs and organizations (ORGS), and persistence (PER). Attribute coding, using the code tree as a guide, was used as a first-cycle coding method to identify basic descriptive and demographic information about each of the participants that was later used to create participant profiles (Saldaña, 2016).

Initial coding was then used as a method to further break the data down into parts so that the data could be more closely examined. Saldaña (2016) describes initial coding as a method of “breaking qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining and comparing for similarities and differences” (p. 115). Initial coding is a starting point that provides analytic leads for further exploration. Here, the code tree was not used, rather an open-ended approach that allowed for codes to come inductively from the interpretation of the data. In this stage, similarities and differences in participant experiences were becoming more visible.

The next step in the analytic process was to sort or organize the coded data into categories by comparing similarities or differences. Pattern coding, using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), was used for this second-cycle of coding. Pattern coding is a way of grouping or synthesizing coded data into smaller, more meaningful categories or themes (Saldaña, 2016). The previously coded transcripts were uploaded and the code tree and initial codes were entered into CAQDAS. Using MAXQDA software search, query, and sort functions, commonalities and differences

were compared, and pattern or category codes were assigned to the coded passages. These comparisons defined theoretical categories which represented concepts that I created, but that were informed by the literature (Saldaña, 2016). The categories were then used to identify recurring themes or patterns between the participants' relevant experiences and that answered the research questions. Using MAXQDA software allowed the coded data to be queried with evidence in the form participant responses that supported the interrelationships or theoretical construct from the data.

Finally, a conceptually clustered matrix was created to display the categorized and coded data together for use as a visual aid in presenting common themes and representative data (Miles, et al., 2014). The matrix lists the themes or categories down the left column, and the coded supporting data consisting of descriptions, statements, or experiences collected in the right column and in the row with the corresponding theme. Organizing the data into a matrix allowed me to visually make connections between the participants' responses and perceptions that emerged from the data and that addressed the research questions.

Trustworthiness

The usefulness and value of a qualitative study lies in the trustworthiness of the study's conceptualization, data collection and analysis, and interpretation of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used the criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Shenton (2004) to establish trustworthiness of this study.

Credibility is ensuring that the study measures what is intended and that the findings are believable and true (Shenton, 2004). Techniques identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that were used to establish credibility of this study are triangulation, frequent debriefing sessions, and member checks. These measures were chosen as they address the possible threats specific to this study. In this study, data was collected from a purposefully selected group of participants by more than one method, individual and focus group interviews, making the findings more believable. I scheduled regular meetings with my dissertation committee chair and researcher during data collection and analysis to discuss themes as they evolved and next steps in the methodological implementation of this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checks the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. Each participant in this study was sent an electronic transcript of their individual or focus group interview to review, have the opportunity to make revisions or additions, or change any responses as a method of validating the collected data.

Transferability, the extent to which what is learned in one study is useful, or transferable, to other settings or groups is determined by the reader rather than the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Providing rich, contextual description of the research setting and participants of the study will enable readers to determine whether the findings of this study are transferable to other contexts.

Dependability, or reliability, refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated, or in other words, if the study is repeated will the results be the same (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To determine the dependability of this study, a researcher

journal was maintained throughout data collection and analysis, and includes interview notes and researcher memos written to reflect on what was happening from the researcher point of view. Detailed descriptions of methodological decisions and rationales for each step was also recorded in the researcher journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability is the neutrality or objectivity of the study's findings and that the conclusions are grounded in the data and represent the participants' responses and not the researcher's biases or viewpoints (Miles, et al., 2014). Through detailed methodological description, readers will be able to determine that this study's findings are the result of the ideas and experiences of the participants and not the researchers. In presenting the findings of this study, I, as much as possible, took a data-oriented approach showing how the data led to the formation of the dominant emergent themes.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the awareness that the researcher's values, background, and previous experience with the phenomenon can influence the research process and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Working as a student affairs professional for more than twenty years has shaped my belief that student engagement, and in particular out-of-classroom experiences, can add value to the student experience (Kuh, 2009). In undertaking this study, I wanted to understand the out-of-classroom experiences of first-generation students to inform practice that may impact the college experience for this group of students. This topic was of interest to me because a large number of the students at the research site institution are first-generation students. Although I am not a first-generation student, my background in working with this population as a student

affairs professional has increased my awareness of the challenges that first-generation students face in getting to college and persisting to degree completion. While bias cannot be totally eliminated, understanding how my background and experiences may influence the findings of this study and acknowledging that bias exists, minimized their impact (Maxwell, 2013).

Another bias risk is reactivity, or the influence the researcher may have on the setting and participants being studied, and the influence the participants and the setting may have on the researcher (Miles, et al., 2014). Reactivity bias was minimized in this study by selecting participants that were not familiar to me and through the use of respondent validation or member checks of the interview transcripts. Because the data collection was conducted at a research site that I am familiar with, I conducted the interviews in a neutral location that was comfortable for the participants. I could not plan for or eliminate all of the validity threats, but having detailed and well-planned research methods and being aware of possible threats and how to address them was a good foundation for a trustworthy study (Maxwell, 2013).

Summary

A basic qualitative design was used for this study. The primary purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the impact that out-of-classroom engagement experiences have on the persistence of first-generation college students. Furthermore, I was curious if first-generation status makes a difference in the college experiences of first-generation students. By interviewing participants, both individually and in a focus group, I gathered qualitative data that lead to a better understanding of how the

participants make meaning of their life experiences, specifically, first-generation students' perceptions of their out-of-classroom engagement experiences impact on persistence.

The research site for this study was a four-year comprehensive university in the southeastern United States. Participants for this study met the following criteria: 1) first-generation status; 2) registered undergraduate students at the research site institution; and, 3) classified as junior status by having completed at least 60 semester hours or a minimum of four semesters of coursework at the research site. The participants self-identified as first-generation students and were selected to participate in individual and focus group interviews by responding to recruitment emails. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed, and coded and categorized patterns in the transcribed transcripts identified common themes. Findings will be presented in the next chapter as the interpretation of the researchers understanding of the participants' experiences from the emergent common themes.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of first-generation college students to better understand the impact that these experiences had on their persistence. The first three chapters of this dissertation presented an introduction to the problem of persistence among first-generation college students, a review of the literature related to pre-college characteristics of first-generation college students, engagement and persistence theory, and a description of the methodology that was used for this study. This chapter will present the findings of data collected from interviews with five individual participants, and a focus group interview with seven participants. In each of the interviews, the participants responded to open-ended questions from an interview guide that were focused on addressing the three elements of the conceptual framework adopted from Astin's (1991) I-E-O model; input as pre-college background characteristics, environment as out-of-classroom engagement experiences, and outcome as persistence. The interviews also explored each of the two research questions.

Research Questions

These research questions guided this study.

RQ1. How do first-generation college students choose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences?

RQ2. How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on their persistence?

Data Analysis and Findings

Each of the interviews were recorded and then transcribed using an online transcription service. Data analysis consisted of listening to the interview recordings, transcribing the recordings, and line-by-line coding to identify categories and themes. Deductive first-cycle attribute coding using the elements from the conceptual framework was utilized to create descriptive profiles of each of the individual interview and focus group participants. Second-cycle initial coding was used to identify common themes that addressed the research questions. CAQDAS was used to categorize the coded data and a theme-response matrix was created to present the results. Themes that emerged from inductive content analysis and that were “outside the box” or unexpected gems were also identified.

Research Setting

This study was conducted at a four-year comprehensive university in the Southeastern United States. The university does not have programs or experiences designed specifically for first-generation students, but because of its geographic location and low-cost degree programs, it attracts many first-generation students. The university also offers a wide array of out-of-classroom experiences for students, which presented sufficient engagement opportunities to the participants of this study.

Results from Individual Interview Participants

Five first-generation college students participated in a 30 to 45-minute semi-structured individual interview. Individual interview participants were first-generation college students who were currently enrolled at the research site institution, and who had been enrolled in one of three Perspectives courses in their first semester at the university. The individual interview participants consisted of three females and two males. Two of the participants were Black, one was Hispanic, and two were White. Table 1 is a display of demographic information about the gender, race, classification, and family education (first-generation) status of each of the five individual interview participants. In each individual interview, the participants were asked to describe their family background, what their last two years of high school were like, and what, if any, out-of-classroom activities they were involved in while they were in high school. The profiles that follow were developed based on the information gathered from the interviews with the individual participants and provide a background perspective of each participant. Pseudonyms were used to conceal the identity of the participants.

Table 1

Individual Interview Participant Profile Table

Participant	Gender	Race	Classification	Family Education
Ana	F	Hispanic	Senior	No College
Kelsey	F	Black	Senior	No College
Jake	M	White	Senior	Father Some College

Travis	M	Black	Senior	Mother 2-year Degree
Emma	F	White	Senior	No College

Profiles of Individual Interview Participants

Ana. Ana is the older of two children and lives off-campus with her mother and brother. Her parents divorced when she was young and her mother was not able to go to college because she had to work full-time to support two children. Ana’s father did not finish middle school because his father died when he was young and he had to get a job to help support the family. Ana’s father moved south to find work when she was a small child, and Ana believes that this separation lead to her parents’ divorce. Ana did well academically in high school and was involved in volunteer work and chorus. Ana’s mother encouraged her to go to college to better her life, and she used her experience in high school chorus to get a music scholarship to help pay for tuition. Ana also receives financial aid, and said “I could never have afforded to go to college if it were not for my scholarship and financial aid. My mother can barely afford to pay the rent!” Ana speaks English as a second language, and works for an online organization teaching English to children in another country.

Ana’s out-of-classroom engagement is through an academic program (music) organization Sigma Alpha Iota, and the community church she attends. Ana said that “there are not many members in Iota, I joined because it is a national music fraternity, and I thought it would look good on my resume. I enjoy the friendships and the volunteer work we do.” As a music major, Ana and her classmates perform at different events on campus and Ana performs as a vocalist at special events in the community. Ana said

“being part of the music department has helped me make friends and the faculty makes me feel special because of my singing talent. All of my friends are in the music program too and we study together and eat lunch together every day.” Ana attributes her persistence to having friends and being a part of the music program that takes her away from her struggles at home. She knows that the university has a lot of activities and thinks that having friends in her program and interacting with them is a good distraction from her studies. “As a music major, I have to take 18 – 20 hours each semester. It is difficult to do anything else.” Ana mentioned that she and her best friend are excited about graduating together, and said that “my faith is the number one thing that has kept me going.”

Kelsey. Kelsey is a senior in the nursing program and is graduating at the end of the spring 2019 semester. Kelsey’s father joined the military right after graduating from high school and has never attended college. Kelsey is a twin, and her sister is in the military and so is her older brother. Kelsey’s mother never went to college. She married and had children when she was young, and chose to stay at home and raise her children. Because of her father being in the military, Kelsey has moved to many different places and went to two different high schools. Kelsey says that she believes moving around helped her adjust easily when she came to college. “Making friends was easy because I was used to moving and being new.” Kelsey played volleyball and soccer in high school and developed a love for sports but did not pursue sports in college because she moved too much in high school to have a firm foundation. Kelsey did well academically in high school and wanted to be a nurse since she was very young. One of Kelsey’s high school

science teachers told her about the nursing program at the university and encouraged Kelsey to apply for a scholarship which she was awarded.

In her first year, Kelsey lived on campus and got involved in volunteer work and intramurals with the other students in her residence hall. At the encouragement of her resident assistant, Kelsey attended an event on campus that spotlighted student organizations and getting involved. Kelsey signed up for a few organizations that interested her, and when one of the groups emailed her, she went to a meeting and then got involved in programs and events with a fitness related organization. Kelsey said “getting involved with people who were like me and liked to work out and do fitness activities made me happy and helped me look forward to getting finished with class and going to the rec center.” When Kelsey was admitted to the nursing program, she got involved in the nursing student association and later took on a leadership role as community service chair because of her past involvement in volunteering.

Kelsey talked about the value of being a leader in the nursing student association by telling about putting that experience on her resume and how in her interviews for internships and a job, she was asked about that experience saying “it put me a step above the others because I had done something outside of my classes.” Kelsey said that the nursing program was very difficult for her academically, and she does not know if she would have made it through if she had not had the out-of-class experiences and outlet of her fitness organization and nursing student organization volunteer work.

Jake. Jake is a senior business and economics major. Jake is a middle child and has two sisters. Jake’s mother became pregnant before she finished high school, got

married, and never attended college. Jake's father attended a 2-year college for a semester, but did not do well academically and dropped out. Jake says that his father is an alcoholic and his older sister has substance abuse issues, both of which Jake attributes to the separation of his parents when he was a freshman in high school. Jake is very close to his younger sister and feels mostly responsible for her wellbeing and is very protective of her. Jake said "because of the substance abuse in my family, my mother's mental health problems, and the separation of my parents, I felt responsible for raising my little sister. It doesn't make a lot of sense because I was a child too, but it is a big part of who I am." As a coping mechanism to the stresses of his family life, Jake developed a strong dedication to working hard and being successful. "It is probably a precursor to being a workaholic," Jake said. "I'm kind of on my own and if I don't succeed in college, I don't know where I will be." Jake's father works as a laborer in the power industry, but his lack of education and alcohol abuse have limited him in moving up the job and pay ladder. Due to Jake's mother's mental health problems, she spent time in several mental health facilities and college was never a consideration. Jake explained, "My mom just does odd jobs, waitressing and sometimes works at the grocery store and other things to make money. Most of my life, we depended on my grandmother for money."

In high school, Jake was a good student and knew he needed to do everything he could to prepare himself for college. Jake was in the governor's honors program and was president of the student council, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Future Business Leaders of America. It was through his involvement in FBLA in high school that Jake

chose his major and was attracted to the university. The university is also close to Jake's hometown, his sister, and his grandmother, who he is very close to. Jake applied for scholarships and coupled with financial aid awards, he was able to have the money to pay tuition and housing at the university.

Like most other freshmen at the university, Jake lived on campus his first year. Jake chose to keep his job back in his hometown, and traveled home every Friday and returned back to school on Sunday evenings. Jake said that "keeping my job was important because I needed the money to help pay for school. Also going home every weekend was important because I felt responsible for my sister who was still in high school."

Near the end of his first year at the university, Jake found that his grades were mediocre at best and the money he was making at his weekend job was barely enough to cover gas to get back and forth. Jake was not very happy because he had not made many friends and he was not looking forward to coming back for a second year. Jake considered leaving the university and getting a full-time job back home or transferring to a different school. Around this same time, Jake saw an email invitation to join the student government association. Jake had been president of the student council in high school, so he went to an SGA meeting and immediately felt an attachment to the people and purpose of the organization. Jake felt that this was something to bring him back to the university. When Jake returned after his first summer at home, he got a job on campus and began staying on campus on weekends and attending football and basketball games and getting involved in projects through SGA. Jake began to make friends and

became more engaged in his classes. He joined a student entrepreneurship organization, and also became involved in a faith-based organization. “The relationships and acceptance that I found there coupled with the new found purpose through my involvement in SGA, made me feel connected to the institution and I felt like I had found my place.”

Travis. Growing up in a mid-sized city, Travis lived with his mother, stepfather and younger brother. His stepfather, the only father he ever knew, is a minister who did not attend college. His mother has an associate’s degree in cosmetology from a local technical college and works at a salon in their neighborhood. Travis recalls that his parents were very strict and his time was very structured with church, homework, and community service:

We, my brother and I, didn’t have time to get into any trouble. With my father being a minister, we were either at church, getting ready for church, just getting home from church, or raising money for the church. (Laughing) those were the days, I didn’t realize how good I had it, not a worry in the world.

Travis remembers that middle school was a challenge for him because he attended a predominately Black school. It was a culture change and Travis had a difficult time adjusting. “In elementary school, there were kids from all over the city, all kinds of different people. We were focused on academics, like the spelling bee and the science fair. When I got to middle school, it was more about being cool and up with the newest music and designer clothes.”

Travis was in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in high school, which is a program that offers college-level courses and projects that prepare students for college. Through the IB program, Travis visited several colleges during his senior year and knew that he would go to college, but it was not until he began applying that he realized that his parents would not be able to afford to pay for his college.

My parents tried to give us everything we wanted, even if we didn't deserve it. I had no idea that money was tight and they made personal sacrifices to make us happy. Especially my mom, she worked very long hours, but she was always there to take me to basketball practice and little league football. I was a safety patrol in middle school, and I had to be to school early, but my mom took me, every day.

Also, because of his middle school experience, Travis realized that he did not want to attend an HBCU or a college in a big city. His typing teacher in high school influenced him and lead Travis to visit the university, where Travis felt comfortable, and it was an easy few hours' drive from his home.

During his first semester, Travis suddenly realized how close he was to his mother and how much he missed talking with her and spending time with her every day.

I thought I was prepared to be on my own, but college is different. There is no one to tell you what to do or how to do it. Nothing can prepare you for being away from your family, especially my mom. I think many of the other kids had parents who had been to college and they could help them out, but I didn't really have that. The Perspectives class I was in was helpful because I knew that the

other kids in the class were in the same situation as me. We kind of learned the ropes together.

Travis lived in the residence hall for most of his time in college, and reflected back on his experience.

When I first came to the university, I lived in the dorm. I didn't know anyone, but I met a guy I went to high school with at Orientation so we signed up to be roommates. He became my best friend and we stayed roommates for four, almost five years. We did everything together, he had a car, so we rode home together on weekends, we went to (basketball) games together, we joined a fraternity together. My first semester I didn't do much, I just stayed in my room and "gamed." If it had not been for my roommate, I don't know if I would have made it through my first year. I was a shy kid, and I might not have ever left my room if it wasn't for him. I also think living on campus helped me go to class and it was easy to go to events on campus. I don't think I would have gotten involved in anything if I had moved off campus.

When Travis returned to the university after winter break of his first year, he got a job in an office on campus. "I needed money for expenses and besides, I was old enough to take more responsibility and work for my own money." His supervisor in the office where he worked encouraged him to "get out of his shell" and go to some of the activities on campus. Travis followed his work supervisor's advice and went to activities on campus and began meeting people, making friends and enjoying college more. He began to like his classes more and spent more time studying.

Academics weren't all that hard, at least not for me, it was all the other stuff.

Simple stuff like washing clothes, getting to the store because I didn't have a car.

I relied on my roommate a lot. Honestly, I was a little scared, but I had to make it work. I thought about leaving, but I had to make it work, I didn't know what else to do but stay in school.

In the spring of his freshman year, Travis and his roommate were outside the student union when a group of fraternity men, who were recruiting new members, approached them and invited them to an interest meeting. Travis and his roommate attended the meeting and decided to join the fraternity that fall. Travis knew that he would have to work all summer in order to have the money to join, but he felt that it was worth it.

My mom and step-father don't understand...the fraternity...because they didn't have the college experience. They want me to be happy, so they are supportive, but at the same time, they don't have money to give me to join, I have to pay for it myself. Being a...member of the fraternity..., you meet a lot of people. The kids in the other fraternities and sororities, it's like one big family. After joining...the fraternity..., I haven't thought about leaving at all.

Although Travis excelled in sports in high school, when he got to the university, he found that he was not good enough to play at the collegiate level. However, Travis went to many of the university football and basketball games, and continued to go to the recreation center on a regular basis and participated in intramural sports with his

fraternity. “Sports were a part of my life since I was in elementary school, it is something that I enjoy and it is an escape from the stress of class and studying.”

In his junior year, Travis became a minority enrichment mentor. “It was my chance to give back to help the new kids like me, to show them the way. I’m proud of that. I would have probably transferred after my first semester, but I got a job on campus and joined a fraternity, and that made life much better. I made friends and I had something other than classes to keep me here. I am about to graduate, and I will be the first one in my family. For sure, my out-of-class experiences enhanced my college life. I don’t know if I would have finished without that.”

Emma. For Emma, reading, drawing, and playing in the nearby creek were reminiscent of growing up in the rural deep south with her parents and sister. The love of nature and books would lead Emma to college later in life, and a major in biology. Emma’s father worked in an air conditioner factory and her mother was a stay at home mom, neither attended college. Emma’s sister is 2 years older and went to a 2-year college, but after only a few semesters, dropped out. “My sister wasn’t really interested in college, and so she didn’t last long.”

Both of Emma’s parents encouraged her to pursue college. “It was something that neither of my parents had the opportunity to do. Especially my dad, he had a good job, but he could never move up and be a manager because he only finished high school.” Emma said that she was influenced by some really good teachers in high school and took advanced classes and got involved in BETA club, 4H, tennis and journalism. “I didn’t realize at the time, but being involved in those activities in high school made me want to

be active when I got to college. Also, being in AP classes helped me get a scholarship in the honors program here.” A scholarship was Emma’s ticket to college. “I knew I was going to college. My parents wouldn’t have it any other way! I had the brains, but the question was, how were we going to pay for it? I didn’t realize that my parents didn’t have the money for college. Like I said, I grew up in the country and I didn’t know that we didn’t have money. We were a happy family, and that’s all I needed.”

Living in a residence hall with other honors students was part of Emma’s scholarship and she enjoyed making friends and doing volunteer work, but there were still a lot of unknowns. “There were still a lot of things that I just had no idea about, and I couldn’t ask my parents because they had never been through it. It was small stuff like “who is my advisor? “Or, how do I choose my classes?” “what do I do if I get sick?” I knew college was going to be challenging, but the biggest transition for me was finding my place.” Emma said that “while I am here for the education, I also live here, so I have to find that community around me, that connection. I’m not in class all the time, and if I don’t find interesting things to do outside of class, then I wouldn’t be very happy.”

Emma shared this about volunteering:

As part of the honors program we were required to do a certain number of volunteer hours each semester. At first, I just did it to get my hours to keep my scholarship, but as I got involved with some organizations, I really liked it and I stopped counting hours. I learned that it’s not really volunteering, its service learning, there is a difference. I got involved with a project through the biology department that is looking at water quality in the local community. Many

children in this community are clean water insecure. It is because of the agricultural run-off into the streams and rivers. That is a topic that I am passionate about and may even lead to a career after I graduate.

Emma also talked about the importance of her involvement in Baptist Campus Ministry. “I was never really very involved in church when I was in high school, but a few of my friends invited me to BCM and I began going on Wednesdays and it was a place that I felt comfortable and loved, it’s like my second family. We do outreach on campus and in the community, so there again, more service!” Being involved with BCM caused Emma to question her major in biology and she even thought about transferring to another school to pursue a degree in religion or religious studies. But Emma realized that her true love was biology and the environment and she could not leave a place where she had learned so much and built so many relationships.

Being a part of a community where you have friends and where you feel that you have a purpose, I am where I am supposed to be, I couldn’t leave that. I’ve met some great people who became my friends. Having friends who you go to class with, study with, do service with, and live with, that is really special.

Emma also worked on campus in the student success center tutoring students in English and helping them write papers. In her work, Emma found other students who came from backgrounds where completing college did not seem like a possibility.

Even though my parents were very supportive of me going to college, they didn’t have the understanding of how college works and it was hard for them to support

me financially. There was always that uncertainty about if I was going to be able to finish my degree.

Typically, the honors kids are the ones whose parents have been to college, they have more resources, and it's hard sometimes to fit in with that. Getting a job in the student success center, my honors scholarship, and my volunteer work outside of my classes were the things that kept me going! I'm about to graduate, and that is a major milestone, not just for me, but for my family.

How Individual Interview Participants Chose Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences

This section will present the findings from the individual interviews related to the first research question, "How do first-generation college students choose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences?" and the environment element of the conceptual framework. The first research question was designed to understand how participants' chose their out of-classroom engagement experiences. The individual interview participants were asked to describe their out-of-classroom experiences, and how they chose those experiences. Transcripts of each of the five individual interviews were analyzed to identify key ideas, phrases, or themes that represented the scope of participant responses to the interview questions. These themes were compiled and then compared across the individual participant responses. Three of the most common themes that emerged were academic major, because of friends, and high school experience. Common themes with descriptive quotes from the participant interviews are presented in Table 2.

Academic Major

Four of the five individual interview participants expressed that it was easy and beneficial for them to join an organization that was related to their academic major. All of the participants who were involved in academic major related activities or organizations said that they were encouraged to join by an instructor, or that they were invited to join through an email sent from the organization's leaders. The participants felt that being associated with an organization or activities related to their academic major gave them an advantage in future career opportunities and created a connection with faculty and staff. Ana said that she joined a music fraternity to make friends who had her same interest in music, and because of its recognition on the national level. Kelsey got involved in the nursing student association and later took on a leadership role as community service chair. In her interview, Kelsey talked about the value of being a leader in the nursing student association and being able to put that experience on her resume. As an economics major, Jake joined a student entrepreneurship organization because he felt it would help him connect with his professors and network with local business leaders. Emma, a biology major, joined the biology club because the service projects were an opportunity to gain experience working with environmental issues that she was passionate about.

Because of Friends

“Because of Friends” was a common theme among the individual interview participants. Most of the participants said they engaged in particular out-of-classroom experience to make friends, because friends invited them, or that they went with a group

of friends. Ana said that she joined the music fraternity to make friends. She said that living off campus isolated her from the other students, but being in the organization helped her feel like she belonged. Kelsey's involvement in the nursing student organization began because of upper class students who she had befriended invited her and then encouraged her to seek a leadership position. Travis got involved in his fraternity because he was invited by friends that he had made. Travis was also active in attending sporting events and usually went with groups of friends. Jake said that he got involved in a faith-based organization because a group of his friends invited him.

High School Experience

The activities and organizations that the participants had experienced in high school influenced their choice of out-of-classroom experiences in college. All of the individual interview participants expressed that they continued activities that they had experienced in high school because it was familiar to them and they felt comfortable in those groups. Ana was in her high school chorus and she majored in music and also joined a music fraternity in college. Church was also a big part of Ana's life and she continued to be active in her local community church throughout college by singing in the church choir. Kelsey was active in sports in high school, and when she came to college, she learned about a fitness group from an organizational fair and joined. Kelsey said that the fitness organization was a stress outlet for her, and she was able to make friends who had a similar interest in fitness. Kelsey also participated on intramural volleyball team because she played volleyball in high school. Jake was a member of FBLA and president of the student council in high school, and when he came to college,

he joined a student entrepreneurship organization and became an SGA Senator. In high school, Travis was active in sports, and in college this translated to his enjoyment of attending sporting events with his friends. Emma was a member of BETA club in middle and high school, and she associates that experience with her devotion to service. Emma was also active in 4H in high school, and being in the biology club was a continuation of that interest.

Table 2

How Individual Interview Participants Chose Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences

Common Themes	Quotes from Participants
Academic Major	<p data-bbox="753 926 1386 1031">“I joined because it is a national music fraternity, and I thought it would look good on my resume.”</p> <p data-bbox="753 1073 824 1106"><i>(Ana)</i></p> <p data-bbox="753 1148 1386 1253">“It put me a step above the others because I had done something outside of my classes.” <i>(Kelsey)</i></p> <p data-bbox="753 1295 1403 1472">“As an economics major, it is important to connect to professionals in the field and network with local business leaders.” <i>(Jake)</i></p> <p data-bbox="753 1514 1419 1766">“The service projects were an opportunity to gain experience working with environmental issues that I am passionate about and may even lead to a career after I graduate.” <i>(Emma)</i></p>

Because of Friends

“I enjoy the friendships and the volunteer work we do.” *(Ana)*

“I joined the nursing student association because I was invited by some of the upper-class nursing students.” *(Kelsey)*

“He became my best friend and we stayed roommates for four, almost five years. We did everything together, he had a car, so we rode home together on weekends, we went to (basketball) games together, we joined a fraternity together.”
(Travis)

“I was never really very involved in church when I was in high school, but a few of my friends invited me to BCM and I began going on Wednesdays and it was a place that I felt comfortable and loved, it’s like my second family.” *(Emma)*

High School Experience

“I played volleyball and soccer in high school and I developed a love for sports, so getting involved with people who were like me and liked to work out and do fitness activities made me happy and

helped me look forward to getting finished with class and going to the rec center.” *(Kelsey)*

“I was in the governor’s honors program and was president of the student council, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Future Business Leaders of America in high school, so it made sense to continue that.” *(Jake)*

“Sports were a part of my life since I was in elementary school, it is something that I enjoy and it is an escape from the stress of class and studying.” *(Travis)*

“I didn’t realize at the time, but being involved in those activities in high school made me want to be active when I got to college.” *(Emma)*

How Individual Interview Participants Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences

Impact Persistence

In this section, the findings from the individual interviews related to the second research question, “How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on their persistence?”, and the conceptual framework outcome element, persistence, will be presented. This research question was designed to understand how participants perceive their out of-classroom engagement

experiences impacting their persistence. The individual interview participants were asked if they had ever considered leaving the university and why, and they were also asked if they thought that their out-of-classroom engagement experiences made a difference in their decision to stay at the university and finish their degree. The previously described process for analyzing the interview transcripts was used to identify key ideas, phrases, and themes that represented the essence of participant responses to the interview questions. The themes were organized to construct conceptual patterns and then compared across the participant responses. The most common themes that emerged were connections, community, and relationships. Common themes with supportive quotes from the participant interviews are presented in Table 6.

Connection

For the majority of the participants, finding a connection with the university through their out-of-classroom engagement experiences was key in their persistence. Travis considered leaving after his first semester, but he started working on campus, and began going to basketball games with friends and joined a fraternity. Travis felt more connected through these experiences and no longer thought about leaving. Emma thought about transferring before her junior year, but because of her connections with faculty in the honors program and her involvement in a service project through the biology club, she felt like the university was where she was meant to be, so she stayed and finished her degree. Jake found a strong connection between his involvement in SGA and the institution. Jake considered transferring after his first year, but realized that

there was a lot of opportunity for him to be a leader and learn skills that would complement his academics, so he decided not to transfer.

Community

Community can be defined as a group of people who share common goals or interests. Participants of this study expressed that being part of a community, or finding a community where they belonged or fit was important to their persistence. Three of the individual interview participants, Kelsey, Jake, and Emma said that although they did not really like going to class, their out-of-classroom experiences enhanced their college experience and made them feel as though they were a part of something and that brought them back year after year. Travis said that if he hadn't found his community in joining a fraternity, he would have probably transferred after his first semester.

Relationships

Similar to the "because of friends" theme that emerged in answer to the first research question of how first-generation students chose their out-of-classroom experiences, "relationships" was a common theme in response to the second research question, how do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on their persistence? Many of the participants shared that they were motivated to continue towards their degree, or they did not quit or transfer because of the relationships that they had found or established with groups, friends, or faculty because of their engagement in out-of-classroom experiences.

Ana said that living off campus was a disconnect for her, and while she never considered quitting college, making friends through membership in a music fraternity

gave her the human interaction she needed to survive. Kelsey shared that her out-of-classroom engagement made her a better student and made her a more well-rounded student. According to Jake, he found acceptance in the groups that he joined, and this acceptance developed into a vested interest in finishing his degree. Having relationships with professors, coworkers, and friendships made Emma feel that she was cared about and encouraged her to succeed.

Table 3

How Individual Interview Participants Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences Impact Persistence

Common Themes	Quotes from Participants
Connection	<p>“Towards the end of my first semester, I thought about leaving and transferring back home, but I came back after Christmas and after I started working on campus and going to basketball games. I felt more of a part of the university, like this is my home now.” <i>(Travis)</i></p> <p>“These out-of-class experiences where you get to meet and connect with people, with faculty, with projects, that's what really keeps you here”.</p> <p><i>(Emma)</i></p>

Community

“I found the Wesley Foundation coupled with serving and being connected to my institution through student government, has certainly impacted how I view the university. I feel more connected and it certainly has influenced me not to transfer”. *(Jake)*

“I was able to experience a sense of community with people that were like me, and being able to be a part of those types of groups and to be able to bring our music together, that has made my experience here better”. *(Ana)*

“Finding those communities that you can get plugged into is super huge. While I am here for the education, I also live on campus so I have to be able to find that community around me. Having those people around you, you're a part of this institution, you're a part of the community, part of this campus”. *(Emma)*

“I joined organizations, like HSA, American Muscle Fitness Club and I was on an intramural volleyball team. Things I can look back on fondly.

Obviously, no one loves going to class, but I was a part of something that kind of made my experience and made me look forward to coming back the next year and then the next year because if you just focus on lecture, you're not going to be very happy". (*Kelsey*)

"I came here and still had actual intentions to eventually transferring. But I found a place. I love being involved outside of the classroom, that's my favorite part of what I do every day. I really don't enjoy going to class that much but I do enjoy being in class. It lets me be able to have the experiences that I have and I'm able to enjoy outside of the classroom". (*Jake*)

"I would have probably transferred after my first semester, but I got a job and then joined a fraternity that made life here much better. I made friends and had something other than my classes to keep me here. I am about to graduate and I will be the first in my family. I feel like my out of class experiences kept me here and enhanced my college

Relationships

life. I don't know if I would have finished without that". (*Travis*)

"I made friends in the music department by being in Sigma Alpha Iota. I think it's very important to have friends, because it's just that break that you need from all your studies and you need to have that human relationship, human face to face interaction with someone. You can't just always be in your book or in your class, you need to have that human interaction to be able to survive this journey". (*Ana*)

"If I knew coming into college, that it was just going to be all academics, I would've hated it. I mean I would've wanted to quit. I think that my out-of-class experiences helped me be a better student. And even a better person too. It makes you more well-rounded, I think. So that helped support my entire academic venture, I think". (*Kelsey*)

"The friends and the relationships and the acceptance that I found played a big role in me falling in love with the university and for me, the

out-of-classroom experiences, the engagement that I've had, out-of-the classroom that has made me feel positively towards the institution, and I have vested interest in finishing my degree here". (*Jake*)

"It is also about having those relationships, having those friendships, having those coworker relationships, and also just having those professors that you have relationships with, you know someone cares about you and it makes you want to succeed". (*Emma*)

Results from Focus Group Participants

Seven first-generation college students who responded to a recruitment email participated in a 75-minute focus group interview. The focus group participants were all currently enrolled students who had earned at least 60 credit hours at the university, and self-identified as first-generation. The focus group was made up of four female and three male students, three of the participants were Black, one was Hispanic, one Indian, and two were White. One participant was considered a non-traditional student in that she was 25 years or older. One participant was a graduate student, and two participants speak English as a second language. Profiles of the focus group participants were developed from information gathered from the focus group interview and illustrate the background and perspectives of the focus group participants. The focus group participants were

asked to describe their family background, what their last two years of high school were like, and what, if any, out-of-classroom activities they were involved in while they were in high school. Table 4 presents information about the gender, race, classification, and family education (first-generation) status of each of the seven focus group participants.

Table 4

Focus Group Participant Profile Table

Participant	Gender	Race	Classification	Family Education
Shayla	F	Black	Junior	No College
Alena	F	Black	Junior	Mother Some College
Isabella	F	Hispanic	Junior	No College
Will	M	White	Graduate	Mother Some College
Daniel	M	Black	Senior	No College
Kadeem	M	Indian	Junior	No College
Amber	F	White	Junior	Father Some College

Profiles of Focus Group Participants

Shayla. Shayla grew up in a two-parent family where neither parent went to college. Shayla learned the importance of college through her mother. “College was my way out the situation we were in.” Shayla recalled that her family did not have a lot of money. “I didn’t have all the nice clothes and shoes that some of my friends had. We only had one car and my dad would drive it to work every day, so that left my mom on foot.” The financial situation of her family... “pushed me to do more and always do my

best in school. I thought that doing volunteer work, and being in clubs would help me get into college.” Shayla was the first in her family to go to college, and felt pressure to get the most out of her experience, to finish her degree, and be a role model for her younger sister. “I had to do what I could to be on top. I was the first, so I had to do my parents proud and pave the way for my sister who was coming up next.”

Shayla has lived on campus since her first semester.

At first, I didn’t have a roommate, and I thought that was great, but then after a while, I realized that I was lonely and I wasn’t doing anything but eating and laying around, I gained 40 pounds! So, my sophomore year, I got a job on campus and I joined an organization that I hope will help me get a job after I graduate. I remember when I got my first paycheck, I bought my mom her first laptop. I was so proud because I was able to give back to my mom for all the sacrifices that she had made for me to be able to go to college. But then, I had to teach her how to use it.

Shayla got involved in Model UN because she had been on the Mock Trial Team in high school. “I was captain of my Mock Trial Team, and I am interested in maybe going to law school after I graduate, so I think this will help my chances. Next year I am going to be an RA. I want to be more of a leader and being an RA will help me develop those skills, and, I will get paid!”

When asked about how her out-of-class experiences impacted her persistence, Shayla said:

There is a lot of pressure on me being the first. Everyone is watching, I know my parents are proud, but it is still a lot of pressure. What if I fail? What if I can't do it? Well, I'm not going to just sit around and worry about it. I decided that I am going to make the best of my experience and get everything I can out of college. There is more to going to college than just going to class. If that was all there was, lots of students would quit. My grandmother, although she didn't even finish high school, she told me "don't just sit there, there is more out there for you, you just have to go get it". Well, I'm going out to get it!

Alena. This participant is the middle of five children, and although Alena has an older brother and sister, she is the first in her family to go to college. Her father never went to college, and her mother took some online classes after her second child but never earned a degree. Alena's parents both worked full time, and she and her brothers and sisters spent most of their time in daycare. Alena recalls, "I pretty much had to rely on other people to guide me along the way in school because my parents were always working, trying to take care of five kids. My father worked really late hours, and so most of the time we were already asleep by the time he got home from work." Alena said "if it weren't for the really great teachers and counselors in high school, I might not have made it to college."

I was trying to better myself because I didn't want to be like my parents, working all the time and having nothing. I had to seek advice from a career counselor at school because my parents didn't have any experience with going to college or even preparing for college.

A teacher encouraged Alena to get involved in a business organization and volunteering in high school, which led her to get involved outside of her academics when she got to college.

One of my (high school) teachers encouraged me to get involved in FBLA, and I also did volunteer work. I enjoyed doing things besides academics because I made friends. It was great having something that I could be equal to the other kids. When you are volunteering, the focus is on the people you are helping, and not yourself. Also, in FBLA, I was able to be a leader and that helped me find a place where I was somebody. When you grow up the middle child, you can get lost in the crowd.

When Alena got to college, she joined Wesley, a faith-based organization, and also got involved in a business organization. “I am a business major mostly because I was in FBLA in high school and it was easy to just continue that path.” Alena said that she got involved in the business organization because she thought it would help her make connections and help her later in her search for a job. “We do service and also connect with local business leaders. That will help me down the road after I graduate and start looking for a job.” Being involved in the faith-based organization is very important to Alena because she has made friends and she feels a connection. “I got involved in Wesley because a lot of the friends I met when I first got here went and so I went with them. We are very active in serving our campus community and the students. We have weekly bible study and service projects. Through Wesley, I feel connected to the University. It has become my second family.”

Isabella. Growing up in New York, Isabella and her mother moved around a lot to escape an abusive father. For Isabella, English is not her first language, and learning English was difficult because no one in her family spoke the language. In high school, Isabella found that she could get by without much effort because no one expected her to go to college and a high school diploma was the goal. “There was no encouragement from anyone in my family to pursue studies, to do extracurricular activities, so I just basically survived.”

Isabella started working when she was a junior in high school in order to help her mother pay the rent and so they could have enough money for food. “Living in New York and not speaking English, my mother worked different jobs as a cook and cleaning to make enough money to pay the rent. I got a job so we could stay alive.” When Isabella graduated from high school, she joined the military. “Joining the military was a chance for me to try and figure out who I was and what I wanted to do with my life. I didn’t know what else to do.” Isabella married early, at age 19, and now has two children. Her military assignment brought her south, and after ten years, Isabella got out of the military and began college. In her first two years of college, Isabella took general core classes at night so she could continue working and providing for her family.

I realized that there was no real future in the military for me and my children, so I got out and started taking (college) classes on weekends, during my lunch hour, and after work at night. My husband was also in the military, but he got injured and had to retire, and is not able to work right now. I live with my in-laws and used my GI bill to pay for my first two years of classes. My GI bill ran out, so

now I have to use some of the money I make to pay for my classes. In my culture, living with your in-laws is no big deal. You do what you have to do to survive.

Isabella was working, raising two children, and was a part-time student. “I don’t have time to think about anything but work, classes, and taking care of my children.” In her junior year, Isabella realized that her classes required more time and her major courses were only offered during the day. “I feel lucky that I was able to get a job on campus. I don’t make as much, but I can take day classes and work during office hours, then go home and be a mother.”

Isabella did not have anyone to guide her in her college experience, so she tried to emulate the students around her.

I just watch to see what the “good students” are doing and try to do that. I work in the communication arts department, so I got involved in the PRSSA (Public Relations Student Society of America), I am the communications coordinator. The faculty advisor encouraged me to join so it would help me connect with the other students. Other than that, I am focused on my kids and their education and extracurricular activities. I use my extra time to focus on things that are not school related. I have a garden and I tend to my chickens. I’m still trying to master a second language, and to make sure my kids are prepared for a good future in school and then college. They won’t be first-generation!

While in the military, Isabella was involved in volunteer work and wanted to continue that in college, but has been unable to find the time. Being a first-generation student has been a disadvantage for Isabella.

I am a non-traditional student and first-generation, so the traditional college life isn't going to be the same for me. Most all of the support and information is for freshmen. I had to figure it out for myself, I didn't have anyone to rely on. But it also inspired me to work twice as hard because I didn't have the support of my family. It was all on me. The most important thing is for me to get my degree. Nothing else, except my family, matters to me. If I am able to do other stuff, great, but my family and my degree comes first.

Will. Even though Will's mother only went to college for one semester, she strongly emphasized education to her two children. Will and his younger sister spent their evenings and summers doing Math drills and multiplication problems at the kitchen table. "We were timed so it became a competition. I remember even in pre-kindergarten, we had to read every night." When he was not doing homework or reading, Will was playing baseball, soccer, or basketball. Piano lessons occupied two days a week for most of his elementary and middle school years, and when he got to high school, Will took the more rigorous classes and participated in several clubs. Will enrolled in his first college class at age 15, and by the time he graduated from high school, he had a 2-year degree.

My mother made me start taking college classes in high school. I wasn't even old enough to drive, my mom dropped me off and picked me up. It was push, push, push, but looking back I am very thankful because I took those classes and got my

2-year degree for free! Also, growing up in a really small town, that's all I have, that's all I know. If I don't excel in education, I don't know what else to do.

When it came time to complete his undergraduate degree, Will decided not to finish at the small college in his hometown where he began, and enrolled at the university which was an hour away. While Will had a 2-year degree, he was only 17 when he moved into the residence hall to start his junior year. "I saw a lot of stuff. It was kind of scary at first because I was so young." Will joined a fraternity in his first semester "...because the other guys on my floor were doing it. I thought that was the best way to get involved so I did it." However, after two semesters, Will found that the social part of the fraternity was not for him. Will said, "I stayed with it for a little while, but it wasn't really giving me the opportunities that I thought, like they said it would, so I got out. It also cost money that I didn't have. I was on an academic scholarship but I didn't have a lot of extra money to spend." Will got a job on campus, joined the Sociology Club and became an ambassador. "I was used to being busy with extracurricular activities, so I looked for things that have purpose. I joined the Sociology Club because that is related to my major and I became the secretary because that is a leadership position. I became an ambassador to give back, to represent the university, and of course having a job helped me financially."

Speaking about being first-generation and his out-of-class experiences, Will shared that he felt a lot of pressure to finish and to be a good citizen, almost to the point of failure.

My first-generation status influenced my out-of-class experience by pushing me to understand how to balance the pressure of being first in my family. They want you to be successful, to be the first, to finish college. There is also pressure from society in general, that you have to push through and finish. You don't want to fail, to be a dropout. The out-of-class activities are sometimes added pressure because not only are you trying to focus on doing well in your academics, but you are also focusing on these clubs and other organizations that you have committed to. I think all of that is more stress than other students experience who aren't first-generation.

Daniel. Daniel was born and lived in Miami Gardens, Florida until he was a freshman in high school. Then, Daniel moved with his family, mom, dad, older sister, and younger brother and sister, to Atlanta. Daniel and his younger brother are close in age, and high school for them was a competition. The younger brother was very smart, and Daniel was very creative. "I wanted to go to the biggest, best university I could to beat him out. But when it came time to pay tuition, I had to be more realistic." Daniel was the first in his family to go to college. Neither of his parents went to college and his older sister got married and had a family soon after of high school.

It was up to me. I was the first. I wanted to prove that I could do it. I wanted to do better than what my parents did. Growing up my parents had to work hard and long hours and we didn't have much money. I wanted more, and college was the only way. I wish that my parents had been exposed to college life because even now they don't understand all that I go through. I can't really talk to them about

college and my life. They still encourage me to do my best, but they don't really get it.

When Daniel first arrived at the university, he, like many new freshmen, explored his independence and "went out and partied every night." Daniel was a good student in high school and took advanced classes. After his first semester in college, Daniel had a lot of friends, but his GPA was below a 1.0. "If I had kept going the way I was my first semester, I would not have been here longer than a year. I had to refocus, I couldn't fail and have to go back home." In his second semester, Daniel focused on his academics and did not participate in any activities outside of his classes. Daniel was very involved in high school, he enjoyed theatre, art shows, and performing music, which lead to joining a modeling group in his sophomore year. "A flyer about a pageant caught my eye, so I decided to do it."

I was always the creative one in the family. I enjoy the arts, and I discovered that fashion and modeling was something that I really liked, and where I can express myself. I thought I knew myself in high school, but I really found myself when I began modeling. I met people who were like me, that I can relate to. The party friends I had before, that wasn't me. Being a part of the modeling group has really been one of the best things for me. Modeling helped boost my self-confidence. I've participated in scholarship pageants and I even launched my own brand. I also do hair and styling for money, which helps pay for school.

Through his academic program, middle grades education, Daniel began tutoring at a local middle school.

The school system isn't all that great compared to what I came from, and I like mentoring kids. I am going to be a teacher. I want to make a difference and have an impact on the lives of my students. Not only am I making money tutoring, I am developing my teaching skills. It is helping me in my academics too. I found that being involved outside of my classes, both in modeling and tutoring has enhanced my college experience. If I hadn't found myself, in modeling especially, I don't think I would have made it.

Kadeem. Kadeem was born and lived in India until he was 10 years old. When he was 10 months old, his father moved to the United States, and his mother moved to the U. S. when he was about two-and-a-half years old, leaving Kadeem to be raised by his aunt and uncle, who had no children of their own. Kadeem's father, and later his mother, moved to the U. S. to get a job so that he could support his family. "When I came to the U. S., I had never met my father, and I didn't really remember my mother. I didn't speak English, and my mother and father spoke very little English. It was a lot different culture than in India, and I was living with strangers."

Kadeem's father owns a convenience store, and his mother also works in the store. His parents worked from 7:00 a.m. until 10:00 or 11:00 at night. "I didn't really see much of my parents outside of the store, they were always working. If I was not in school, I was at the store with them. My biggest struggle in school was learning English. I didn't have anyone to help me with my school work, I had to learn everything myself." When Kadeem got to high school, he was able to enroll in an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program.

In my ESOL program, the teacher worked with a lot of Indian students before me, all my friends knew her. She was the nicest lady ever and she really helped me with my English and pushed me to take the hardest classes so I could go to college. No one in my family had ever gone to college, there were no professionals. I want to be a doctor, so I had to take advanced classes and do really well so I could hope to go to college.

In high school, Kadeem was not able to play sports like he would have liked to have, or be involved in any activities because his parents were working and he had to ride the bus home because there was no one to pick him up from school. When Kadeem reached his junior year in high school, he was able to join the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program. “IB was great! My ESOL teacher signed me up, and then I got to do activities with the other kids. IB prepares you for college. It’s like rigorous college level classes for two years, and then you also get to do volunteer projects.” Kadeem felt prepared for college, and wanted to go away from home to a large school and pursue his dream of becoming a doctor. “I wanted to go to a really big college because I felt like I would do well, but financially, we were never well off, we struggled to get by, so I could only afford to go to the university. Also, my parents didn’t really want me to go off too far, mostly because of money and also we had spent so much time apart when I was younger.”

Being a local student, Kadeem never lived in a residence hall, but he did have friends at the university from high school. “I was a commuter student and so I would come to campus, go to class, go home eat lunch, come back for the next class, then go

home again.” At the end of his first semester, Kadeem realized that his college experience was not what he had expected and not what he had heard about from friends.

I looked around and said “this isn’t the college experience you hear about or see on TV”. I decided to do something about it. I joined the Biology club because that was my major, and I heard about it from one of my teachers. We did some volunteer projects in the community and also helped in the lab on some research that some of the professors were doing. That is really going to help me later when I go to grad school.

Kadeem shared that in Indian culture, most teenagers don’t work until they have a college degree, or either they work in their family business after they finish high school. “I was always helping my dad in his store, but it wasn’t like a real job. All my friends, they started working when they were in high school. I wanted the “American experience”. I asked my dad if I could get a job and he told me that I should just help him at the store. In the spring semester of his sophomore year in college, several of Kadeem’s friends were applying to be orientation leaders, and they encouraged him to apply.

So, I applied to be an orientation leader. I was so nervous at my interview. I had never done anything like that. But I was selected! That was my first job outside of my father’s store. It was a lot of work, all summer, but it is one of the best things I have ever done. I met so many people, friends, staff, and even the President! Through Orientation, I heard about the ambassador program and I applied, and then through my ambassador friends, I heard about and became an

SGA senator. Even though my parents didn't have a college experience to tell me to do all these things, I got involved because I thought it would help me get the best college experience.

When asked if being first-generation impacted his choice of engagement experiences Kadeem replied:

Being a first-generation student, you don't have any guidance, you don't have any standards set for you. You just have to figure things out on your own. I looked around at my friends and at reality TV shows and looked at what the American college experience was supposed to be. I knew that I didn't want to be that Indian student who just came to school and got good grades. I wanted to be involved in organizations and be an outgoing person. I wanted to meet more people than the friends I had from high school. I wanted to do volunteering in the community, at the local hospital because that will help me in my career.

Amber. Growing up in a small town with her mother and father, Amber remembers the constant struggle for money. "We lived in poverty my whole life. I can remember several times the power being turned off and my dad having to pick up odd jobs to get the money to pay the bill." Amber's father was in the military and her mother stayed at home to homeschool her and her younger sister. Amber said, "because we were homeschooled, my parents tried to get us out of the house and around people, so we were very involved in church and I got involved in girl scouts at an early age. I did girl scouts for 13 years." Amber's father took some college courses through the military, but when Amber became seriously ill, he had to stop taking classes and get a second job to pay

medical bills. He never finished college. Not having a college degree hampered him from progressing in rank in the military.

At age 16, Amber dual enrolled in the local community college, but she was unable to take classes on a consistent schedule because her parents could not afford the cost. “Dual enrollment didn’t pay for full tuition and books, so I had to borrow money from where ever I could to keep going. It took me a lot longer to get my associates degree than it should have.” After Amber finished high school, she got a job in retail and continued taking classes towards her associates degree. “I thought that retail was going to be my life. I never thought that I would go to a 4-year university and get a degree.” Four years after she finished her associate’s degree and working in retail, Amber found herself in a deep depression and began praying for guidance for her life. “My faith is very important to me. There have been times in my life that my faith was all I had to get me through. One of my friends went to the university after high school and she told me to go for a visit. I did, and I fell in love with the campus and the thought of the possibility for a better life encouraged me to apply. The university was an answer to prayer! It’s the best decision I’ve ever made.”

Because her faith was so important to her, Amber searched for a faith-based organization when she arrived at the university. She got involved in Baptist Campus Ministry (BCM) and found comfort with the friends and activities that the organization offered. “I never had the opportunity to be involved in organizations, except girl scouts, so I took advantage of a lot of different things.” Amber participated in the undergraduate research symposium, she was a member of Model United Nations, and has studied

abroad. “I have been able to travel with Model UN to different conferences. It is something that I would have never been able to do without being involved in Model UN. I also went on a study abroad this past summer. What an experience! I feel like a lot of what I do is to make my parents proud, but it is also helping me grow as a person. I will be more well-rounded by the time I graduate!”

Amber chose to engage in the experiences that she did because she was following a person that she looked up to. “My parents didn’t understand college life, and they had no idea, I had no idea what to do when I came to the university. I, like (Isabella), looked for someone who I thought was successful and tried to be like her. She was a senior in my major and also involved in a sorority and in SGA. She was so easy to talk to and encouraged me to find activities that I related to and to just get involved.” Amber expressed that she is very passionate about human rights issues and especially ending human trafficking and sex slavery. She and another student organized the END IT Movement on campus and continues to stay involved in activities that she feels will prepare her for the work that she wants for her future. Amber shared that as a homeschool student, she was very shy and hesitant to make friends or be in groups.

I have met so many friends all over the world being in Model UN. We learn how to negotiate, how to be a diplomat, and how to work with people with an international perspective. Participating in the undergraduate symposium, I got to work with some faculty and I feel a part of the university. Being involved in BCM, having that faith community here, they are my family now.

I had no idea that any of these things existed. All I knew about college life was Greek life, and I knew that wasn't for me. When I saw all these other opportunities, all these organizations, I jumped in with both feet. I saw this as my chance to better myself and not live in poverty like my parents. I am going to school to take care of them in the future when they get older and can't work labor jobs anymore. They took care of me. I am going to return the favor.

How Focus Group Participants Chose Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences

This section will present the findings from the focus group interview related to the first research question, "How do first-generation college students choose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences?", and the environment element of the conceptual framework. The first research question was designed to understand how the participants' chose their out of-classroom engagement experiences. Like the individual interview participants, the focus group participants were asked to describe their out-of-classroom experiences, and how they chose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences. The participants were also asked if they thought that their first-generation status influenced their choice of out-of-classroom engagement experiences. The transcript of the focus group interview was analyzed to identify key ideas, phrases, or themes that represented the scope of participant responses to the interview questions. These themes were compiled and then compared across the focus group participant responses. Like the individual interviews, the most common themes that emerged from the focus group interview were "academic major", "because of friends", and "high school experience". The theme "on your own" was also identified from the focus group when asked if they

thought that their first-generation status influenced their choice of out-of-classroom engagement experiences. Common themes with descriptive quotes from the focus group interview participants are presented in Table 5.

Academic Major

Five of the seven focus group participants expressed that it was easy and beneficial for them to join an organization that was related to their academic major. Focus group participants Alena, Isabella, Will, Kadeem, and Amber, all joined activities or an academic major related organization because it was what was first introduced to them when they entered college. Daniel said he did not join an academic major organization because he did not know what his major was going to be until he was in his junior year, and by that time, he had other interests. Isabella said that because of family and work, the academic major organization that she joined was the only out-of-classroom activity that she had time for. The participants also said that it was beneficial for them to be a part of these organizations or activities because they could connect with the academic department faculty, upper class students in their major, and other students in their classes. The focus group participants all said that they were encouraged to join academic major activities or organizations by one of their instructors.

Because of Friends

“Because of Friends” was also a common theme among the focus group participants. Most of the participants said they engaged in particular out-of-classroom experience because friends invited them, or that they went with a group of friends. Alena joined a faith-based organization because the friends that she met when she first arrived

at the university went, and she went with them. Kadeem said that he became an orientation leader, ambassador and SGA senator because his friends encouraged him. Amber and Isabella watched what other students that they knew were doing and followed that. Will said, "I joined a fraternity my first semester because the other guys on my floor were doing it."

High School Experience

All but one of the focus group participants related their college out-of-classroom experiences to their high school experience, saying that the activities and organizations that they had experienced in high school influenced their choice of out-of-classroom experiences in college. The focus group participants like the individual interview participants expressed that they continued activities that they had experienced in high school because it was familiar to them and they felt comfortable in those groups.

Shayla was captain of the Mock Trial Team in high school and she continued as to be involved in Model UN when she arrived at the university. For Alena, being in a business organization is a result of her being active in FBLA in high school. Daniel shared about his interest and involvement in theatre and music in high school and how that led him to getting involved in fashion and modeling. Amber's participation in girl scouts and church was influential to her interest and engagement in BCM and volunteering in college. Isabella said that she did not participate in any out-of-classroom experiences in high school, but she did volunteer work while she was in the military and that led to her joining an organization in college.

On Your Own

Many of the focus group participants felt like they were on their own when it came to choosing their out-of-classroom experiences. Isabella said “you know, you have to figure things out for yourself, there was no one to turn to, to figure out what you are supposed to do. You make it what you want, and hope for the best”. Kadeem commented “you don't have any guidance, you don't have any standards set for you, so I kind of just had to go out there and figure it out on my own”. Amber felt like she had to find her way by trial and error.

Table 5

How Focus Group Participants Chose Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences

Common Themes	Quotes from Participants
Academic Major	“I joined an organization that I hope will help me after I graduate. I am interested in maybe going to law school so I think this will help my chances.” <i>(Shayla)</i> “I was used to being busy with extracurricular activities, so I looked for things that have purpose. I joined the Sociology Club because that is related to my major.” <i>(Will)</i>

Because of Friends

“I joined the Biology club because that was my major, and I heard about it from one of my teachers”. (*Kadeem*)

“I work in the communication arts department and I am a Public Relations major, so I got involved in the PRSSA. The faculty advisor encouraged me to join so it would help me connect with the other students”. (*Isabella*)

“I got involved in Wesley because a lot of the friends I met when I first got here went and so I went with them.” (*Alena*)

“I joined a fraternity my first semester because the other guys on my floor were doing it.” (*Will*)

“Several of my friends were applying to be orientation leaders, and they encouraged me to apply. Through my friends, I heard about being an ambassador, and applied for that. I looked around at my friends and at reality TV shows and looked at what the American college experience was supposed to be.” (*Kadeem*)

High School Experience

“I had no idea what to do when I came to the university. I, like (Isabella), looked for someone who I thought was successful and tried to be like her”. *(Amber)*

“I got involved in Model UN because I was on the Mock Trial Team in high school.” *(Shayla)*

“One of my (high school) teachers encouraged me to get involved in FBLA. I was in FBLA in high school and it was easy to just continue that path.”
(Alena)

“I was always the creative one in the family. I enjoy the arts, in high school I did theatre and music, and I discovered that fashion and modeling was something that I really liked, and where I can express myself.” *(Daniel)*

“Because we were homeschooled, I had no idea that any of these things existed. I never had the opportunity to be involved in organizations in high school, except girl scouts. All I knew about college life was Greek life, and I knew that wasn’t for me.

On Your Own

When I saw all these other opportunities, all these organizations, I jumped in with both feet.” (*Amber*)

“I feel like I had to learn what everyone else already knew by trial and error”. (*Amber*)

“As a first-generation student, you don't have any guidance, you don't have any standards set for you, so I kind of just had to go out there and figure it out on my own”. (*Kadeem*)

“I had to figure it out on my own”. (*Daniel*)

“You know, you have to figure things out for yourself, there was no one to turn to, to figure out what you are supposed to do. You make it what you want, and hope for the best”. (*Isabella*)

How Focus Group Participants Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences Impact Persistence

Findings related to the second research question, “How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on their persistence?”, and the conceptual framework outcome element, persistence, that were revealed in the interview with the focus group participants will be presented in this section. This research question was designed to understand how participants perceive their out of-classroom engagement experiences impacting their persistence. The focus group participants were asked if they thought that their out-of-classroom engagement

experiences made a difference in their decision to stay at the university and complete their degree. The previously described process for analyzing the interview transcripts was used to identify key ideas, phrases, and themes that represented the essence of participant responses to the interview questions. The themes were organized to construct conceptual patterns and then compared across the participant responses. The most common themes that emerged were “career after college”, and “enhancing the overall experience”. Common themes with supportive quotes from the participant interviews are presented in Table 6.

Career After College

Few, if any, of the focus group participants in this study mentioned that they had considered leaving or transferring from the university, but several of them expressed that their out-of-classroom experiences had advanced their future career after college. Being engaged outside of the classroom, was motivation to stay and complete their degree. Most of the participants talked about graduation and finishing their degree, and their career goal after graduation. Daniel said that through his out-of-classroom engagement in a modeling organization, he was able to find something that he did not know existed, and that his self-confidence grew, and that experience helped him complete his degree.

Kadeem shared,

I pushed myself to go volunteer at the local hospital and it has kind of helped me career wise because that's what I want to go into. I want to go into the medical field. I've given myself that kind of experience that I personally would want as a first-generation student or even just as a student. So yeah, I pushed myself, and

then I worked hard towards setting academic goals and achieving them through my hard work.

Amber shared that she got involved with other students and organized a human trafficking movement on campus, “this will help tailor my experience and prepare me for the work that I want to do in the future”.

Enhancing the Overall Experience

A common theme from the focus group that emerged in response to the second research question, how do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on their persistence? was “enhancing the overall experience”. As stated previously, few, if any, of the focus group participants expressed that they had thought about leaving the university. Many of the focus group participants shared that they were motivated to continue towards their degree because their out-of-classroom experiences had enhanced their overall experience and they stayed to complete their degree. Alena feels that her engagement in out-of-classroom experiences is keeping her going. “I enjoyed doing things besides academics because I made friends. It was great having something that I could be equal to the others. When you are volunteering, the focus is on the people you are helping, and not yourself”. Shayla said, “I decided that I am going to make the best of my experience and get everything I can out of college. There is more to going to college than just going to class. If that was all there was, lots of students would quit”. For Isabella, her focus is on getting her degree. “The most important thing is for me to get my degree. Nothing else, except my family, matters to me. If I am able to do other stuff, great, but my family and my degree comes first”.

Daniel shared the importance of his out-of-classroom experiences saying, “I found that being involved outside of my classes, both in modeling and tutoring has enhanced my college experience. If I hadn’t found myself, in modeling especially, I don’t think I would have made it.” Kadeem shared,

I didn’t want to be that Indian student who just came to school and got good grades. I wanted to be involved in organizations and be an outgoing person. I wanted to meet more people than the friends I had from high school. I wanted to do volunteering in the community, at the local hospital because that will help me in my career. I wanted to get the most out of my college experience.

Table 6

How Focus Group Participants Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences Impact Persistence

Common Themes	Quotes from Participants
Career After College	<p>“I got a job on campus and I joined an organization that I hope will help me get a job after I graduate. <i>(Shayla)</i></p> <p>“This (volunteer work) will help tailor my experience and prepare me for the work that I want to do in the future after I graduate”. <i>(Amber)</i></p> <p>“I learned that modeling was something that I definitely like to do. So, I joined the modeling</p>

Enhancing the Overall Experience

organization on campus and became a part of a community that I didn't know existed. That pretty much built a lot of confidence within myself that I didn't know that I had and it definitely helped me keep going, and now I am about to finish, graduate". *(Daniel)*

"I pushed myself to go volunteer at the local hospital and it has kind of helped me career wise because that's what I want to go into. I want to go into the medical field". *(Kadeem)*

"I decided that I am going to make the best of my experience and get everything I can out of college. There is more to going to college than just going to class. If that was all there was, lots of students would quit". *(Shayla)*

"Pretty much, with class and with student government and with Wesley..., I pretty much take it step-by-step day-by-day, but I enjoy it. It keeps me going and I am alive here!" *(Alena)*

"I found that being involved outside of my classes, both in modeling and tutoring has enhanced my

college experience. If I hadn't found myself, in modeling especially, I don't think I would have made it". (*Daniel*)

"I didn't want to be that Indian student who just came to school and got good grades. I wanted to be involved in organizations and be an outgoing person. I wanted to do volunteering in the community, at the local hospital because that will help me in my career. I wanted to get the most out of my college experience". (*Kadeem*)

Unexpected Gems

During first-cycle initial coding, one unexpected theme emerged while coding for the first research question and the environments element of the conceptual framework. Although not directly related to the research questions, several participants mentioned that they had had a study abroad experience. As first-generation students, travel to another country was something that the participants said that they never imagined possible because of their socioeconomic status. They talked about learning about a different culture in a way that broadened their knowledge of subject matter and they now see things through a different lens. Kelsey said,

I studied abroad in Ireland, that was the best experience I have had. I heard about it through the honors student association, but I would have never had the opportunity to travel to another country just being me. I could not have gotten

anything equivalent to that experience in any organization or classroom setting. I don't know how to explain it. I learned about another culture, and that broadened my knowledge of nursing and also of people in general.

Jake shared his experience.

I did a study abroad in Spain, Italy, and Hong Kong. It was one of the most eye-opening experiences that I have had since I've been in college. No-one in my family has had the opportunity to travel outside of the country. It allowed me to have a different cultural experience than I have ever had. I see life through a different cultural lens now. That experience has also helped me grow in my business courses and grow in my world as I see life.

Amber said that her study abroad experience "made me realize that there is more to the world than just what I learn in my classes."

In second-cycle coding, faith and family were discovered as reasons that many of the first-generation student participants gave as motivation to stay at the university and complete their degree. While these are not directly associated with the participants out-of-classroom experiences, they were presented as having an impact on their persistence. Ana shared that, "because of my family's circumstances, because they didn't have the opportunity for education, they encouraged me to go to college. That encourages me to continue and I am going to finish because I don't want to disappoint them". Ana is also very involved in her church, and expressed that "my faith and my family has been the number one thing that has kept me going". Kelsey shared that her family's financial situation is not good, but they supported her in her efforts to go to college. She said,

“That has impacted me more than anything to finish my degree. I have been given an opportunity that my parents didn’t have to better my life, and I’m going to take advantage of that and make my parents proud”.

Jake has a strong faith-based motivation for staying at the university to earn his degree.

My faith led me here and my faith guided me to stay here. Also, my involvement in Wesley and the acceptance I found and the purpose in serving Him has influenced my decision to stay. No one in my family, even my extended family, has ever graduated with a bachelor’s degree, I am going to be the first, I am going to graduate and be successful in a way that no one in my family ever has.

Travis was motivated by his mother to go to college and to finish.

She made me realize that I could be whatever I wanted to be. She motivated me to go to college and she is encouraging me to finish. I am close to my mom and she is a big reason I am doing this. I am about to graduate and I will be the first in my family. I am pretty proud of that and I know my parents are.

Emma shared that her family is why she is in college, and faith is what has gotten her through.

I was pushed by my parents to go to college. I wanted to go, but without their encouragement and support, I don’t know if I would have made it this far. It’s not just a degree, it’s an achievement, it’s a milestone, not just for me, but for my family. My faith is also important to me, it is my strength and gets me through hard times.

Several Focus Group Participants shared that their college degree was important to their family. Shayla remarked, “Getting an education is extremely important to my family because none of them have done that. My mom and dad worked all the time. So that’s my motivation, to have it better than them”. Alena also mentioned that she will be the first in her family to graduate from college and she wants to finish so she will have a better life. Amber expressed that “My family encouraged me to go to college. They have worked hard and taken care of me all my life. I want to graduate and be able to take care of them in return”. Faith is also important to Amber, “I was involved in church all my life. My faith is important to me, and it gives me strength to get through every day”.

Summary

This chapter presented the emergent themes that resulted from individual interviews with five first-generation participants, and a focus group interview of seven first-generation participants. Participant profiles were created from demographic information collected from each of the participants through interview questions that addressed the conceptual framework input element. Theme-response matrices present the common themes that emerged from participant interview responses that addressed the environment and output elements of the conceptual framework and the study’s research questions. The findings revealed that these first-generation participants chose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences because they were related to their academic major, because of friends, and because the experiences were familiar to them from high school experiences. It was also found that the participants perceive that out-of-classroom experiences impacted their persistence by connecting them with the university and

faculty, by becoming or being a part of a community, and because of the relationships that they have established by being engaged in an out-of-classroom experience.

Participants of this study also perceive that out-of-classroom engagement experiences advanced their career after college and enhanced their overall college experience, which impacted their persistence. Chapter 5 will discuss the results and implications for practice, and recommendations for future research will be presented.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As a student affairs professional for more than twenty years, it has been my belief that student engagement, and in particular out-of-classroom experiences such as living and working on campus and participation in student organizations and campus events, can shape and add value to the overall student experience. As previously noted, I am not a first-generation student, but my experience in working with this population as a student affairs professional has increased my awareness of the challenges that first-generation students face in getting to college and persisting to completing a degree. I began this research study with the objective to merge my belief in the value of student engagement with a better understanding of the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of first-generation students to inform practice that may enhance the college experience and increase persistence for this group of students. The findings from this study explained how the participants chose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences and how the participants perceived that those experiences impacted their persistence.

In previous chapters, an introduction to the problem of persistence among first-generation college students, a review of the literature related to pre-college characteristics of first-generation college students and engagement and persistence theory, a description of the methodology that was used for this study, and the findings from collected data was

presented in detail. This chapter will provide a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings and implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Summary

This study examined the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of twelve first-generation college students at a comprehensive university in the Southeastern United States. A basic approach to qualitative research was used to explore and make meaning of the experiences of the participants. Data were collected through individual and focus group interviews. Five participants were interviewed individually, and seven participated in a focus group interview. All of the interviews took place during March and April of 2019.

Restatement of Problem and Research Questions

Higher levels of education are shown to elevate career and income status, improve the standard of living, and mitigate the effects of family education status for first-generation college students (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006). Although college attendance and completion rates for first-generation students have increased slightly over the past decade, in general, first-generation students are still less likely than other students to attend college and persist to complete a degree (Cataldi et al., 2018). Student development theorists Alexander Astin (1999) and Vincent Tinto (1993), suggest that pre-college characteristics coupled with collegiate academic and social engagement have considerable impact on student persistence. A common principal of good practice in student affairs is that student engagement outside of the classroom results in higher levels of academic achievement and increased student persistence (Kuh, 2009; Pascarella &

Terenzini, 2005). In their research, Pascarella et al. (2004) discovered that out-of-classroom experiences such as living and working on campus and involvement in extracurricular activities were found to heighten academic performance and increase persistence for all students, even those with background and other hardship challenges such as first-generation status. However, pre-college characteristics such as family experience in higher education, socioeconomic status, and college preparedness, may cause some first-generation students to experience college differently, including having out-of-classroom engagement experiences that are different from other students (Pike and Kuh, 2005). The differences in out-of-classroom engagement experiences may impact persistence for some first-generation college students.

The purpose of this study was to explore the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of first-generation college students to gain an understanding of how they chose their engagement experiences, and the impact that those experiences may have had on the persistence of the participating first-generation students. Interviews with five individual participants and a focus group interview of seven participants were utilized to gather information, to create participant profiles, and to answer these two research questions.

RQ1. How do first-generation college students choose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences?

RQ2. How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on their persistence?

Overview of Methods

Individual interviews with five participants and a focus group interview of seven participants were conducted. The five individual interview participants, who were all seniors at the time of their interview, were enrolled in a section of a course during their first semester in college that was specifically designed to engage first-generation students in campus life. The individual participants were selected based on their response to a recruitment email that was sent to the class roster of each of the specific courses in which they were enrolled. The seven focus group participants self-identified as first-generation, and volunteered to participate as respondents to an email sent to students at the research site institution who were currently enrolled and who were classified as juniors with 60 or more earned credit hours.

In each of the interviews, the participants responded to semi-structured questions from an interview guide that were focused on addressing the three elements of a conceptual framework adopted from Astin's (1991) I-E-O model; inputs as pre-college background characteristics, environments as out-of-classroom engagement experiences, and outcome as persistence. The interviews also gathered responses to answer the research questions stated previously.

Each of the interviews was recorded and then transcribed. Data analysis consisted of listening to the interview recordings, transcribing the recordings, and line-by-line transcript coding to identify categories and themes. The three elements from the conceptual framework were utilized to create descriptive profiles of each of the individual interview and focus group participants, and coded data was categorized into

common themes that addressed the research questions. Computerized assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used to categorize the coded data and a theme-response matrix was created to present the results. Themes that emerged from content analysis and that were unexpected gems were also identified.

Summary of Findings

Profiles of Participants

The individual interview participants consisted of three females and two males. Two of the participants were Black, one was Hispanic, and two were White. One of the individual participants speaks English as a second language. Three of the five individual interview participants' parents had no experience in college, one of the participants parents had some college, and another parent had a 2-year certificate. The focus group was made up of four female and three male students, three of the participants were Black, one was Hispanic, one Indian, and two were White. One focus group participant was considered a non-traditional student in that she was 25 years or older. Another focus group participant was a graduate student, and two participants of the focus group speak English as a second language. Similar to the individual participants, the focus group participant's parents had little or no experience with college. Four of the focus group participant's parents had no college experience, and three had attended for less than a year.

Student Engagement

The research university has a first-year residency requirement, therefore the majority of the participants lived on campus for at least their first year. Several of the

participants lived on campus for most of their time in college. However, two participants lived locally and never lived on campus, and one participant, who was a non-traditional student, never lived on campus. In their interviews, all of the participants shared that they worked on campus, several of them mentioned that they had more than one job. Most, if not all, of the participants were involved in at least one out-of-classroom club or campus organization during their college career. Many of them were involved in multiple organizations, and most of the participants were involved in volunteer work or service that was affiliated with one of their student organizations or academic majors. Some were involved more than others. None, if any, of the participants were athletes, and only one participant indicated that they were a member of a Greek organization.

Key Findings Related to Research Questions

When each of the individual interview and focus group participants were asked, “How did you chose your out-of-classroom engagement experiences?”, the most common themes that emerged from both groups were: it was related to my academic major, I chose that because of friends, and, I was involved in that in high school. Several of the focus group participants said that they were on their own when it came to choosing engagement experiences. In response to the interview question, “How do you perceive that out-of-classroom engagement experiences impacted your persistence?” the most common themes from the individual interview participants were: I felt a connection to faculty and the university, I became a part of the community, and, I established relationships with faculty and friends. While few, if any, of the focus group participants said that they had considered quitting or leaving college, the most common themes that

came from their responses were: my engagement experiences will advance my career after college, and my engagement experiences enhanced my overall college experience.

Discussion

Data collected from interviews with twelve first-generation students, five individual interview participants and seven participants in a focus group interview, were used to answer the two research questions that guided this study. Before exploring the answers to the research questions, it was necessary to become familiar with the pre-college characteristics of the first-generation students who participated in the study. In his I-E-O model of student engagement theory, which was used as the conceptual framework for this study, Astin (1991) concluded that a student's pre-college characteristics, or inputs, impact that student's college experiences, and according to Astin's theory, inputs coupled with environments or experiences, are predictive factors of the eventual college outcome. In asking the participants of this study to describe their family background and the last two years of their high school experience, a descriptive profile of each participant was constructed. The participant profiles provided information about family education, socioeconomic status, college preparedness, and high school experiences, all predominant pre-college background factors identified as impacting persistence of first-generation students (Astin, 1993; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2004; Warburton et al., 2001). High school experience was a common theme that emerged from the participant interviews, and will be discussed in a later section.

Family Education

The benefits of a college degree include elevated career opportunities and income status, a higher standard of living, and very often, jobs with benefits such as health care and retirement (Tinto, 2012). The benefits of a college education also extend beyond the graduates themselves. Families of college graduates are often better off financially, and it is more likely that children of college graduates will also attend college and graduate (McFarland et al., 2017). By definition, first-generation college students are those whose parents have not completed a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2014). Of the twelve participants in this study, three of the five individual interview participants and four of the seven focus group participants have parents with no college experience. One individual interview participants' father attended college for one semester, and three of the focus group participants had a parent who attended college for a year or less. The mother of one individual interview participant had a 2-year certificate, but did not have a bachelor's degree. Based on past research and the family education status of the participants as first-generation students, they may be less likely to persist and complete a degree than their peers, whose parents have a college degree.

Socioeconomic Status

The majority of the participants of this study described the socioeconomic status of their family as working or lower-middle class. This is different than what Choy (2001), Chen (2005), and others reported, being that most first-generation students are from low-income families. While the socioeconomic status of the majority of the participants was seemingly higher than many in earlier studies, most, if not all of the

participants indicated that they did not receive financial support from their parents, and relied on financial aid, scholarships, and work to pay for college expenses. Often the parents of first-generation students have no experience and are unfamiliar with higher education processes and are therefore unable to provide the knowledge and guidance needed in applying for and receiving financial aid, loans, and scholarships that would assist them in financing college (Astin, 1993; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In their interviews, the participants spoke about working at least one job to help with paying for college. Many of the participants shared that their families struggled financially and having a better life than their parents and not having to work as hard as their parents, were motivating factors for attending and completing college.

College Preparedness

Taking the necessary courses in high school to prepare for college is an important step to postsecondary enrollment and persistence (ACT, 2016). It has been reported that first-generation students, more than other students, make decisions to attend college later in their high school career which may hinder their academic preparation and limit their choice of college (Choy, 2001). Degree aspirations at college entry may also be indicators of eventual college completion, and first-generation students tend to have lower educational aspirations than non-first-generation students (Saenz et al., 2007). This may be explained by students' lack of information about degree programs, the college process, availability of resources, and academic preparation. In contrast, most, if not all, of the participants of this study stated that they felt that they were academically prepared for college. Several were in the honors program, while some others received academic

scholarships. Three of the participants indicated that they were in an International Baccalaureate program in high school, which is a program for high school students that prepares them for the course work in college and also assists them with college application and admission. Also, as was noted by three participants, speaking English as a second language created a barrier to their college preparedness, and language continued to be an obstacle for them in college.

RQ1: How Participants Chose Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences

Astin (1993), Kuh et al. (2005), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), acknowledged that there are several predictive factors of student persistence in college, but focused most of their research and writings on environmental factors. Environmental factors, or experiences such as place of residence, work, participation in extracurricular activities, and social interactions with peers, were identified as environmental experiences that had the most impact on student persistence (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

According to Astin's I-E-O theory (1991), pre-college background experiences influence environments or in-college experiences, which in turn, impact the eventual college outcome. As discussed earlier, the pre-college background experiences of first-generation students may be different than those of other students, and therefore, their out-of-classroom experiences may differ. The first research question: "How do first-generation college students choose their out-of-classroom engagement experiences?" explored the participants out-of-classroom engagement experiences to determine what their experiences were and how the participants chose their engagement experiences.

When asked, “how did you choose your out-of-classroom experiences”, the three common themes that emerged from the participants’ responses were: because it was associated with my academic major, because of friends, and because of my experiences in high school.

Academic Major

Astin (1999) defined academic involvement as “the time and amount of effort that a student devotes to academic related pursuits” (p. 525). Astin suggested that academic involvement and student-faculty interactions are predictors of student persistence. Students who interact with faculty both in and outside of the classroom and devote time and effort to academic related activities are more likely to persist. Tinto (1993) described the transition component of his departure theory as “a period of passage between the old and the new” (p. 97). Tinto theorized that when a student enters a campus environment, they begin to interact with that environment and encounter new experiences. Those new experiences begin to replace old, past experiences. Many of the participants of this study chose to join academic related organizations or activities because it was the first thing they encountered or were introduced to when they entered college. “I joined the Sociology Club because that is related to my major,” Will commented, and Kadeem said, “I joined the Biology club because that was my major, and I heard about it from one of my teachers.” Participants said that they were encouraged to join academic organizations or activities by one of their instructors, or that they were invited to join by the organization’s student leaders. As Isabella stated, “I work in the communication arts department and I am a Public Relations major, so I got involved in the PRSSA. The

faculty advisor encouraged me to join so it would help me connect with the other students.” Kelsey recalled, “I joined the nursing student association because I was invited by some of the upper-class nursing students.”

The participants shared that being involved in an academic related organization, or activities such as volunteer work or service, gave them an advantage in future career opportunities and created a connection between them and the faculty and upper-class students of their academic major department. Emma said, “the service projects were an opportunity to gain experience working with environmental issues that I am passionate about and may even lead to a career after I graduate,” and Shayla shared, “I joined an organization that I hope will help me after I graduate. I am interested in maybe going to law school so I think this will help my chances.”

Because of Friends

“Because of Friends” was a common theme that both groups of participants expressed in response to how they chose their out-of-classroom experiences. In his theory of student departure, Tinto (1993) theorized that one of the most important factors in student departure was the student’s experiences within the college, which he referred to as integration. Tinto concluded that the more integrated a student was in the academic and social environments of the college, the more likely the student would persist. Social integration is described by Tinto (1993) as the interactions between students and the social environments of the college. Within the social environments, Tinto identified two components: formal and informal. Formal social integration could be measured by students’ involvement in residence hall activities, and clubs and organizations, whereas

informal social integration is described by Tinto as peer-group interactions such as socializing and participating in activities with friends. The participants of this study said that they initially chose to engage in particular out-of-classroom experiences to make friends, because friends invited them, or that they went to an event, activity, or student organization meeting with a group of friends. Kadeem shared, “Several of my friends were applying to be orientation leaders, and they encouraged me to apply. Through my friends, I heard about being an ambassador, and applied for that.” Alena said, “I got involved in Wesley because a lot of the friends I met when I first got here went and so I went with them.” The participants said that it was easier to go to activities with friends or to join an organization when they knew someone that was a member. “I was never really very involved in church when I was in high school, but a few of my friends invited me to BCM and I began going on Wednesdays and it was a place that I felt comfortable and loved, it’s like my second family,” Emma said.

High School Experience

The activities and organizations that the participants in this study had experienced in high school influenced their choice of out-of-classroom experiences in college. Participants expressed that they continued activities that they had experienced in high school because they were familiar to them and they felt comfortable in those groups. For example, Jake said, “I was in the governor’s honors program and was president of the student council, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Future Business Leaders of America in high school, so it made sense to continue that.” Alena remembered, “One of

my (high school) teachers encouraged me to get involved in FBLA. I was in FBLA in high school and it was easy to just continue that path.”

Pascarella et al., (2004) found that a student’s experiences in high school carried over to their college experiences, especially for groups such as first-generation students who do not have a family history with college. Not only are high school academic experiences influential in college student persistence (Warburton et al., 2001), but high school social involvement carries over to college as well (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) discussed the social integration of students, especially those from low-income or first-generation, as being reliant on their knowledge of the current environment. First-generation students often have less knowledge of the college environment, the importance of engagement, and how to become engaged, because their parents have not experienced college. First-generation students must then rely on other means to integrate into the college academic and social environment. As Emma commented, “I didn’t realize at the time, but being involved in those activities in high school made me want to be active when I got to college.”

RQ2: How Participants Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences Impact Persistence

Research question two explored how participants perceived that their out-of-classroom engagement experiences impacted their persistence. As Tinto (2012) noted, “it is not simply the degree of involvement, but the quality of the involvement and how a student interprets and perceives the relevancy of the experiences that leads to a sense of belonging and in turn persistence” (p. 66). Participant responses reflected a perception that their out-of-classroom engagement experiences had a positive impact on their

persistence. The participants expressed that they felt a connection with faculty and the university, that they had become a part of the university community, and that they had established relationships with peers by being engaged in out-of-classroom experiences. Some of the focus group participants also said that out-of-classroom engagement experiences enhanced their overall college experience and that these experiences will advance their career after college.

Connection

For a majority of the participants, finding a connection with the university through their out-of-classroom engagement experiences was key in their persistence. Emma had this to say: “These out-of-class experiences where you get to meet and connect with people, with faculty, with projects, that's what really keeps you here.” Tinto (1993) presents the concept of connecting with the institution as “becoming incorporated into the life of human communities generally and that this process, is marked by stages of passage, through which individuals must typically pass in order to persist in college” (p. 94). Tinto went on to explain that in order to incorporate or truly connect to the institution, a student must first separate from family and high school and transition into college by connecting through academic and social integration. Connecting to the college can be the difference between continued persistence and early departure. Tinto (1993) also notes that there is not a formal ritual or ceremony where connectedness is established, but that living on campus, extracurricular programs, and frequent faculty interactions serve to provide individual students with opportunities to establish repetitive contact with one another, which lead to the possibility of

incorporation or connection to the life of the college. Travis gave this example.

“Towards the end of my first semester, I thought about leaving and transferring back home, but I came back after Christmas, and after I started working on campus and going to basketball games, I felt more of a part of the university. Like this is my home now.”

And for Jake, “I found the Wesley Foundation, coupled with serving and being connected to my institution through student government, has certainly impacted how I view the university. I feel more connected and it certainly has influenced me not to transfer.”

Community

The transition stage of Tinto’s (1993) theory of individual departure suggests that students who come from families, communities, and schools whose norms and behaviors are different from those of the communities of the college that they now attend, face difficulties in becoming part of, or integrating into, that new community, and this leads to higher instances of departure. Generally speaking, families of first-generation students do not have the experience with college, nor the knowledge of the college environments as do families of students who attended or completed college. Also, first-generation students often have background characteristics that are different from others in the college community. Thus, first-generation students may be more likely to leave college or be less likely to persist than other students. Tinto (2012) also believes that it is important that students see themselves as valued members of a community of faculty, staff and other students, and that they feel like they belong. Jake commented, “I came here and still had actual intentions to eventually transferring. But I found my place.” The result of the community bond serves to bind the individuals together as a group or

community even when there are challenges. The participants of this study said that they felt like their engagement in out-of-classroom experiences made them feel more a part of the university community, that the university was their home, and that they belonged or fit there, making them less likely to leave and more likely to stay and complete their degree. Anna said, “I was able to experience a sense of community with people that were like me, and being able to be a part of those types of groups and to be able to bring our music together, that has made my experience here better.” In her interview, Kelsey talked about her out-of-classroom experiences impact on her persistence. “Obviously, no one loves going to class, but I was a part of something that kind of made my experience and made me look forward to coming back the next year and then the next year, because if you just focus on lecture, you're not going to be very happy.”

Relationships

“It is also about having those relationships, having those friendships, having those coworker relationships, and also just having those professors that you have relationships with, you know someone cares about you and it makes you want to succeed” was Emma’s response to how her out-of-classroom experiences impacted her persistence. Tinto (1993) discussed the importance of social involvement with peers and faculty as having an important impact on student persistence. Tinto noted that often the relationships between faculty and students are the primary social integration factors that are valuable to meaningful student experiences. “They stay because of friendships they have developed” (Tinto, 1993, p. 131). As Ana shared, “You can't just always be in your

book or in your class, you need to have that human interaction to be able to survive this journey.”

Astin (1999) found that frequent student interactions with faculty outside of the classroom were more strongly related to student satisfaction with college than any other type of engagement. Jake, one of the individual interview participants said, “The friends and the relationships and the acceptance that I found played a big role in me falling in love with the university and for me, the out-of-classroom experiences, the engagement that I've had out-of-the classroom, has made me feel positively towards the institution, and I have a vested interest in finishing my degree here.”

Enhancing the Overall Experience

Astin (1991) described his input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model as a conceptual guide for analyzing college student development. The theory behind the I-E-O model is a method that can be used to assess the impact of experiences by determining whether students grow or change under various environmental conditions. The outcome element of Astin’s theory involves student characteristics after exposure to the environment or a particular experience. Change or growth is determined by comparing the outcome characteristics with the input characteristics. The participants of this study, mostly the focus group participants, said that they felt as though their out-of-classroom experiences enhanced their overall college experience, and that because of their experiences, they had grown or changed as an individual and therefore returned year after year and were motivated to complete their degree. Shayla made the comment, “I decided that I am going to make the best of my experience and get everything I can out of college.

There is more to going to college than just going to class. If that was all there was, lots of students would quit.” Daniel attributed his persistence to finding a passion in modeling. “I found that being involved outside of my classes, both in modeling and tutoring has enhanced my college experience. If I hadn’t found myself, in modeling especially, I don’t think I would have made it.”

Unexpected Gems

Miles et al. (2014) advised qualitative researchers to look for “surprises”, likewise, Saldaña (2016) remarked that he was always on the lookout for “buried treasure” when reading his students dissertation research. Similar to outliers in quantitative research, Miles et al. and Saldaña are referencing the unexpected gems, or findings or themes that may not be related to the research questions of a qualitative study, but yet they contribute to the study in an unexpected way (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016). In this study, study abroad experiences and faith and family emerged as unexpected gems during coding and data analysis.

The participants of this study who had experienced a study abroad talked about their experience as an out-of-classroom experience that connected them with the university in a way that they could not describe. The participants also described their study abroad experiences as broadening their cultural awareness and as an opportunity to travel to another country, something that they would have never been able to experience otherwise because of their socioeconomic status. Kelsey said, “I studied abroad in Ireland, that was the best experience I have had. ...I would have never had the opportunity to travel to another country just being me. I could not have gotten anything

equivalent to that experience in any organization or classroom setting. I don't know how to explain it. I learned about another culture, and that broadened my knowledge of nursing and also of people in general." Kuh (2008) listed diversity and global learning as a high impact practice that has been shown to enhance student engagement. One such example of global learning cited by Kuh is a study abroad experience. Pascarella et al. (2004) discussed a study abroad experience for a first-generation student as an out-of-classroom experience that added to the social capital of the student and provided greater outcome benefits even though first-generation students were less likely to participate than other students.

Faith and family were other themes that emerged from coding and analysis of the participant responses. Faith and family were reasons that many of the first-generation student participants, gave as motivation to stay at the university and complete their degree. Emma shared that her family is why she is in college, and faith is what has gotten her through.

I was pushed by my parents to go to college. I wanted to go, but without their encouragement and support, I don't know if I would have made it this far. It's not just a degree, it's an achievement, it's a milestone, not just for me, but for my family. My faith is also important to me, it is my strength and gets me through hard times.

Westbrook and Scott (2012) reported that the relationship between college students and their parents has a strong influence on decisions that students make about college attendance and persistence. First-generation students often lack the cultural capital

related to the college experience, and therefore, they may not have the family support or encouragement that is important to be persistent and complete a degree (Westbrook & Scott, 2012). However, most, if not all of the participants of this study said that they were encouraged by their parents to attend and finish college, and many of them said that they continued to pursue their degree because of the encouragement and support that they received from their parents.

Faith was also important as mentioned by a number of the participants. Amber stated, “I was involved in church all my life. My faith is important to me, and it gives me strength to get through every day”. Rood (2009) found that a shared belief system or common values played an important role in student fit and integration into the institution. Rood (2009) and Tinto (1993) both stated that integration into the academic and social environment of the institution plays a major role in student persistence. While many of the participants of this study mentioned their faith as having an impact on their persistence and how they chose their out-of-classroom experiences, this may not be reflective of first-generation students who chose not to participate in this study or first-generation students at other institutions.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study indicate that out-of-classroom experiences such as living and working on campus, involvement in clubs and student organizations, and volunteer work, can have a positive impact on first-generation student persistence. Accordingly, student affairs practitioners should consider ways to engage first-generation students in out-of-classroom experiences that connect them with faculty, make them feel

like they are part of the university community, and where they can establish and build relationships with peers, as these were perceived by the participants to be ways that out-of-classroom experiences impacted their persistence.

Kuh (2008) identified ten high-impact practices (HIPs) that are widely tested evidence-based practices that enhance student learning and persistence for college students from differing backgrounds. Participation in HIPs are especially impactful for students who may be first-generation by improving the quality of a student's college experience (Bonet & Walters, 2016). Among the HIPs are living-learning communities, global learning experiences such as study abroad, and faculty-led service learning. First-generation students are less likely than non-first-generation students to be familiar with HIPs or engagement opportunities because of their lack of knowledge with the overall college experience. Introducing HIPs to first-generation students through academic advising or through student engagement programming can lessen the gap in participation for first-generation students.

One suggestion is to engage first-generation students in HIPs is to create a first-generation living-learning community. First-generation students would live together on-campus, and could receive needed support from residence life staff and faculty on topics such as financial aid and scholarships, advising, and career opportunities, and where they could connect with other students who are experiencing similar challenges. Participation in student organizations is also important. There should be multiple opportunities for first-generation students to become familiar with and join student organizations. It is also important that organizations that may appeal to first-generation students such as those

with cultural, ethnic and religious affiliations are available. The formation of a first-generation student organization could be beneficial to students in building relationships and making friends, and could serve as a foundation for out-of-classroom engagement. Student affairs staff should encourage and partner with faculty on service-learning or volunteer projects as a way to connect first-generation students to the institution and their academic major.

Consideration should also be given to the socioeconomic constraints and time commitments of many first-generation students. Keeping cost of participation to a minimum and arranging activities with regard to work schedules will allow first-generation students greater opportunity to engage in out-of-classroom experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several future research possibilities that evolved from this study. First, Astin's (1999) discussion of his student involvement theory suggests that different forms of involvement may lead to different outcomes. This raises the question: can particular engagement experiences produce certain student outcomes? For example, the conceptual framework outcome for this study was student persistence, and as suggested by Pascarella et al. (2004), residency, work, involvement in clubs and organizations, and volunteer work, were considered to determine the impact that those experiences had on the persistence of the first-generation participants. However, it is recommended that other experiences, even those that were mentioned by the participants of this study, such as study abroad, involvement in faith-based organizations, and interactions with peers, be

explored to understand what impact those experiences may have on first-generation student college outcomes.

Another question raised was whether particular pre-college characteristics such as family education, socioeconomic status, and academic preparedness, are related to different types or levels of engagement. This study explored the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of first-generation students who, in general, have different pre-college characteristics than other students. Profiles of the participants were constructed to frame the pre-college characteristics and out-of-classroom engagement experiences of these participants in particular. Without comparing first-generation students at other institutions, or examining the pre-college characteristics and out-of-classroom experiences of students at the same institution who are not first-generation, it is difficult to determine if the pre-college characteristics of these participants uniquely impacted their engagement and persistence. Therefore, it is recommended that future research consider the impact of pre-college characteristics of first-generation students on out-of-classroom experiences as compared to the experiences of non-first-generation students at the same institution.

Finally, it is recommended that additional research explore the characteristics and experiences of uninvolved first-generation students who nonetheless manage to persist and complete college. All of the participants of this study were engaged in out-of-classroom engagement experiences to some degree. But it is certain that other first-generation students at the research site institution, who had very little or no out-of-classroom engagement, were successful in completing their degree. Further exploration

of these students' experiences will help determine the relationship of pre-college characteristics, during-college experiences, and college outcomes as outlined in Astin's I-E-O model.

Conclusion

Each first-generation college student has unique pre-college characteristics, and experiences college in his or her own individual way. Much of the past research describes first-generation college students as more likely to be minority race, low-income, academically under-prepared for college, and less likely to persist and complete their degree. This portrayal of the typical first-generation college student is not necessarily true for the participants of this study. The first-generation students who participated in this study represented diverse racial backgrounds, and while they came from families with lower incomes than their non-first-generation peers, they did not fall into the low-income socioeconomic class as depicted in the literature. Most, if not all, of the participants felt academically prepared for college, and while each of their out-of-classroom experiences was unique, they chose their engagement experiences in similar ways. While the primary purpose of this study was to explore the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of first-generation college students to gain an understanding of the impact that those experiences may have on persistence, a secondary objective emerged, and the perceptions of the participants and how they perceived that out-of-classroom experiences impacted their persistence became a focal point.

Creating profiles of each of the twelve participants provided a verbal portrait of their pre-college background characteristics and engagement experiences for a better

understanding of the overall college experiences of the participating students. Individual and focus group interviews focused on the particular out-of-classroom experiences that the participants perceived as impacting their persistence. Analysis of coded data from the transcribed interviews identified common themes among the participants that represent their perceptions of experiences that impact persistence.

The findings of this study provided insight into the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of a group of first-generation college students, and the perceptions of that group of participants on how those experiences impacted their persistence. The goal was to not only identify the pre-college characteristics of the participants, but also to examine in-college experiences and the impact of those two combined on persistence. It is my hope that this research will inform practice for student affairs practitioners in engaging first-generation students in out-of-classroom experiences such as those that connect them with faculty, make them feel like they are part of the university community, and where they can establish and build relationships with peers, as these were perceived by the participants as having impact on their persistence. In conclusion, although there is abundant opportunity for further research on first-generation students' college experiences, this study provided a fundamental understanding of the out-of-classroom experiences that impact persistence. Finally, there is a need for colleges and universities to define first-generation and have definitive ways of tracking or collecting data on those students to better understand their experiences and identify ways to increase persistence for a population that is historically disadvantaged and less likely to complete their degree.

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APPENDIX A:

Institutional Review Board Protocol Exemption Report



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 03717-2018 **Investigator:** Sherolyn Hopkins
Supervising Faculty: Dr. Jamie Workman
PROJECT TITLE: *The Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences of First-Generation College Students that Impact Persistence.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of your research study compiled data (email list, correspondence, pseudonyms, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *Consent Statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of recording. The recording and transcript must document the researcher's reading of the consent statement and confirming the participant's willingness to participate.*
- *Exempt guidelines permit recording of interviews provided that the recordings are used for the sole purpose of creating a transcript and then deleted. The recordings are not to be shared or stored.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie 11.29.2018
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

APPENDIX B:
Participant Recruitment Email

To: (Student)

Subject: Participation in First Generation Student Research

Dear Student,

My name is Sherolyn Hopkins and I am a graduate student at Valdosta State University. As part of my Doctoral degree program, I am conducting a research study that will examine how first-generation students' out-of-classroom engagement experiences impact persistence. By gaining a better understanding of the out-of-classroom experiences of first-generation students, faculty, staff, and administrators can better serve the needs of first-generation students and promote their success.

I am looking for participants for my study who meet the following criteria:

- Are first-generation college students. For this study, first-generation is defined as a student who is first in their family to graduate from college.
- Are currently registered undergraduate students.
- Are classified as at least junior status by having completed 60 semester hours or a minimum of four semesters of coursework.

If you meet the criteria above and volunteer to participate in this study, you will be invited to participate in a (30 to 45-minute interview) (60-minute focus group interview). The interview will take place in a pre-arranged location on campus (a library study room, or a meeting room in the student union). The interview will be recorded but your identity will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law, and will not be revealed as part of the study's findings.

Your involvement in this study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate, not answer a question, or to stop at any time without penalty. There are no costs to you but each participant who qualifies and completes the interview will receive a \$15.00 gift card as compensation for their participation in this study. Although you may not benefit directly from this research, your participation will help me gain a better understanding of the college experiences of first-generation students. Knowledge gained from this research study may contribute to the success of future first-generation students.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Sherolyn Hopkins at sshopkins@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-259-5045 or irb@valdosta.edu.

If you are interested in participating in my study, please reply to me via email at sshopkins@valdosta.edu by (date). Your reply as a voluntary participant is also consent to participate in the research.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sherolyn Hopkins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

Sherolyn S. Hopkins
VSU Graduate Student
Curriculum, Leadership and Technology (CLT)
sshopkins@valdosta.edu

APPENDIX C:
Individual Interview Guide

Introduction: discussion of purpose of the research, background of the researcher and why I am interested in learning about this topic.

1. Begin Audio Recording
2. Informed Consent
 - a. Review of verbal consent script
 - b. Verbal agreement obtained
 - c. Printed copy of consent information given to participant
3. Interview Questions
 - a. Tell me about yourself, your family, and what high school was like for you.
 - b. What brought you here, and why have you stayed?
 - c. What did you expect college to be like? Has it been like you expected?
 - d. Describe your overall student experience? What would you change if you could?
 - e. What are the highlights of your academic experience? What has been particularly challenging for you about being a student here?
 - f. What would a typical day look like for you?
 - g. How do you spend your out-of-class time?
 - h. Have you been involved in any out-of-class experiences? (e.g. living on campus, campus employment, social events, student organizations and clubs, volunteer work)
 - i. How did you choose to get involved in these experiences?
 - j. What role did being first-generation play in your out-of-classroom experiences? As a first-generation student, have you faced any challenges becoming involved on campus?
 - k. How have your out-of-classroom experiences affected your feelings about the university?
 - l. Have your out-of-class experiences influenced your decision to stay here? Do you expect to graduate?
 - m. What else related to your out-of-classroom experiences would you like to tell me about that I may not have asked?

APPENDIX D:
Focus Group Interview Guide

Introduction: discussion of purpose of the research, background of the researcher and why I am interested in learning about this topic.

1. Begin Audio Recording
2. Informed Consent
 - a. Review of verbal consent script
 - b. Verbal agreement obtained
 - c. Printed copy of consent information given to participants
3. Interview Questions
 - a. Tell me your story, about yourself, your family, and what high school was like for you. What brought you here?
 - b. Describe your typical day. How do you spend your time outside of class? Have you been engaged outside of class such as living on campus, campus employment, social events, student organizations and clubs, volunteer work?
 - c. How did you choose those experiences? Did being a first-generation student play a role in your out-of-class experiences?
 - d. Has being involved in out-of-classroom experiences influenced your decision to stay here?
 - e. What else related to your out-of-classroom experiences would you like to share that I have not asked about?